

The World's Leper

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

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This Shabbat before Pesach is a special one—it's called Shabbat HaGadol, the Great Shabbat.

But this year, to be honest, I'm not sure how great it really is. Because this is the first Shabbat after the world shifted in yet another dramatic and dangerous way for the Jewish people.

It's the first Shabbat since the Islamic Republic of Iran publicly and proudly launched an attack on Israel.

We all know Iran has been behind violence against Israel for decades; but up till now, they've been content to let their Hamas and Hezbollah henchmen do it while the ayatollahs hang back in the shadows.

But this time was different. Not only did Iran claim responsibility, but they used their own army, their own weapons, and their own territory to do it. This highlights something terribly disturbing about the post-October 7 world: Our enemies have gotten bolder.

Maybe they feel empowered by public opinion, fueled by the ascendant anti-Israel American left.

Maybe, now that Hamas so easily caught Israel off guard and breached its legendary defenses, they feel like a final solution is within reach.

Maybe they sense that, after 75 years of this, the world is just tired of all the headaches the mere existence of a Jewish state is causing them. That if the U.S., Israel's only real friend, is wavering this much, well, the "Zionist entity" can't be long for this world. So, they might as well get on with it.

It was just recently when the President told Iran, "Don't." Some good that did. The ayatollahs aren't stupid; they know that actions speak louder than words.

So, they launched more than 300 drones and missiles toward Israeli cities—a direct attack by Iran itself, for the first time in history.

No matter that the weapons traveled toward their target at an absurdly slow pace. Thank God, Israel—with the help of the U.S., France, the U.K., Jordan, and even the Saudis—shot nearly all of them down. Had even a few in this barrage slipped through, the destruction would have been immense.

As it has been said: We have to be right every time; they only have to be right once. Does anyone doubt that they will keep trying?

But Israel was told, "Don't."

It was another feckless warning, we found out today, thank God.

What other country on the face of the earth would be admonished not to respond to a massive assault launched against its civilian population?

It's insane. But then again, so are things like Queers for Palestine and calls to stand with Iran. I guess they don't remember 1979, or every day since.

It feels like the world has gone completely mad.

It's hard to make any sense of it, but NYU professor Mark Galloway did a pretty good job in an interview this week with the pro-Israel podcaster Dan Senor.

Galloway said he's been an atheist and an apathetic Jew for most of his life. Though he travels extensively around the world, it never even occurred to him to visit Israel.

That is, until October 7. The horrific events of that day woke him up to the fact that antisemitism and anti-Zionism pose a grave existential threat to Jewish people around the world, including here in America.

As Galloway put it, October 7 made him understand that, in the eyes of many people around the world, "There's a certain group of people that are guilty before they are born, and those people are Jews."¹

He's right about this, of course. But this isn't new. It's been around since antiquity, and what we're seeing now in Gaza and Iran and the U.S. is just the most recent iteration of it.

Let's look at history.

More than 100 years before the Common Era, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote about us:

They have "a novel form of worship, opposed to all that is practiced by other men," he said. "Things sacred with us, with them have no sanctity, while they allow what with us is forbidden. ...

"All their customs, which are at once perverse and disgusting, owe their strength to their very badness. ...

"Among themselves they are inflexibly honest and ever ready to [show] compassion, though they regard the rest of mankind with all the hatred of enemies. ...

"The Jewish religion," Tacitus said, "is tasteless and mean."²

A century or so later, the Hellenistic Egyptian philosopher Apion—according to Josephus, who engaged in debate with him—claimed that the term "Sabbath" came from the fact that "when the Jews had traveled a six days' journey, they had swollen sores in their groins, and that on this account...they rested on the seventh day. [They called it 'Sabbath'], for that malady of swollen sores in their groin was named 'Sabbatosis' by the Egyptians."³

Apion also claimed that "the Jews placed a donkey's head in their holy place. ... [It was] made of gold and worth a great deal of money."⁴

They "swore by God...to bear no goodwill to any foreigner."

Jews, said Apion, "'have not had any wonderful man amongst us, nor any inventors of arts, nor any eminent for wisdom.' [They] are the only people which have made no improvements in human life."⁵

Perhaps most gruesomely, Apion claimed that “they used to catch a Greek foreigner, and fat him thus up every year, and lead him to a certain wood, and kill him, and sacrifice him, and [eat] his entrails, and take an oath...that they would ever be at enmity with the Greeks.”⁶

If you’re keeping score, the ancient Romans and Greeks accused the Jews of being nefarious and disgusting, perverse in our religious practices, lazy, obsessed with money, degenerate leeches on society, hateful toward the rest of humanity, and guilty of ritual murder and cannibalism.

