

Kol Ha-Rav

Shabbat Zachor falls this year on March 16th. It is the Shabbat before Purim when we are commanded to remember Amalek, the ancestor of Haman, whose memory we blot out on Purim. Amalek and Haman are the archetypes of the villains of the Jewish people; those who, in the words of the Megillah: "Desire to kill and obliterate all of the Jews, from young to old." So this is the Shabbat that rabbis through the years have used to focus on the never ending problem of anti-Semitism. What is there to say? There *was* anti-Semitism, there *is* anti-Semitism and there *will be* anti-Semitism! We can't stop it ... it's an irrational force! It has even occurred in times and countries when and where there were no Jews.

And yet something has to be said, for the problem of anti-Semitism is on the mind of most every American Jew today.

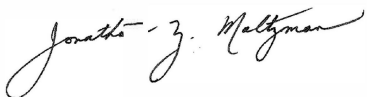
More than 40 years ago, while Rabbi Benjamin Blech, one of Orthodox Judaism's most well regarded teachers, was the rabbi at the Young Israel of Oceanside in Long Island, NY, he and the other Jews of the community woke up on a Yom Kippur morning to the horror that all synagogues in the community had been vandalized overnight, with curse words painted at the entrance of each synagogue. Rabbi Blech wrote a powerful essay entitled, "Only Words Upon a Wall?" pointing out that it is not only words, it is much more. He wrote:

"Next day, news reports carry the story. And suddenly it strikes me. For the first time I grasp the real problem. "A rash of anti-Semitic incidents struck Oceanside yesterday ..." begins the announcer. Anti-Semitic? Wait a moment. Were Semites the victims of prejudice, or was it every member of society who respects democratic ideals, who recognizes inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? Why single out one group as having been harmed when it is the collective fabric of a free and ethical society that has been torn asunder? Someone in town says to me, "I'm sorry you people had that unfortunate incident." And I cry to myself at the lack of understanding. For even as he consoled me, he makes clear he does not recognize the extent of his personal loss. If only the announcer would have said: "A rash of anti-human incidents struck Oceanside yesterday."

Why did he universalize the issue? It's anti-Semitism! Hatred of the Jews. The perpetrators didn't write curse words on churches. Why make this into, in his words, "an anti-human incident" when the attack was only on the Jews?

What we have experienced in America in recent months has taught me that it's not only Jews who are in danger but America herself is in danger. Those who commit these acts have been filled with hate for years. They have been that way most of their lives, but they felt powerless and helpless and kept to themselves. And then, suddenly, they heard America talking about things in public that they had only talked about in private: bad hombres and rapists coming in from Mexico ... spies coming in amongst Syrian refugees ... blacks and carnage ... terrorism being perpetrated by illegal immigrants ... Muslims imposing Sharia law ... the LGBTQ community taking over our bathrooms. It's when this kind of talk becomes public discourse that the rats feel comfortable coming out of the sewers. Did we really think in this climate and atmosphere that Jews would be left out of the discussion? Hatred of a Jew is irrational. And hating a person because of the color of his skin is rational? Or because of the country from which he comes? Or because of the religion she practices? Hating someone because he or she is different, is an "other" ... does that make any sense?

All us "others" are in this together. This means that in the years ahead we Jews are going to have to work with the other "others". And maybe one day we will be able to echo the words the Jews were able to say in regard to Haman: "*La-yehudim hayattah orah v'simcha v'sasson vicar* - for the Jews, there was light, gladness, joy and honor."



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