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PROMPTING ANTI-SEMITIC HATRED

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

The recent rise of anti-Semitism worldwide has not come as a shock to us. To the contrary, during the past ten years we have repeatedly been surprised by the numbers of intelligent and thoughtful Jews who argued vociferously that anti-Semitism at the end of the fifty-eighth century of the Jewish people was a non-starter—a point of view that seems absurdly naïve now.

Moshe's baseline for evaluating anti-Semitism is his own boyhood in Los Angeles 50 years ago. Jews were restricted from particular employment, clubs, neighborhoods, and schools. Everyone knew that a Jew could not get a job with the phone company or the gas company. On the bridge leading onto Balboa Island, a resort community south of Los Angeles, there was a sign that read, "No Dogs, No Niggers, No Jews Allowed," and there was a similar sign on the gate to a private golf course in Orange County as late as 1962. But that's virtually all changed for the better. Jews now work, live and play like all other Americans. Institutional anti-Semitism is a rarity.

But Moshe also recalls the upsetting experience when young boys yelled "dirty Jew" and "kike" at him while walking home from elementary school. And, regrettably, that in-your-face brand of anti-Semitism is alive and well today. Reading ADL annual reports for the past several decades confirms the intractability of the problem. But for those who still have doubts, we recommend the "30-day test." Wear a *kippa* (yarmulke) or large Magen David (Star of David) prominently in public for a month and we're confident that you will encounter personal anti-Semitism (unless, of course, you're living and working in a largely Jewish neighborhood or possibly a progressive, culturally diverse urban setting).

Our benchmark, confirmed many times over by our own personal experience, is a former congregant in a northern California university town who told us a few years ago that whenever she goes out and about, she always tucks her Star of David into her blouse so it can't be seen—"to be on the safe side."

In a similar vein, Moshe, wearing a *kippa*, was getting his beard trimmed at a barber shop and, after paying for the trim and then asking for change for a \$20 bill so he could tip the barber, the shop owner asked, "Is this some kind of Jewish trick?"

It's usually a shock when it happens, when we encounter anti-Semitism directly and personally. It's not a matter of having an anxiety attack or losing control of our bowels, but there's a sense of incredulity, disbelief. On some level we say to ourselves, this can't be happening, not to me, not in this place, not in this day and age. In our *kishkas* we don't really get it, although we have endless intellectual explanations (some of which we'll return to momentarily). We're decent, honest, and hard-working; we're responsible citizens, dedicated employees, and good neighbors. So why should we be singled out for bigoted abuse, why us?

We imagine that we're hated because of the carnard that we killed Jesus. But of course that doesn't explain the Jew-hatred that existed in the ancient world, before Christianity, or the current antipathy of non-Christians. We imagine that we're hated because of our economic success. But of course that doesn't explain why impoverished Jews are hated with equal fervor as rich ones. So our speculations go on and on.

We believe that the most parsimonious explanation of anti-Semitism and hatred of the Jews, particularly their historic durability and intensity, may be found in the very reason for our existence as a people. In Leviticus 22:32 we read: "And you shall not profane My holy name; but I will be sanctified among the children of Israel: I am Adonai who sanctifies you." The *mitzvah* (commandment) of *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctification of the name of God, in effect calls us *not to refuse to do good* and *not to hide ourselves in the presence of evil*. More specifically, we are commanded to lay down our lives rather than commit murder, idolatry, or sexual immorality.

These notions, that we are to sanctify and not desecrate the name of God by our actions, have been the animating force of Jewish life for more than 3,000 years. And until relatively recently, the

last century or two, the majority of Jews held these notions in earnest.

What has that meant as a practical matter, that we would not refuse to do good and not hide ourselves in the presence of evil?

In all places and periods, Jews were implicitly or explicitly the critics of those who did do evil or refused to speak out in its presence. Since ancient times the existence of the Jewish Torah and people have been an uncomfortable reminder that spirit-crushing political tyranny, murderous child sacrifice, family-demoralizing temple prostitution, desensitizing cruelty to animals, and the like, are contrary to God's will. We have been a thorn in the side of every dictator and tyrant and their minions that would enslave and exploit.

In other words, Judaism—the belief system and practices of the Jewish people—is what feeds anti-Semitism and hatred of the Jews.

The lesson is that, to be a light to the nations is not to be thanked for illuminating the path. Rather it is to be told that your light is blinding people and making them uncomfortable. Anti-Semitism goes with the territory of being Jewish, regardless of whether we live up to Judaism's teachings or not. The anti-Semites are equal opportunity haters: they hate us for what our grandparents believed and practiced and what our Torah has taught for 3,000 years, irrespective of what *we* believe or do.

The question we're left with is this: Do we want to be "incidental victims" of such hatred or, instead, to consciously choose a way of life that runs the risk of *prompting* it? If Judaism has little or no real meaning in our lives, then we're only incidental victims of the anti-Semites. But if Judaism is at the core of our beliefs and behavior, what we teach our children and live out in our own lives, then the anti-Semites who are bent on evil have more than sufficient motivation to hate us. From a strategic viewpoint, we can certainly understand their hatred. Moreover, we can take pride knowing that we're in the best possible company to be among those whom they hate!

So we come to the most fundamental reason to want actively to be counted in the company of the Jewish people and to risk prompting anti-Semitic hatred. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105), the dean of our Torah commentators, says that when we "surrender our life"—doing good and not hiding ourselves in the presence of evil—we sanctify the name of God.

What is the result of this *Kiddush Hashem*?

In the words of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888): Our deeds have the effect of "stirring, animating, and elevating" us, suffusing our lives with the very spiritual meaning that we so desperately seek.

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