

LEKH LEKHA
A SURGE IN ANTI-SEMITISM AFTER THE MASSACRE
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The response was predictable.

A day after the massacre, a colleague of mine called me and asked, how long do I think this sympathy will last? And I responded, about three days.

We know the script of this movie.

Israel is attacked.

Israel responds.

Innocent people, Hamas' human shields, are killed.

Israel is blamed. Israel is castigated and villified.

And anti-Semitism erupts.

I literally thought that the enormity of this atrocity would yield three days of sympathy.

I was off. The eruption happened literally the next day.

People move very quickly into their normal habits of mind:

the delegitimization, demonization and double standards, to which they subject Israel and Jews. Natan Sharansky called this the 3 D's - the defining symptoms in the pathology of modern anti-Semitism disguised as anti-Zionism.

Delegitimization - the denial of the legitimacy of Israel's right to exist and it's right to defend itself.

Demonization - the distortion and depiction of Israel and Jews in grotesque images and with ancient tropes.

Double-standards - for example, that every other country can use lethal forms of self-defense to protect its citizens, while Israel cannot.

And here we are.

You've seen dozens of examples of anti-Semitism by now.

They multiply daily.

Demonstrations. All over the world. Even where there are no Jews.

The genocidal cry: "From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free!"

And so much more.

It's horrifying on the one hand. But on the other, it's remarkable that so much this hate is inspiring ingenuity and creativity.

I think the "creativity" prize goes to George Washington University - whose anti-Semites used projectors to project the slogans, "Glory to our Martyrs," and "Divestment from Zionist Genocide Now," onto the sides of buildings. Amazing.

You could down the list of the Ivy League and see a whole catalogue of moral bankruptcy. Harvard.
Yale.
Penn.

The failure to unequivocally condemn Hamas is the definition of moral bankruptcy of our time.

The contextualization of the atrocities - like what UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said, is another defining line of moral bankruptcy. Here's what he said:

"It is important to also recognize the attacks by Hamas did not happen in a vacuum."

So let's interpret that for a moment.

No matter how awful the crime was, no matter how horrifying the murder of innocents, the rape of women, the decapitation of infants was, "it's important to recognize that there's a reason for it."

Really?!

Imagine that.
It didn't happen in a vacuum.
There's a reason for all this horror.

Really. A reason.

Take a minute to digest that.
Just do the thought experiment.
Try this out on any other atrocity and see if it holds up.
Take the mass shooting this week in Lewiston, Maine:

As awful as the mass-shooting in Maine was, it is important to recognize that it did not happen in a vacuum. And that would be what? Access to guns? Mental illness?

Does the shooter have any moral agency here?

Imagine contextualizing slavery. Imagine saying,

As awful as slavery was, you have to understand that slavery didn't happen in a vacuum. Really? Then why did people oppose it? Why did we fight a whole bloody war against it?

Imagine saying: That was what people did at the time. It was an economic necessity to provide labor for the country. Everybody else was doing it. And in retrospect, it's what enabled the young country to grow and prosper.

As if it wasn't a moral choice. Even then.

Nobody would ever say a thing like that without being roundly condemned.

How about Kristallnacht, which we're going to commemorate in a week and a half.

As awful as Kristallnacht was, it's important to recognize that it did not happen in a vacuum. Germany was humiliated after the First World War, and the Treaty of Versailles, brought economic ruin and catastrophic inflation during the Weimar years. And it's important to realize how much pain ordinary Germans were feeling.

Anti-Semites justify for crimes against Jews.

And anti-Semites simultaneously blame Jews for the crimes committed against them.

This is an affront to all humanity.

To excuse human evil, and to blame victims for the evil perpetrated against them.

To say that human beings are evil for all sorts of reasons, except the most obvious one: they actually choose to be evil - is an insult to all humanity.

Or it ought to be. But it was okay for the Secretary General to say that, and he was widely applauded for that.

This is what people don't get about October 7:

October 7 was a crime not only against Israel. Not only against Jews.

It was a crime against Humanity.

Think about it.

All humanity was stained by the atrocities committed on that date.

