“Judeopessimism” and the Coarsening of Our Community
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The other day, in the weekly meeting of my rabbinic cohort, a colleague asked a question that landed with surprising weight: “Do you ever wonder if we Jews are somehow addicted to the struggle—like we need things to be hard all the time?”

As we talked, it became clear that many rabbis are feeling a rise in tension, conflict, and negativity in their communities.

A recent survey of American rabbis across denominations found that, while nearly all find their work spiritually fulfilling, a significant number also report challenges with what they describe as “institutional dysfunction” and even “abusive environments.”1

I love our congregation deeply. We have caring, thoughtful people here. And yet even in a community like ours, we’re not immune to these wider dynamics.

Over the past couple of months, I’ve received a few messages that were unusually harsh—people expressing anger in ways that felt personal and painful. Messages like: “I don’t know what kind of person you are. …You call yourself a rabbi?” And “I’m disgusted by you.” And “Shame on you. … You’re a sad man.”

It’s hard not to feel the weight of words like that. And if that’s how someone speaks to their rabbi, I worry about how much unspoken hurt or stress might be circulating in their lives more broadly.

I’m not sharing this out of anger. I’m sharing it out of concern for the spiritual health of our community, and for the ways we may be carrying more strain than we realize.

Because it’s not only about extreme behavior. Many people—not just clergy—are feeling heightened criticism, irritability, or impatience in daily interactions. Something is pressing on us.

Part of this is not new. In 1960, Rabbi Robert I. Kahn told the HUC rabbinic ordination class, “I’ve heard someone say that the Jewish congregation is more demanding of its ministry than any religious body in the world. As in the days of Moses, our people murmur.”2

But I do think something more is happening. The world feels heavy and stressful right now. And for Jews, the rising tide of antisemitism is impacting us psychologically in ways we may not fully understand.

It is draining to see near-daily reports of protestors shouting at Jews outside synagogues, podcasters glorifying Hitler, politicians recklessly accusing Israel of genocide and questioning American Jews’ loyalty, anti-Israel boycotts, and seeing fellow subway riders in keffiyahs.

These patterns don’t stay outside our doors. They get into our bodies. They make us feel squeezed, vulnerable, and on edge. And without meaning to, we sometimes redirect that anxiety toward the people closest to us.

Last year, the scholar Shaul Magid of Indiana University wrote about a phenomenon he calls "Judeopessimism"3—a growing sense that antisemitism is not just persistent but inevitable, baked into the structure of the world.

Judeopessimism is grounded in a midrash on this week's parashah, which says, "It is a well-known halakhah (law) that Esau hates Jacob." Over time, "Jacob" came to stand for the Jewish people, and "Esau" came to symbolize the non-Jewish world.

Based on this midrash, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein taught that antisemitism is a natural law of the world; it never goes away, even in places where the Jewish condition seems at the time to be good.4

Whether or not we accept this interpretation, its psychological impact is real.

When we internalize Judeopessimism, even unconsciously, it can darken our view of the world. It can make us quicker to feel threatened, more certain that others are against us, less trusting, less patient, less openhearted. It doesn't stay confined to the outside world; it shows up in our homes, our friendships, and our synagogues.

I wonder if some of the sharpness we're feeling—here and elsewhere—comes not from malice, but from fear. I wonder if some of the harshness comes from hearts that feel bruised, overwhelmed, or unsafe.

When we're stressed and scared, it's easy to lash out. It's harder to pause, breathe, and remember that the person in front of us is not the cause of our pain.

The first step toward t'shuvah is to name our transgression. And what might be happening right now is that Judeopessimism is coloring our inner landscape and causing us to be less than our best selves.

It's understandable. It's human. But it cannot be the place from which we speak to each other.

We can make a different choice. We can choose compassion, generosity, positivity, and dignity—especially when we feel stretched thin.

We can remember that every one of us is navigating a complicated world, and that our community becomes stronger not through perfection, but through kindness.

These are hard times. But if we care about the well-being of our Jewish community—and I know we do—then we must commit to softening our edges, tending to our fear with honesty, and treating one another with gentleness.

If we do this, we will become not only a community that survives difficult moments, but one that helps to heal them.

1 Atra, "From Calling to Career: Mapping the Current State and Future of Rabbinic Leadership," 15 and 39, https://atrarabbis.org/wp-content/uploads/From-Calling-to-Career-Mapping-the-Current-State-and-Future-of-Rabbinic-Leadership.pdf

2 Rabbi Robert I. Kahn, "The Faithful Shepherd," In: May the Words of My Mouth

3 Shaul Magid, “Judeopessimism: Antisemtism, History, and Critical Race Theory,” Cambridge University Press, May 15, 2024, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/harvard-theological-review/article/judeopessimism-antisemitism-history-and-critical-race-theory/B9D5D7DD25EC84F9FABB70E64B5E4F60

4 See Prof. Rabbi Marty Lockshin, “‘Esau Hates Jacob’—But Is Antisemitism a Halakha,” https://www.thetorah.com/article/esau-hates-jacob-but-is-antisemitism-a-halakha. Lockshin cites and analyzes Rabbi Feinstein’s statement, but argues that it is an incorrect interpretation of the midrash.