

## ANTISEMITISM

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel | March 5, 2019

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Throughout the ages, antisemitism, a euphemism for Jew hatred, has often led to hardships and pain for the Jewish people. Antisemitism has existed in all generations and in all countries. This phenomenon began with the very first Jew, Abraham, who was sentenced to be killed by being thrown into a furnace because of his belief in one G-d. Fortunately, G-d saved him miraculously.<sup>1</sup> This set the pattern that continued, in somewhat different form, in each generation, as mentioned at the Passover Seder.<sup>2</sup> Even in countries where few or no Jews lived, antisemitism was present. For example, when Shakespeare wrote about the character Shylock (a caricature based on antisemitic rhetoric), there were no Jews living in England at the time. Even in recent times, antisemitism and accusations of control by Jews became an issue in the 1980's political campaign in Poland when fewer than 5000 lived there. Similarly, a virulent antisemitic book became a big seller in Japan when fewer than 250 Jewish families were residents in the 1990's. Thus, antisemitism exists in all places and all times, irrespective of circumstances. How can this phenomenon be understood? How can we explain why and how it occurs?

### **REASONS FOR ANTISEMITISM**

Many explanations for antisemitic feelings and behavior have been offered. The best place to begin is in the Torah itself. Why was the first Jew, Abraham, hated so much as a Jew? The Midrash<sup>3</sup> says that Abraham was called a Hebrew because the whole world was on one side and he was on the other side (*Ever*). Therefore, we see that because Abraham was different (in his belief) he was hated. This is somewhat understandable, as it is natural to be uncomfortable around anyone who is a little different. This natural reaction does not make it morally correct or justified, but understandable.

Being different is not unique to Abraham, but it has become a characteristic of the Jewish people of all ages. When most nations would assimilate after being conquered, the Jews held fast to their religion, by and large, even after they were forced to leave their homeland, the Land of Israel. This is most clearly expressed in the Purim Megillah when, at first, Mordechai was different by refusing to bow to Haman. Then, when convincing the King to destroy the Jewish people, Haman's argument was that the Jew's laws and religion was different from any other religion.<sup>4</sup> The fact is that the Jewish people are supposed to remain different,<sup>5</sup>(see chapter on "Being Jewish and Being Different") which naturally engendered much anger and hostility by the surrounding non-Jewish community.

A second reason that can be seen in the Torah as well as in many countries today is jealousy. Non-Jews jealous of success of the Jews tend to hate them for this success. This was first seen in the blessings given by Isaac to his son. Not only was Esau angry because Jacob "stole" the blessings, but he was also jealous that Jacob somehow always got ahead (that is the meaning of the Hebrew name for Jacob-Yaakov)

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<sup>1</sup> Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 38:13

<sup>2</sup> Passover Haggadah, Vehi She'amdah

<sup>3</sup> Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 42:8

<sup>4</sup> Megillat Esther 3:8

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 18:3

and that Jacob would now get much merit while he, Esau, would get less. Esau felt outwitted, according to Rashi.<sup>6</sup> According to most commentaries, the stories of Jacob and Esau are prototypes for what will transpire in all generations between Jew and non-Jew.

A third possible reason explaining antisemitism is that Jews tended to live separately from others around them. This began when the Jews came down to Egypt and asked to live apart in the land of Goshen.<sup>7</sup> (The excuse that a place was needed for cattle was merely a ruse, as Joseph had instructed them to say this.<sup>8</sup>) Of course, there are reasons why Jews throughout the generations tended to live isolated. Firstly, all people like to live in neighborhoods with people who are culturally similar to them. That is why blacks tend to live in black neighborhoods, Italian-Americans in Italian-American neighborhoods, etc. Furthermore, because of the necessity of walking to the synagogue on Shabbat, traditional Jews always had to live in close proximity to the centrally located synagogue, since they had to walk there on Shabbat. While this explains why Jews grouped together, non-Jews tended to dislike Jews anyway because it appeared that the Jews did not want to live with them, as if the non-Jews were "not good enough."

