

The Old-New Anti-Semitism: "A New King Arose"

As we begin the 2nd Book of the Torah, *Shemot*, The Book of Exodus, we find the Children of Israel for the first time living entirely in the Diaspora. When they first went down to Egypt to escape famine they found a safe refuge. The community flourished in Goshen and their well-cultivated political and social connections gave them a sense of security. And then it all changed.

⁸ Then a new king, who knew not Joseph, came to power in Egypt. ⁹ "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become far too numerous for us.

¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country." ¹¹ So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and made the build Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.

¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³ and worked them ruthlessly.

¹⁴ They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly (Exodus 1:8-14).

Thus began the world's first outbreak of virulent anti-Semitism. An entire people enslaved just because of their faith. And with their wicked appetite whetted, the Egyptians, prodded by the demagoguery of Pharaoh, took their hatred to the extreme. It was as if slavery and bitter oppression were not enough to suppress our ancestors---so, Pharaoh and the Egyptians whipped themselves into a genocidal frenzy and planned our extermination:

¹⁵ The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, ¹⁶ "When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." ¹⁷ The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. ¹⁸ Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?" ¹⁹ The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive." ²⁰ So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. ²¹ And because the midwives feared God they were blessed to families of their own. ²² Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live" (Exodus 1:15-22).

The power of this story does not rest simply on its emotional drama. Rather, the story of a dominant culture's intolerance of a minority group has been shamefully repeated far too many times. It is a story that has all too often led to a nation's murderous plans to destroy our Israelite family. It is not necessary to search deep into the annals of history to come up with the examples. We need only look to the events in the 1930s and 1940s to understand the full force of anti-Semitism. We need only to ask the remaining

survivors of the Holocaust for the personal details of what it was like to be hunted down simply because you were a Jew.

And we do not need to look to the past generations to witness the latest scourge of anti-Semitism. Today, in this country, the freest, most open and tolerant nation on earth, there still are those who are twisted by their pathological hatred of Jews and Judaism. And lest anyone be so deluded as to think that such vicious anti-Semitism is confined to those who are dismissed as “deplorables,” the uneducated, backward bigots who hate all those who don’t look, pray, speak and act like they do. No. Today’s anti-Semites are found among the far right and the far left. Some of today’s anti-Semites are the obvious characters who march in parades wearing neo-Nazi and KKK regalia. And on the opposite side of the political spectrum, there are some anti-Semites who are considered the darlings of the “intelligentsia,” the social and academic elite. Some are bestselling authors, popular actors, athletes and rock stars. And most alarmingly, some are college professors who are teaching our students. They openly broadcast their hatred of Jews and of Israel but are protected because of their tenure.

The Book of Exodus opens with us in slavery---but it also provides a template for redemption and freedom. No, we do not have to wait for heroes like Moses, Aaron and Miriam to save us. The redemption our ancestors experienced came because God inspired them to finally believe in themselves and their own self-worth. In turn, our story has motivated many different people to stand up against oppression and bigotry. It’s time that we reclaim our own story and begin to resist the modern anti-Semites among us. I’ll speak more on this topic this Friday night at services.

In addition, I urge you to visit the ADL websites at www.adl.org and the ADL Mountain States office (based in Denver) at denver.adl.org. And for those considering a safe college campus, check out the ADL’s campus website: www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/campus-affairs.

We’ve learned too much over the millennia to feel complacent. Yes, bigotry, racism, and prejudice torment nearly every minority and ethnic group. Yes, there are those who are filled with hatred towards people of different sexual orientations, national origin and the color of their skin. Jews proudly stand up in the defense of all who are vulnerable. We are champions of civil and social rights. And we cannot forget that we too are the targets of hatred and bigotry. We simply can’t afford to stop standing up for ourselves.

In the uplifting description of our ancestors that we recite each year at Pesach, The Book of Exodus begins with degradation and concludes with redemption. Let us renew our commitment to help our Jewish family against the evils of anti-Semitism.

B’vrakhah

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