- Humanity is **not** stained by lawful and legitimate acts of self-defense result, God-forbid, in the deaths of innocents.
- But humanity **is** stained by the intentional killing of innocents.
- Humanity is **not** stained by lawful acts of war committed for defense and survival that result in the deaths of combatants and non-combatants.

- Humanity is stained by that atrocity.

There's a difference.

A big difference.

A big moral difference.

The inability to see the crimes of October 7 as a crime against humanity is itself, a moral crime. A moral stain.

And there's only one reason why people try to "explain" or "contextualize" or "excuse" this atrocity: because in this atrocity, the victims were Jews.

That's anti-Semitism. Pure and simple.

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I hate having to talk again about anti-Semitism.

I hate having to study it.

I hate having to argue about it.

I hate having to be polite about it and say for example, that anti-Semitism is not like all other hatreds.

I can't tell you how deeply offensive it is when anti-Semitism is lumped with all other hatreds.

Anti-Semitism is unique.

But that claim itself arouses anti-Semitism!

They even want the hatred against them to be regarded as unique! Jews!

That's the irony of it!

The failure to recognize particularity of anti-Semitism nullifies any attempt to eradicate it. We need a whole course to show how anti-Semitism is unique. I've taught it. But here are the main points: It spans all of history. It's annihilationist. It mutates in every generation, with every ideology, in every culture. Even in cultures where there are no Jews.

And I hate that. I absolutely hate that our agenda is being dictated by those who hate us.

I hate what that does to our communities.

I hate that anti-Semitism distorts our priorities.

I hate that it chews up our budgets. That we have to invest so much in hardening our security, hiring guards, putting cameras up, and doing all the things that we rehearse and

rehearse, just in case, God forbid, we become a target. Today is the fifth anniversary of the Pittsburgh Tree of Life Massacre. No shul in the United States has been the same since.

And what I hate most of all, is that it makes us feel powerless, traumatized, and afraid.

So here we are. We've decided to encourage people to do something simple. To put out a flag of Israel. Or to put out blue and white ribbons around trees. Or to put out "We Stand with Israel" signs.

And I understand that some people are uncomfortable with that. And, on the one hand, I get it. So, to those of you who are uncomfortable with outwards signs and symbols, find a way that you are comfortable with, to express your support for Israel. Find a way to advocate and make your voice heard.

But on the other hand, it's beyond me, that my neighbor, whose mother is still in Ukraine, can wrap a yellow and blue ribbon around his tree without any thought whatsoever, that someone will throw a rock through his window, or an egg, but that I, even I, Rabbi of the Highland Park Conservative Temple - Congregation Anshe Emet, had to consider for a moment: do I have insurance for this? If someone sees my ribbon - let alone a "We Stand With Israel" sign - do I have to put a camera on my property?

We live in America!

I should be able to be proud of what I am!

I have an identity too! I should be able to celebrate that too!

You can ride on any street in Highland Park and see flags for everything. You can see flags for every country, every identity.

But God forbid, to put up in Israeli flag? We might become a target.

That's fear.

The war is raging over there.

It's on the boundary between Israel and Gaza and possibly also in the north.

It's about the future of the State of Israel and the future of the Jewish people. As I mentioned last week, it's an existential war. Because if Jews are no longer safe in Israel, then Israel's very raison d'etre is called into question. This war is about the survival of the Jewish people.

That's what it's about over there.

But here, the battle is on our campuses.

The battle is in our media.

And the battle is in the space between our own two ears.

It's the battle over our own fears.

We're not used to fighting this pernicious hatred.

We're not used to calling it out every time we see it.

We're not used to having to go on the offensive and call up universities that we graduated from and say that we are literally sickened by anti-Semitism that is running rampant on their campuses.

All we want is for people to love us.

But we see all this hate.

And we this human contortion:

we don't really hate Jews, we hate Israel.

And besides, they had it coming to them.

This gives us fear.

How do we overcome this fear?

There are a lot of things you can do to overcome fear.

