

What I am going to do this week is use the opening narrative of *Va'yeshev* about Joseph's relationship with his brothers to talk about a very important issue that the Jewish community faces: the threat of antisemitism.

I believe that this opening story can provide a window into the phenomenon of antisemitism even though the passage is clearly not about that. In order to do that, I'm going to set up my discussion with three verses from Tanakh. They are Malachai 2:10, Isaiah 2:4, I Kings 10:9. Each of these verses helps bridge the gap between the opening story in *Vayeshev* and the problem of antisemitism.

Before I turn to that exploration, however, I want to speak about antisemitism generally. It is at once a very simple and direct topic and one that is immensely complicated, particularly when one addresses it historically. Most scholars assert that its origins lie in the Hellenistic world, but the key turning point is the advent of Christianity, the creation of the New Testament, and the Roman Empire's adoption of Christianity as the state religion. At that point, policies of persecution and methods of interpreting scripture anti-Judaically became enshrined.

I used the word anti-Judaic, and that's important because antisemitism – as a term – does not even come into existence until the late nineteenth century. Clearly, however, hostility toward Jews pre-existed that. The earlier hostility is often referred to as anti-Judaism because it is religious in nature. Where antisemitism differs from anti-Judaism is that it is not based in religion or religious texts. It's based in either racialist ideas or the opposite – the charge that the Jews are not a nation.

Islam was forged through Muhammad and his followers interaction with Christians and Jews, and from Christianity, Islam inherited the antisemitism

of the Church. By the medieval period, both Christianity and Islam had formulated discriminatory policies toward their Jewish populations and persecuted the Jews in their realms.

The transition away from anti-Judaism to antisemitism, as I mentioned, in the late nineteenth century resulted from the weakening of religion as a source of authority in society. Science had replaced religion as society's guiding source of authority.

Nevertheless, hatred of the Jews mutated from a religious-based hatred to a modern, pseudo-scientific based hatred.

At this point, I'd like to turn to the prophets Malachai, Isaiah, and the Book of Kings I and explain how each of the verses I selected from these books helps us employ the story of Joseph and his brothers as a means to comprehending antisemitism.

Malachai states:

“Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we break faith with one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?” (2:10)

This verse establishes that all human beings are brothers and sisters.

Isaiah states:

“And they shall beat their swords into plowshares
And their spears into pruning hooks: Nation shall
not take up Sword against nation; They shall never
again know war” (2:4)

I refer to this as the people of Israel's ultimate
dream. It's not a dream in the sense that Isaiah
dreamt it. Isaiah's prophecy came from God. I call it
a dream because it has not yet been realized but will
one day.

I Kings states:

“It is because of the LORD’s everlasting love for Israel that He made you king to administer justice and righteousness” (10:9).

This verse is important because it stresses something we should never forget: God loves Israel.

With these three elements - the brotherhood of humankind, the dream of peace, and God’s love of Israel – intact, you may already be able to anticipate

how the story of Joseph and his brothers will match up.

First, Joseph was persecuted by his brothers, in effect denying their brotherhood. Second, what provoked them was Joseph's dream. Third, mentioned several times in the story is that Jacob loved his son Joseph.

What stands out from the narrative about Joseph and his brothers is a) their hatred of him 2) their jealousy of him 3) their mockery of him.

We discuss antisemitism, devote entire organizations to fighting against it, but rarely do we really discuss it. We probably don't because of how painful such a discussion is. Antisemitism is ultimately hatred, and knowing that someone hates you and having to face that is extremely painful. That hatred operates through two particular avenues that we don't discuss often enough: jealousy and mockery.

Before I turn to how jealousy and mockery drive antisemitism, I want to reference where they appear in our *parsha* so that the link between the opening

narrative of *vayeshev*, and the discussion of antisemitism is complete.

The Torah states:

וַיִּקְנְאוּ-בּוֹ אֶחָיו וְאָבִיו שָׁמַר אֶת-הַדָּבָר

“So his brothers were wrought up at him, and his father kept the matter in mind” (37:11). The Jewish Publication Society translates וַיִּקְנְאוּ as “wrought up” but the root of the word – *koof, nun, alef* – means jealous.

Additionally, the Torah states,

“They said to one another, ‘Here comes that dreamer! Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; and we can say, “A savage beast devoured him.” We shall see what comes of his dreams’” (37:19-20)!

“We shall see what comes of his dreams” is clearly a statement of mockery.

Joseph’s brothers were jealous of him, and they mocked him, just as some of our potential brothers in this world are jealous of the Jewish people and mock

us and that is the essence of the hatred they purvey called antisemitism.

