

The Hatred Is Old; The Answer Is Older Still

By Rabbi Aaron L. Raskin

There is an old accusation, older than any of us, that Jews poison wells, that Jews murder children for sport, that Jews are the secret authors of the world's suffering. It has worn many costumes across the centuries. Today it wears a new one: the charge that Jews are committing genocide, that we are deliberately starving babies. The details change. The architecture does not. It is the same libel, refitted for a news cycle.

I live in a city where this has stopped being an abstraction. Our mayor has been slow to disavow language that inflames rather than informs. Rabbis have gone to his office and asked him, respectfully, to lower the temperature. He has listened, or seemed to. But I have come to believe that meetings like these, however necessary, are a bandage on a wound that starts much deeper than any one official's rhetoric.

We have tried almost everything else. Campaigns. Task forces. Millions of dollars in advertising and advocacy. Antisemitism has not receded. So it is worth asking a harder question: not how do we manage this hatred, but how do we actually answer it.

My teacher, a man I consider the Moses of our generation, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, has said plainly that more police on our streets will not solve this, and neither will more guards outside our schools. Those measures may keep us safer for a season. They do not touch the root. The root, he teaches, goes back to Sinai itself — to the moment God gave the Torah to the Jewish people and, in the same breath, charged them with a second task: to teach the nations of the world the seven laws given to Noah, and to be, in Isaiah's words, a light unto the nations.

That charge is not nostalgia. It is a job description we have let go unfilled.

To be that light starts with a single idea, offered to every human being regardless of faith or nation: that God is concerned with your welfare, that God is the source of all good and wants good for your life, and that you were made in God's image. From that idea, a demand follows — to do good in the world, to live by basic decency: not to steal, not to kill, not to worship idols, to build courts of justice, to hold life sacred. But underneath the specific laws is something larger — a consciousness that every person, everywhere, shares responsibility for

making this world a dwelling place worthy of its Creator. Isaiah said God did not make the world to be a chaos, but to be inhabited in peace. That is the ledger we are meant to be building.

The images out of Gaza, and the ugliness they have unleashed against Jews everywhere, should be a wake-up call rather than only a source of despair. We were called to this mission thirty-three centuries ago. The moment has come to actually live it.

It begins with something almost embarrassingly small: being a mensch. Being kind to the stranger on the street. Not cutting someone off in traffic. Not being short with the person ahead of you in line at the supermarket. There is a commandment to love God, and our sages teach that the way Abraham fulfilled it was by causing others to love God too — by living in a way that made people stop and take notice. Look how they treat their children. Look how they speak to a colleague, a neighbor, a stranger. I want to live like that. That admiration is the open door. It is how the conversation about the seven laws of Noah actually begins — not with a lecture, but with an example someone wants to follow.

There is a practical version of this, too. Once a week — payday is fitting — give every person who works for you an extra dollar and tell them plainly: this is for charity. Most will add to it themselves. Do this in a warehouse, an office, over Zoom, on social media, and you have started a chain that does not end with you. Multiply that by the number of people reading this, and by the people they in turn inspire, and the arithmetic becomes almost impossible to hold in the mind — millions of small deeds compounding into something that looks, from a distance, like redemption.

Maimonides, the great Jewish philosopher and codifier, offers an image worth sitting with: think of the world as a scale, holding steady at fifty percent merit and fifty percent failing. A single good deed can tip it. In Washington there is reputed to be a button that could unleash catastrophe on the entire world, and it is said that even a child could press it. Each of us carries the opposite button now — in an email, a phone call, a five-minute conversation — capable of setting off a chain reaction not of destruction but of kindness, moving outward further than we will ever get to see.

The hatred is old. The answer, it turns out, is older still. It has been waiting since Sinai for us to pick it up.