A fourth reason, whose roots are again found in the Torah, is fear. Pharaoh was afraid the Jews would become too numerous and eventually rebel against the natives.<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon continued, as Jews were always perceived as foreigners who might one day rebel against the government and cause difficulties. Non-Jews feared a loyalty to G-d or to the Land of Israel and not to the country in which the Jews lived. That is why Napoleon made the Jews sign an oath of loyalty to him. Even today in the United States, the most tolerant country in history, Jews are often accused of dual loyalty whenever any kind of friction occurs between the United States and the State of Israel.

In their recent book, "Why the Jews?" Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin suggest yet another reason. It is because the Jews gave the world a code of ethical behavior, they are hated. Even though the world has, by and large, accepted the Torah's code of ethical behavior as morally correct, the Jews still face resentment because of it. It is like the child who resents his or her parent who tells the child what to do. Even though the child knows it is right, the child still resents the parent for imposing the restrictions (accept the message and shoot the messenger?). This concept can be seen in the Talmud in a play on words, when it says that Sinai caused the hatred (*Sinah*) by non-Jews.<sup>10</sup>

### **SOMETIMES THERE IS NO REASON**

The classic people in the Torah who hated the Jews most are the Amalekites who first attacked the Jews immediately after they left Egypt. Throughout history, even until today, there are essentially four reasons why one nation attacks another nation: 1) to gain land, 2) to show power to other nations (and sometimes to themselves), 3) fear of being attacked, so they attack first, and 4) a holy war. The way the Torah describes the attack of Amalek<sup>11</sup> it is clear that none of these reasons applied. The verse starts off by saying that the Jews were attacked "on the way" meaning in no man's land. Therefore, the reason could not have been to gain territory. The next phrase in the verse is "they smote the weakest in the back ranks." Therefore, they could not have demonstrated power even if they had been victorious, since they had

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<sup>6</sup> Rashi on Genesis 27:35-36

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 47:4

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 46:31-34

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 1:9-10

<sup>10</sup> Shabbat 89a

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy 25:18

attacked only the weakest. The verse continues, "when you (the Jewish people) were faint and weary." Therefore, the reason could not have been fear of an attack by the Jews, since they were tired. Finally, the verse concludes "and they did not fear G-d." Therefore, it could not have been a holy war.

If all the usual reasons were not present, why, then, did the Amalekites attack the Jews? There are always some non-Jews who hate Jews for no reason at all, other than they are Jews. Thus, this form of antisemitism is not based on anything specific, just the fact that Jews exist. This phenomenon is expressed in a very unique way by the Midrash.<sup>12</sup> It says that it is a "known law" that Esau hates Jacob, i.e. the non-Jew hates the Jew. What kind of law is this that non-Jews hate Jews? Most people think of laws as a demonstration of a man-made justice system. But there is another kind of law, the laws of nature, which are not man made but G-d-made. These laws are neither good nor bad, but, rather, true or not true. Therefore, the Midrash seems to indicate that there is a natural law that the non-Jew will hate the Jew, an inescapable part of nature. Similarly, the Midrash describes the Jewish people as one lamb among seventy wolves,<sup>13</sup> as a natural state of things where the wolf desires to eat the lamb, and that all the nations hate the Jews. Of course, this does not mean that all non-Jews hate Jews, only that some non-Jews hate Jews without any logical reason or provocation. Part of this "law of nature" is also the ebb and flow of the Jews and gentile nations in an inverse relationship: when the Jews are on top, the non-Jewish nations are usually falling and when the non-Jewish nations are on top, the Jews are often falling.<sup>14</sup>

This, then, is the definition of Amalek today, according to Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik. Although there are no longer any physical remnants of Amalek, there are spiritual heirs. Anyone who hates Jews and tries to destroy Jews just because they are Jews (and without any concrete reason) would be considered Amalek today. (For a further analysis of who would fit the definition of Amalek today, read the chapter in this book about "The Holocaust: Why Remember?")

