

Terumah 5777 **“The Antisemitism”**

Rabbi, what do you think about the antisemitism?

I was asked this question a few times this week. It is, sadly, a good question. There have been upwards of 100 bomb threats over N America and Canada. The last I heard, 3 graveyards desecrated (St Louis, Philadelphia, Rochester). Westboro Church, those delightful folk, picketed outside the Jewish school Shalhevet in Los Angeles. And perhaps most chilling, a shot was fired through the Hebrew school classroom of Adath B’nai Israel in Evansville, Indiana.

Rabbi, what do you think about the antisemitism?

I could reply: it’s repugnant. There is something particularly perverse and vicious about targeting places where the vulnerable go, of forcing the evacuation of little children under the ruse that they are visiting the school across the street, of putting the elderly into wheelchairs and hoping to make it to the door in time. Those headstones lying on the ground are an abomination, the abuse of those who are past being able to fight back. And as the rabbi of Adath Bnai Israel stated, the thought that someone would stand outside a shul and fire a gun at all, even into an empty classroom, is sickening and terrifying.

Actually, it’s easy to say things about the antisemitism. I can do it in an English accent and use lots of important-sounding words. I can “castigate it from the pulpit.” And indeed, we’ve heard a number of speeches about it this week. But do speeches help? Do my words help? Are we feeling any better yet?

No. What is harder, but what we must strive for, is to understand what we should do and how we can be in such a climate. And that is a question that no amount of rhetoric can address, because it has no simple and readily packageable answers.

Yet it is urgent that we search for them. As I explored when I spoke about what truly motivates Pharaoh some weeks back, no possible good can come from giving in to fear. Somehow we have to find a way to shore up our courage and our conviction.

As always, I look to our tradition for models. Conveniently, Purim is right around the corner. The Purim story is set in a climate of decadence, with a flabby king on a shiny throne; a climate into which it is easy for Haman the arch-villain to insert the classic argument of the anti-Semite:

“There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws, so that it is not to the king’s profit to tolerate them. If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed...”

It is tempting to proclaim that in times like these we need to be Mordechai, refusing to bow our heads. We need to be Esther, bravely fasting before stepping into the heroic destiny for which we were created. We need to rip off our masks of assimilation and stand up as proud Jews regardless of the consequences. And I am sure there are people this weekend who are giving sermons on that basis.

But something doesn’t ring true to me. Something is off. It feels...insincere. There is a pantomime quality about Purim, that festival that comes so close to Mardi Gras every year and shares its quality of masquerade. The baddies are a bit too bad and even the good seem somehow to be caricatures. Under the plot roils an ugly truth: those massacres at the end of the book are what happens in a topsy-turvy world when everything is just a bit too simple and obvious.

When it comes to addressing our fears, a pantomime is a distraction, but not much of an answer.

And so I have been looking, this week, for another way to process our disquiet. It turns out there is one. It might be a bit early for it, since it’s not coming up in the calendar until next week; but we need it now.

It’s in the Purim Torah reading, which deals with the very first manifestation of Amalek in the Torah. Amalek, the cruel king who preyed on the weak and the vulnerable. Amalek is the most ancient and terrible ancestor of Haman; the original, not the substitute.

In our tradition, Amalek represents evil itself; absolute evil. That feeling that we got when we heard about those JCCs, those little children innocent of what was happening; the clench and sinking we feel inside when we look at those toppled headstones - that is because we have been brushed by evil. Amalek is real: Amalek is passing. This is a better model for addressing the how we should be dealing with what has happened to us.

The Torah [Shemot 17:8ff] tells us that Amalek came to attack the people at Refidim. Joshua led the defence while Moses stood on the hill with the rod of God in his hand, and Aaron and Hur with him. Whenever Moses held up the rod, the Israelites would prevail: whenever he let the rod drop, the Amalekites would prevail.

The inevitable happened: Moses became tired. The rod dropped. Amalek looked set to triumph. But then Aaron and Hur took a stone and sat Moses on it, and held up his arms until sunset, until the battle was won.

How can this piece of Torah help us understand the past week?

One possibility: to look for Aaron and Hur. Moses is fragile. Evil saps us and makes us wobble. But having others around who support us means that we stand some chance of tackling it.

Here is just one example. In Los Angeles I was part of a Muslim-Jewish initiative called New Ground and there I met and workshopped with a woman, a beautiful soul, called Noor-Malika Chisti. Here is what she wrote to the rabbi of Adath Beth Israel:

I am so sorry to read of the continuing violence against the Jewish community. I am a Muslim very involved in working with the local Jewish community here in Southern California and want you to know we hold you in our hearts and prayers as dearest Cousins. I was born and raised in Indiana and still have family there so feel a deep connection. Shalom. Salaam. Peace.”

Whether for us personally or as a community, who is symbolically holding up our arms? At times like this, we can rely on them. Fear is isolating, but we need to remember we are not alone.

Another possibility: the application of ingenuity and creativity. Aaron and Hur find a technological fix for Moses' fragility. The Shalhevet school in Los Angeles is also home to IKAR, one of LA's most flourishing communities. When they heard of the picket, they invited e-donations to tzedakah based on the number of minutes the picket would continue; a very direct way to turn hatred into goodness.

Meanwhile the school itself relocated its students to a synagogue down the street during the Westboro picket, where they joined other Jewish students. As Reb Weissman, Shalhevet's rabbi, explained:

"When people protest our Judaism, we spend EXTRA time learning. When people protest our Judaism, we spend EXTRA time davening and singing. And, when people protest our Judaism, we spend EXTRA time doing chesed. That's who we are."

A brush with evil can make us doubt or even forget our true nature. But we are ingenious and resourceful and creative; and when we are challenged, we are EXTRA ingenious, resourceful and creative.

And a third possibility. The Mishnah asks in astonishment:

Did Moses' arms decide whether a war was won or lost? No! Rather, whenever Israel looked up and directed their hearts towards their father in heaven, they prevailed; and whenever they did not, they fell...

What is the equivalent, for us, of this looking up and directing our hearts? I think the message is that we need to keep ourselves open and connected to the best of our aspirations. In the presence of evil it feels right to shut down; but the Mishnah is saying that the very moment of the encounter with evil itself is precisely the moment to look up. Nobody, to my mind, expressed this better than Anne Frank, who was writing in the direst of circumstances:

That's the difficulty in these times: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to meet the horrible truth and be shattered. It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery and death...I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I am able to carry them out.

Let me end where I began. *Rabbi, what do you think about the antisemitism?*

I think that what I have to say is a lot less important than how we should react. I think we have been brushed by evil. I think we have a choice about letting it contaminate us. I think that we can grow by digging into our tradition and our history to understand it, to recognize it as a call to engage and do battle with it. And I believe that with compassionate support, and with ingenuity, and by looking up, by always looking up, we can still be steadfast and radiant with integrity, even when the world is turning upside down around us.

May it be so.

Shabbat shalom.