



## REBUKING ANTI-SEMITISM—NOT AN OPTION, AN OBLIGATION\*

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

It was almost two decades ago that, prior to my own ordination, I found myself in the awkward position of feeling obligated to rebuke a rabbi. I had observed him closely for several months, watching him in a role that wasn't helpful to his congregation. There was a conflict and, instead of facilitating its constructive resolution, he tried to suppress it—with less than ideal results.

The Talmud teaches, “Whence do we know that the disciple [must rebuke] his master? From the phrase *‘hokeakh tokiakh’*, implying under all circumstances.” (Bava Metzia 31a) So my obligation was to question a rabbi's behavior.

One evening while we were working alone, I respectfully raised the subject. To my surprise, he candidly acknowledged his behavior and went on to clarify its cause. As a youngster he had witnessed his father in a confrontation lose control of his bowels, soiling himself—and thereafter the son went to great lengths to avoid conflict and a similar loss of control. Having a fear of conflict myself from an early age, it was a very familiar emotion. The rabbi's shame-laden personal story much more sharply etched my understanding of the connection between fear and avoidance of conflict.

All this came to mind upon reading an informative *Baltimore Jewish Times* column, “Defending the Faith” (April 11, 2003) by Barbara Pash, an assistant editor, which described an incident of anti-Semitism in a public meeting. An African American pastor, having recently purchased a convenience store, referred in a derogatory tone of voice to the previous owners as “those Jews,” who ostensibly had managed in some devious way to get the city to overlook code violations.

I was not the least bit surprised to read about such behavior in the “public square.” Not long before, as a university lecturer in social work, my ears were figuratively singed upon hearing a highly regarded African American full professor refer to the events of 9-11 as essentially no different than Joshua's entry into the land. This offhand (off the wall?) remark was made as part of a panel presentation to some 300 undergraduate and graduate social work students and faculty. And although a question and answer period followed, not one word was said to challenge her remark, even from a scholarly perspective, if not to combat anti-Semitism.

Personally, I was sufficiently dumbstruck by the recklessness of her comment in a time of mounting campus anti-Semitism, and intimidated as a part-time lecturer, that I too let the remark pass, at least until I had time afterwards to gather my wits and write a letter to her.

But let's return to the *Baltimore Jewish Times* column, because the question it raised is one that every Jew—whatever one's persuasion, movement, or branch of Judaism—should consider carefully: Should we answer anti-Semitic speech in the public square? The certainty regarding this question is that fear of conflict should *not* be the decisive factor in what we conclude and choose to do—although, of course, realistic fear should put us on notice as to *how* to respond.

The *Jewish Times* columnist quoted two experts—a Jewish communal organization executive, and a program coordinator for a Jewish family services agency. On the one hand, the executive counseled confronting anti-Semitic speech on the spot

as “casual anti-Semitism . . . and unacceptable.” On the other hand, the coordinator counseled approaching the pastor privately after the public meeting and saying to him that, “I’m sure you didn’t intend to sound the way you did.” She added that, to speak out in the meeting would be “more destructive.” The columnist concluded, “I agree that we shouldn’t let anti-Semitic comments go unchallenged. I also agree that making an issue of it probably wouldn’t have accomplished much. But still, I’m left wondering, what was the right response?”

When we hear anti-Semitic language it jars our sensibilities and causes us emotional pain. I recall the experience of a former congregant who, while waiting at the checkout stand of a big-box pet store, observed the customer ahead of her using a discount card issued by the store. When she got to the register she asked the clerk, “How do I get a discount card?”—but the clerk didn’t answer her. When she asked a second time, the clerk turned and, in a contemptuous tone of voice, replied, “What are you, a Jew?” within earshot of anyone standing near the checkout line.

Our first reaction to such incidents is shock and pain, the motivation for our more considered response—and to some extent the considered response relieves some of the shock and pain. But, of course, relief of shock and pain *alone* is not justification for responding to anti-Semitic speech.

Why, then, should we answer anti-Semitic remarks made in the public square?