The first-century evangelist Matthew picked this up, of course, in his famous telling of the Passion of the Christ. According to the *Gospel of Matthew*, Pontius Pilate asked the Jewish crowd gathered in the Old City to witness Jesus’s sentencing:

“What shall I do...with Jesus who is called the Messiah?’ They all answered, ‘Crucify him!’

“Why? What crime has he committed?’ asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, ‘Crucify him!’

“When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. ‘I am innocent of this man’s blood,’ he said. ‘It is your responsibility’” All the people answered, ‘His blood is on us and on our children!’⁷

As Matthew tells it, the Jewish people are collectively guilty of Jesus’s murder, and that guilt is passed down from generation to generation, for all time.

Centuries later, the Qur’an picked up these by-now well-established themes, claiming that “God has rejected [the Jews] for their disbelief”⁸ and “condemned [them] as apes and pigs”⁹ because they are liars who falsify Scripture and have no problem cheating Muslims out of money.¹⁰

So, it’s no wonder that some modern Muslim philosophers, clerics, and politicians have learned to see the Jews and Israel through this lens.

Here’s the writing of Sayyid Qutb, the intellectual forefather of radical Islamic jihadism, in 1950: “The struggle [between Islam and the Jews] has indeed become more deeply entrenched...ever since the Jews came from every place and announced that they were establishing the State of Israel. Their greed now extends from afar to Jerusalem. ...Nothing will curb their greed short of Islam’s defeating them.”¹¹

Qutb’s sentiments are repeated daily in sermons and speeches throughout the Arab world and in Iran. They are age-old libels against the Jewish people that have become embedded in the collective consciousness of humanity.

People don’t even realize it. But the post-October 7 vitriol directed against us and against Israel is just the newest expression of a very old hatred.

Our parashah this week, Parashat M’tzora, is apropos for this Shabbat because, as these texts I’ve quoted demonstrate, the Jewish people have, for millennia, been treated as the world’s leper.

Nothing in our time makes that clearer than the slanders of the State of Israel and the insane, irrational support of its enemies.

In his podcast this week, Dan Senor said, “I always thought that the outrage after October 7 would be directed at those massacring Jews. I didn’t think the outrage would be directed at Jews for objecting to being massacred.”¹²

I agree. But, alas, this is not the case.

The Jewish people and our tiny state are today what we have been pretty consistently since antiquity: hated, slandered, accused of all kinds of depravities, including bloodlust and murder, and isolated outside the camp.

But, in contrast to the biblical leper, it seems that Israel has no pathway to purification, save willfully refusing to defend itself and acceding to its own destruction. And that, of course, will never be acceptable to us.

It’s tragic that, as 100 Israeli hostages remain in captivity and Israel is reeling from attacks by its enemies, our friends are equivocating and backing away.

As we prepare to celebrate the Pesach seder in a few days, the message this Shabbat HaGadol, still so raw and painful, is that Elijah’s chair is still empty, and our redemption has not yet come.

So, in my view, we have to stop living on their terms. We have to stand up for ourselves and fight; and if we’re on our own, so be it.

The sages of the Talmud believed that peace and salvation would come to the world by the hands of a leper,¹³ “despised and shunned by others.”¹⁴

Let’s pray this Passover that the people of Israel—and Jewish people everywhere—can find the strength to persist and overcome those who want to see us perish.

1 “Call Me Back” with Dan Senor podcast, April 17, 2024, episode

2 Tacitus, *The Histories, Book V*, ca. 110 BCE

3 Josephus, *Against Apion, Book II*, section 2

4 *Ibid.*, section 7

5 *Ibid.*, sections 11, 13-15

6 *Ibid.*, section 10

7 *Matthew 27:22-25*

8 Qur’an 2:87-88, *The Qur’an*, Haleem, M.A.S. Abdel, trans., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 11

9 Qur’an 5:59-60, *ibid.*, 74

10 See Qur’an 5:41, *ibid.*, 71

11 Sayyid Qut’b, “Our Struggle with the Jews,” quoted in R.L. Nettler, *Past Trials and Present Tribulations: A Muslim Fundamentalist’s View of the Jews*, 84-85

12 “Call Me Back” podcast, April 17, 2024

13 Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98b

14 *Isaiah 53:3*