### **CAN ANTISEMITISM EVER BE GOOD FOR THE JEWS?**

Even though people think of antisemitism in totally negative terms, sometimes there can be a positive end to this hate. The Talmud<sup>15</sup> says that the antisemitism displayed by Achashverosh in the Purim story, by decreeing to kill all the Jews, did more to motivate the Jews to repent than the prophecy and admonishing by all 48 prophets and 7 prophetesses. What does this mean? The negative acts of Achashverosh woke the Jews up and inspired them to do good, as no prophet did, says the Talmud, because it is often the negative acts against the Jews which brings them together and wakes them out of their spiritual slumber. The decree of a wicked king mobilized the Jews to become more Jewish, where the prophets could not.

This idea is alluded to in the Torah. After the Jews left Egypt, the verse says that Pharaoh drew closer to the people as he chased them.<sup>16</sup> But the tense for the verb "drew closer" actually reads "he brought them closer" as a causative, *hif-il*. Thus, according to some commentaries the Torah is actually telling us that Pharaoh (and not any other action by Moses) brought the people closer. Sometimes it takes an outside threat to unite the people. That is what happened with both Achashverosh and Pharaoh.

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<sup>12</sup> Midrash, Sifri, Behaalotcha 11

<sup>13</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Toldot 5

<sup>14</sup> Pesachim 42b

<sup>15</sup> Megillah 14a

<sup>16</sup> Exodus 14:10

In modern times, this phenomenon can be seen. It was only after the pogroms and antisemitism in Europe during the 1880's that the Jews started to seriously move to Palestine and actualize the Zionist dream. The same phenomenon occurred in Nazi Germany, as the threats of 1933-1935 surprisingly awoke Jewish identity in German Jews, and caused more Jewish books to be published in Germany in those few years than the total number of Jewish German books that had been published in the previous 50 years combined! In more recent times, after the establishment of the state of Israel, the desire to come on Aliyah was not usually strong enough to attract the masses to the State. The massive Aliyah of Jews from Arab countries, from Russia, Ethiopia and other countries, has come, by and large, because of antisemitism. Once again, the terrible pain of antisemitism has led to a positive result, Aliyah.

### **ANTISEMITISM TODAY**

Since the horrors of the Holocaust occurred and became well-known, it has not been socially acceptable in western society to commit pen acts of antisemitism. The mental association of antisemitism with Hitler has led to almost universal condemnation in each instance of antisemitism. This abhorrence to antisemitic acts, however, does not imply that antisemitism does not exist. It merely exists in a new form.

As overt antisemitism has receded, a new type of antisemitism has emerged – latent antisemitism. This is an anti-Jewish feeling by many people that is felt inside but not expressed publicly on a regular basis. When latent antisemitic feelings emerge, they are triggered by large and small incidents.

For example, until 1977, in a little New Jersey town of Little Falls, no expression or incidents of antisemitism had ever been found. Then, a teacher showed the seventh grade a film about free speech in which a man put on a Nazi arm band in a Jewish neighborhood and began shouting "Hitler was right." The purpose of the film was to present the question if he has the legal right to do this. After the film, however, the two Jewish children in the class were attacked and pennies were later thrown at them by the other children. After investigation, it was found that latent antisemitism was brought to the surface by the film. At the height of the severe Arab oil boycott in 1974, where Americans suffered because America was denied Arab oil due to the United States support of Israel, bumper stickers were spotted in the USA reading "Burn Jews not oil." During the congressional battle in 1981 on whether the United States should sell sophisticated weapons to Saudi Arabia, which was opposed by Israel and American Jews, there emerged antisemitic comments such as "the Jews control the media." In all these examples, events and incidents brought latent antisemitism to the surface and converted it into overt antisemitism. And today the grossly illogical anti-Israel feelings and Israel bashing all over the world have taken the place of classic antisemitism, as their anti-Israel activities are a thinly veiled form of antisemitism.