Here's a few:

1. **Tell the Truth.** Telling the truth means you have to know the truth, you have to know your history, you have to know a thing or two about Israel. And you have to have confidence in your knowledge. That takes time and that takes effort. And most people don't want to do that work. But if you want to overcome your fear you have to make the effort. You have to understand who you are. What you believe. What you stand for. You have to know your history.
2. **Know That You Are Not Alone.** Know that you are part of something larger. And that there is security in numbers. It's easier to put out a ribbon or put out a flag or put up a sign when a whole community is doing that. Thank God we can do that.
3. **Replace Your Fear.** Do the mental exercise that is necessary. Resist the temptation to catastrophize. This is not Nazi Germany. We live in Highland Park NJ! On Kristallnacht, when the Nazis set fire to synagogues the firefighters sprayed water not on the synagogues, but on the buildings next to the synagogues to prevent them from catching

on fire. Here, firefighters, run into synagogues that are on fire to rescue people and to rescue the sefer Torahs. Here good, decent people are repulsed by what Hamas did.

I can't tell you what it meant to me that my contractor, one of the nicest, most decent people, came to my house the week following the massacre with tears in his eyes, asking me, "How are your kids? Is everybody alright? Is there anything we can do for you?" And how disappointing, and sad, and awful it is that not one single other faith leader in our community reached out to me, not a single one, to say, "This was horrible. I condemn it. Unequivocally." Not. A. Single. One. ZERO. Z.E.R.O.

4. **Come to shul.** I've been saying that for the last three weeks. And it's good that people are here, including people that are not in the practice of coming often. And we honor you for being here. At the same time, it's surprising that so many people still do not come, even at this urgent time. What will it take to have people come to shul?
5. **Do acts of hesed.** Kindness. And that doesn't only mean you have to give money. Just be kind. Be good to one another. Help someone. Call someone. Just be courteous. Say thank you. It's really that simple. Just be kind. It will give you a lot of strength.
6. **Pray for Israel and the hostages.** Find a moment in your day, to focus and to pray. Every morning we've been adding Psalm 121. *God will guard you from all harm...* Add a prayer when you gather around the Friday night table. Prayer gives us strength.
7. **Study.** You'd be surprised how valuable it is to study Torah. Because Torah gives us the ideas and the framework needed to constantly remake ourselves and understand our world. And it gives us joy. And comfort.

To that end, here's a text from this week's parasha that, I think is the Torah's ultimate teaching about anti-Semitism.

וְאֶבְרַכֶּה מְבָרְכֶיךָ וְאֶקְלֶלֶה אֹאֲרֵי

I will bless those who bless you

and curse those who curse you. (Gen. 12:3)

I'm always amazed at the truth of that statement.

People who admire Jews, people who share our values, of community, devotion, commitment, faith, ethical grandeur, justice, peace, and so many more, they are

blessed people. There is something good about them. There is something beautiful about them. You can see it on their faces.

When you think about examples of individuals or institutions that love Jews, or respect Jews, or admire Jews, every single one of them is blessed. There's something good about them beyond just the fact that they are positive towards Jews.

And the opposite is true: people who hate Jews, the Haman's of the world, the Hamas sympathizers, those who say it out loud, and those who hate us in their hearts, those who hate our values, our institutions, and our State of Israel, are ugly, despicable, and contemptible in every way. It shows in their work, it shows in their institutions. It shows on their face.

Jew hatred even leaves a permanent curse on the earth.

My favorite example of this is not far from here. I ride my bicycle often on the Canal Tow Path between Colonial Park in Somerset and Rocky Hill. It's very beautiful there. And right near Rocky Hill, in Griggstown, there's this disgusting, overrun wasteland. And there's a sign on it that says it was a camp of some sort. And there are a few worn down buildings and the whole place is ugly, with dead trees and putrid marshes. While doing some reading about the area, I discovered that in the 1930's there was a summer camp for Nazi youth somewhere near Griggstown near the water. That's the place. The place was defiled by Nazis and their hate. And to this very day, it remains desolate and cursed.

We are in a convulsion now of anti-Semitism.

And God's promise to Abraham resonates throughout all history to this time.

וְאַבְרָהָהּ מְבָרְכִיךָ וּמְקַלְלֶיךָ אָאָר

I will bless those who bless you

and curse those who curse you.

May God give us the strength to overcome our fears.

May God give us the courage to stand up for our people.

And May God continue to bless all of those, calling out evil, unequivocally condemning Hamas' atrocities, and standing proudly by our side in our darkest hours.