- Apart from the speaker, who may be approached privately afterwards, every person who hears a speaker’s anti-Semitic words and has the slightest sympathy for them is reinforced in his or her bigoted beliefs and in the future likelihood of speaking out similarly in a public setting.
- Every person who recognizes the impropriety of such speech responds to the modeling of formal and informal leaders who are present but fail to speak up, thereby reinforcing as appropriate the idea and behavior of remaining passive in the face of increasing public expressions of anti-Semitism.
- The presence of anti-Semitic *speech* in the public square and the failure to confront it is likely—given present social, cultural, and demographic conditions in the U.S.—to stimulate and reinforce anti-Semitic *behavior*.
- The net effect of an increase in anti-Semitic behavior is certain to be an increase in measurable pain and loss for individual Jews, for Jewish families, congregations, and business-

es, and for larger Jewish communities and institutions.

The point is, when casual or intended anti-Semitic speech occurs in the public square, confronting it privately may be necessary but not sufficient to deal with its potential consequences. In the case of the social work professor who likened Joshua’s entry into the land to the 9-11 terrorists, she was willing in our later brief exchange of email correspondence only to acknowledge that she is a pacifist, notwithstanding any scholarly, logical, or commonsense critique of her comment that I offered—which acknowledgment, of course, had no effect whatsoever on the lessons learned by those who were present when she made the damaging comment.

What about the danger of promoting “destructive” public conflict? It may be fairly said that responding to anti-Semitic speech is not the instigation of, but a response to, the beginning of destructive conflict. Moreover, such anti-Semitic speech reveals not only the speaker’s bigotry, whether conscious or unconscious, but the social and cultural distance between all the persons who are present and who identify with the speaker, and “those Jews” to whom the speaker refers. We are dealing here not only with psychological dynamics but sociological ones as well: we have the attitudes and actions of groups to consider, not only individuals. And there is implicitly an opportunity to diminish the distance between the groups.

The question becomes, is it possible *constructively* to confront public anti-Semitism? And if so, what are the conditions and constraints that ought to be respected? It’s not enough to recognize the necessity for risking the consequences of intensifying conflict, we must also be clear for moral and strategic reasons about the imperatives for action and inaction.

Since our tradition has so much to teach us about “rebuke,” it is an ideal source to guide our thinking on *how* to answer anti-Semitic speech in the public square. But it should be acknowledged at the outset, that the *mitzvot* (commandments) and *halachah* (rabbinic law) reflect an implicit assumption that the context of their application is a religiously educated and observant Jewish community. Of course, nowadays, the majority of Jews, who are affiliated with the liberal streams of Judaism, are dispersed residentially and occupationally throughout the non-Jewish world, and their application of the religious law—in those rare instances when they may know and observe it—is not likely to have the effects envisaged by our sages and rabbis throughout history. So while we may choose to

observe these laws with the aim of modeling what we hope will become normative behavior in the larger non-Jewish world, we ought not to have unrealistic expectations in that regard.

The applicable *mitzvah* is in *parasha* (Torah portion) Vayikra: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall rebuke your neighbor and not bear sin because of him.” (Leviticus 19:17) We have it on Rashi’s authority in the name of Rabbi Akiba that, “This is a fundamental principle in the Torah (Siphra).” According to the *Sefer haHinnuch*, “The root reason for the precept is . . . it serves to improve society and order its communal life. . . .”

The importance of rebuke is also suggested by the extent to which it is affirmed in Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), more than a dozen times in Proverbs alone. Clearly, reproof or challenge is not simply a “good idea”; it is, according to all *poskim* or rabbinic legal authorities, *halakhah* “*l’maasei*” (i.e., to *do*—practically, actually, or in fact). The consequences for urban life of failing to observe this *mitzvah* are pointedly described in the Talmud: “Jerusalem was destroyed only because they did not rebuke each other . . . Israel of that generation hid their faces in the earth, and did not rebuke each other. . . .” (Shabbat 119b)

But the Talmud also poses several critical caveats regarding rebuke.