You might wonder, Of what are they jealous?

During the first stage of hatred – anti-Judaism – the jealousy was grounded in Israel's special relationship to God. During the second stage of hatred – antisemitism – the jealousy was grounded in the success of the Jewish people.

In the past few years, the phrase white privilege became all the rage on college campuses. Leftist college students used the phrase as a way to generate

support for their anti-racism platform. Jews got caught in the throes of this terminology. Our success was cast as an outcome of white privilege. While I do think that being white has clear advantages in our society, which is deeply unfair, I don't think the success of Jews can be understood through white privilege. Many explanations are proffered for the success of Jews in so many areas of society; the one that I turn to is that we are a community that has been literate for more than two thousand years. Given how critical literacy is to success in modern society, the Jews were bound to be successful.

That's the role that jealousy plays in antisemitism, and we should never forget that as we address the ongoing problem of this persistent hatred.

The second element of antisemitism that does not receive enough attention is mockery. Mockery is an intriguing human response. It falls under the general category of humor and therefore is connected to laughter. Humor, laughter, and comedy are some of the most important coping mechanisms for managing the absurdities of life. In the Torah, laughter appears in the context of wonder and surprise. Sarah and Abraham both laugh when they

hear that they will have a son Isaac, expressing their radical amazement. Mockery twists and contorts humor through a bitterness and vengeance that nearly strips humor of its essence. Instead of wonder and surprise, mockery is used to denigrate and dismiss.

Joseph's brothers declare that they will kill him after reminding themselves that he is a dreamer, and they follow their promise to kill him with the clearly mocking statement, "We shall see what comes of his dreams!"

Mockery is a key component of antisemitism. No one actually could believe that the Jewish people is one that hungers for war, bloodshed, and violence.

Yet, in the framing of Israel's conflict with her neighbors since at least 1967, especially as the Palestinian cause came to the fore of the attacks on Israel, Israel is always cast as a lover of war. All of our history, all our culture, all our current behavior, and most of all, the entirety of our religious literature speaks to the Jewish people's desire for and striving for peace. Isaiah's prophecy of plowshares and pruning hooks is only the most famous of untold numbers of statements in the Tanakh, Talmud, the

liturgy, and other religious literature that speak to Israel's dream of peace.

Every photo or news article that mentions the IDF's actions has the effect of associating the Jewish people with war – the ultimate mockery of us as a people. And purveyors of antisemitism know this, which is why they constantly wage war on Israel.

We live in an era of antisemitism. I don't know where to demarcate its beginning, but I know we're in the midst of it, and the Jewish people has not clearly marked a definitive path and approach to

withstanding and defeating this surge of antisemitism and closing out this latest era. In the story of Joseph and his brothers, we encounter two components of antisemitic thinking, propaganda, and practice – jealousy and mockery – that don't gain enough attention in our conversations about this phenomenon. We need to articulate that more before we will arrive at ways to combat the current assault upon us.

The one item I haven't talked about much is this peroration is hatred. Antisemitism is hatred, and hatred is the governing sentiment of Joseph's

brothers toward him. Even before they are jealous of Joseph, they hate him. The jealousy actually follows the hatred, not the other way around.

One of the primary features of modernity is analysis.

How did something come to be and why is it like

that? These are the questions of the analytical,

modern mind. The mind, however, enters an

analytical void when it encounters hatred. From a

religious standpoint, from the standpoint of the

Torah, hatred is an illusion, a non-entity, a false god,

a nullity. The universe is governed by a loving God

Who willed the creation because of His love of

human beings and His desire to create them in His

image. Hatred does not exist in the realm of God.

Yet humans hate. The hated have to be careful. Jews, especially, with our propensity for thinking, reasoning, and analyzing, are tempted to seek an answer to why antisemites – and their enablers – hate us. Do not try to understand or analyze hatred. Hatred is never caused; it is not an effect. The Jew who seeks to understand why he is hated enters a dangerous realm that he may never escape from unscathed.

All one can do with respect to hatred is respond to it with the pursuit of the mission of the Jewish people:

to lead humanity toward peace. The blindness of antisemitism, the blindness and deafness of hatred should not prevent us from pursuing our mission.

That is always a key component of every Jewish response to an antisemitic era. We do not stop building; we do not stop prospering; we do not stop succeeding; and we certainly do not stop realizing our dream of peace.

Like Joseph, the Jewish people, too, will be vindicated, and our brothers will come before us – as many already have – and they will say, “Your dream

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was true; we were jealous; we mocked it; now we know it must be realized, and we join with you to enact it. May we live to see that day.