The origin of these two forms of antisemitism can be seen by carefully reading a verse in the Torah itself. When beseeching G-d to save him from the impending battle with his brother Esau, Jacob says<sup>17</sup> "Save me from my brother, from Esau." Since the Torah does not use any word unnecessarily and since Jacob had only one brother, why must Jacob repeat his request to be saved from his brother and from Esau - either the term brother or Esau would have sufficed? Why say both? Rashi answers the question<sup>18</sup> by explaining that Jacob was really asking G-d for two things. Jacob first asked G-d to save him from Esau when Esau acts like a brother, when he appears to be nice and loving. That is one type of threat. The other threat

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<sup>17</sup> Genesis 32:12

<sup>18</sup> Rashi commentary to Genesis 32:12

and request is to be saved from Esau when he acts like Esau, i.e. the hateful brother who wants to kill Jacob. Thus, both the covert antisemitism of a brotherly action is a threat as well as overt antisemitism, when the threat is a known enemy such as Esau.

Which type of antisemitism is more dangerous? Logically, the latent antisemitism seems more of a threat because you can never really know who is your enemy and a danger to you. It could be anyone, even someone who acts like your friend. At least an overt enemy with overt antisemitism is identified and can be anticipated, but not the latent antisemite. In the verse, too, the latent antisemite is mentioned first (brother) as it is the more dangerous of the two.

### **HOW TO RESPOND TO ANTISEMITISM?**

How is the individual Jew who is attacked only because he or she is a Jew, supposed to respond to either a verbal or physical antisemitic attack? There are three possible reactions, each laden with a possible positive or negative result. One possibility is to ignore the attack. Since the purpose of many antisemitic attacks is to cause a reaction, ignoring the attack may cause the attacker to be frustrated and cease further attack. Sometimes, however, ignoring inspires the attacker to repeat the attack in a more violent manner to engender that reaction. A second possible response (probably the most natural) is to fight back. This often causes the attacker to flee and desist from further attacks since he, too, is afraid underneath and is scared by fight. Sometimes, however, a confrontation causes the attacker to return to attack again, this time with more people or more dangerous weapons. Finally, there is the legal option. By responding to the attack by calling the police and/or suing the attacker, often prevents further attack out of fear of the consequences. Sometimes, however, this causes the attacker to become even angrier and the attacks grow worse, but in a way that the police cannot prove anything or take action. Thus, although each reaction may prevent further attacks, each of the three options is fraught with possibly disastrous results.

Does the Torah ever condone a violent reaction to an antisemitic act? Is the fight option ever legitimized in Judaism? Many will point to the source "an eye for an eye"<sup>19</sup> to prove that one may react to violence with violence. However, according to all the commentaries as well as the Talmud,<sup>20</sup> the clear meaning of the verse is to pay back money for any bodily damage. So this is not a legitimate source. The story of Simon and Levi who destroyed the city of Shechem in retribution for the rape of their sister Dina provides an instance of a violent reaction to a violent act (although it is not clear if it was an antisemitic act). How does the Torah view the actions of Simon and Levi? Although it is not clear from the story itself,<sup>21</sup> later on in the blessings, Jacob reprimanded them for their action.<sup>22</sup> It appears, therefore, that a violent reaction is not proper. And yet, from the story of Moses who killed an Egyptian who was beating a Jew,<sup>23</sup> it seems a violent reaction is acceptable. Here, too, it is not the usual case of antisemitic act, as Moses was helping a Jew in trouble and antisemitism was a state policy.

Is there, then, any instance in the Torah where a violent reaction to an antisemitic act is praised? Yes. In the story of the Midianite woman who committed sexual intercourse with the Prince of the tribe of Simon, Pinchas, the son of the High Priest, reacting to an act that embarrassed the Jewish people and their G-d, "took the law into his own hands" and killed them both, thereby stopping the plague (which had killed

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<sup>19</sup> Exodus 21:24-25