- “. . . If it is evident to all, and known, and tested and confirmed that the sinner hates instruction and will not listen to the voice of his teachers or give ear to those who would instruct him, about such a one it is said, ‘Reprove not a scorner lest he hate thee’ (Proverbs 9:8). And our sages have said, ‘Just as it is a *mitzvah* to say what will be heeded, so is it a *mitzvah* not to say what will not be heeded.’” (Yevamot 65b)

Presumably, if we are to restrain ourselves from rebuking those *individuals* who we are virtually certain have closed their minds and hearts to correction, all the more so we should refrain from doing so with *groups* that are likely to respond similarly.

- “They said further, ‘One who shames his neighbor in public has no share in the World to Come.’” (Bava Metzia 59a).

So we are directed to do nothing that publicly shames, slanders, or discomforts our neighbor. And the prohibition is reaffirmed in Berachot 31b, Pesachim 118a, Yoma 4b, 75a, and 87a, Ketubot 67b, Sota 5a, Bava Metzia 31a, 58b, and 59a.

At first blush the *halakhah* would seem to preclude confronting anti-Semitic speech in the public square if we bind ourselves to constraints that are intended to be applied within a *Jewish* community. But even so, what is forbidden is confrontation of an individual in a way that causes shame. So one’s confrontation of such anti-Semitic speech in the non-Jewish world, if we were to apply the same standard, might instead be in the vein of *public education*, directed at all who are present, to counter the ignorance implicit in anti-Semitic beliefs and attitudes. One’s “rebuke,” then, would be addressed not to the individual but to the entire assembly. It would not focus on individual bigotry but on factual misunderstandings, common mistaken beliefs, and faulty conclusions. Whenever possible, it would seek to highlight shared values, experience, and interests.

Yet there is nonetheless a risk that the person who made the anti-Semitic comment and those who heard it will experience our response as shaming. So we ought to tactfully answer anti-Semitic speech with respect and kindness, implicitly giving our “neighbor” the benefit of the doubt that an honest mistake has been made (possibly *ours*) or that there is good reason for the speech in question. It is essential that we do not adopt the values and behavior of those whose speech may harm us. And we must not poison our communities and ourselves by refusing to be reconciled with those who have harmed us with their words by error or ignorance. But certainly when all is said and done, neither should we make our communities or ourselves vulnerable to malevolence against us.

As Nehama Leibowitz wrote in *Studies in Vayikra*, “The Torah teaches us that even by sitting at home doing nothing, by complete passivity and divorcement from society, one cannot shake off responsibility for what is transpiring in the world at large, for the iniquity, violence and evil there. By not protesting, ‘not marking the graves’ and danger spots, you have become responsible for any harm arising therefrom, and have violated the prohibition: Thou shalt not put a stumbling block before the blind. . . .”

When we confront anti-Semitic speech in a *communal* setting, our goal is de-legitimization of its content, regardless of the animus behind it. We should be guided by the goals of public education, aiming to increase knowledge, to strengthen relationships within the community, and to foster understanding between dissimilar peoples for the sake of the commonweal.

What could or should I have done in that *academic* setting of social work faculty and students? I might have spoken out and, in a spirit of scholarly

inquiry and dialogue, said: “Regarding the *dissimilarities* between the 9-11 terrorists and Joshua’s entry into the land, the Israelites felt themselves bound by God’s commandment to protect human life, specifically: “When you draw near to a city to wage war against it, you shall call out to it for peace.” Canaan was not a nation, not even inhabited by a single people; however, the various peoples living in Canaan had their idolatry in common.

They had institutionalized child sacrifice, “sacred prostitution” of both men and women, and worship of the god Ba’al by defecating on the idol of its supposed likeness. Withal, the Israelites’ entrance into the land is not entirely unproblematic by contemporary standards, but comparisons of Joshua’s entry into the land with the events of 9-11 are not supported by any recognized scholarship.”

\* Updated since originally published.

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