<sup>20</sup> Bava Kama 84a

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 34:1-31

<sup>22</sup> Genesis 49:7

<sup>23</sup> Exodus 2:11-12

24,000 people).<sup>24</sup> Based on G-d's own words, Pinchas did the right thing and was rewarded handsomely for this courageous act.<sup>25</sup> Was this indeed the right thing to do, to take the law into one's own hands and kill two people? Although the Torah praises Pinchas' reaction, the Talmud<sup>26</sup> seems to condemn this type of reaction, saying that Pinchas was about to be excommunicated for what he did, and it was only the Divine intervention in this unique case that saved Pinchas. In all other cases, however, it seems that this type of reaction would be punishable. This opinion disagrees with the generally accepted positive reaction to Pinchas' act. Although the initial act is not antisemitism per se, it was a desecration of G-d's name in public, a situation not unlike many antisemitic attacks. Thus, if the attack is public and desecrates G-d's name, may a person react violently? According to Maimonides,<sup>27</sup> if there is indeed public desecration of G-d's name, a violent reaction would be acceptable under three conditions: 1) the reaction to the attack must take place in the heat of passion, while the act is being committed and not later, after cold reflection, 2) If permission to respond is asked of the authorities (even during the attack), the person will be denied permission by the authorities and he may not respond, and 3) If the original attacker kills the Jew responding, the attacker is not guilty of murder.

We see, therefore, that under certain conditions, one may be able to respond. This does not conclusively answer, however, which reaction is the most preferable. Every situation is different and an appropriate rabbinic authority should be consulted in each instance.

#### **TRADITIONAL RESPONSE IN JEWISH HISTORY**

In the Bible, the response to the antisemitism of Haman was the legal option. Esther went to the king and obtained legal permission to be armed and fight back. However, the traditional response to group antisemitism during the last thousand years has been to ignore the attack and attacker. The rationale was that the less the Jews protested, the less the damage would occur. It was wiser to accept the pain, the damage and even the killings of a few if the community could survive. Often, Jews would have to move from town to town or even from country to country, but the Jewish community survived. Although it was a painful experience, this response worked best to preserve the Jewish community.

But the Holocaust changed this traditional response. During the Holocaust, most Jews responded to Hitler's antisemitism as they always had: accept the pain and killings, wait the mad man out and the community will survive. In this instance, however, this reaction did not work, as the entire Jewish community of Europe was virtually destroyed. Clearly, this time, the traditional response was not the correct one.

Following the Holocaust, the Jews learned this lesson well. Since this terrible period, the Jewish reaction to antisemitism has been very vocal, both in Israel and in the Diaspora. Any attack on the State of Israel today causes a speedy retaliation, usually causing much more damage than the original attack. Gone are the days when Jews will be silent when attacked. In the Diaspora, where the response is usually verbal, the reaction there, too, is not silent but very loud indeed. Even the smallest act of antisemitism is not tolerated. It is publicized, reported to the media and examined. The days of not responding to antisemitic actions are over. (This is one of the main lessons learned from the Holocaust, as discussed in the chapter, "The Holocaust: Why Remember?")

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<sup>24</sup> Numbers 25:6-9

<sup>25</sup> Numbers 25:10-13

<sup>26</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 48b

<sup>27</sup> Hilchot Issurei Biah 12:4-5

**MINIMIZING ANTISEMITISM**

Since it is a “natural law” that “Esau hates Yaakov” there will always be some antisemitism, no action today will be able to prevent antisemitism totally. However, Jews can minimize antisemitic acts in a number of ways. By continuing to speak out publicly and virulently when antisemitism does occur, Jews can remind the world how intolerable this type of action is. General society must be reminded to continue to believe that antisemitism is an antisocial behavior and will never be condoned. Jews also have a responsibility to insure that non-Jews have little or no reason to commit antisemitic acts towards them, as Jews should not behave in a way that invites an antisemitic reaction. Every public immoral act by a Jew not only desecrates G-d's name, but also encourages antisemitism. Finally, the Jew must constantly be on the lookout for signs of latent antisemitism and fight it wherever possible. By recognizing the signs of latent antisemitism early, overt antisemitic acts can often be prevented.

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