

## Looking for America

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I'd like to begin by quoting an influential American leader of his day:

"We are a movement of the plain people. ...We are demanding, and we expect to win, a return of power into the hands of the everyday, not highly cultured, not overly intellectualized, but...average citizen of the old stock.

"Our critics have accused us of being merely a 'protest movement,' of being frightened; they say we...are in a panic because we cannot hold our own against the foreigners. That is partly true. We are a protest movement—protesting against being robbed. ...We are suffering in many ways, we have been betrayed by our trusted leaders, we are half beaten already. But we are not frightened nor in a panic. We have merely awakened to the fact that we must fight for our own.

"But the plain people realize also that merely stopping the alien flood does not restore Americanism, nor even secure us against final utter defeat. America must also defend herself against the enemy within, or we shall be corrupted and conquered by those to whom we have already given shelter."<sup>1</sup>

It sounds so contemporary, doesn't it? But these words were written exactly 100 years ago, in 1926.

The author was Dr. Hiram Evans, Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

As we prepare to celebrate America's 250th anniversary tomorrow, we find ourselves in another "fight for Americanism," as Evans called it. This one is being waged from both right and left—and American Jews are caught in the middle.

The battles we've seen this week over birthright citizenship, Israel's legitimacy, democratic socialism, and the Bible in public schools are really battles over one core question:

Who is America for?

Today, as then, too many people answer that question from a place of fear rather than love. It's a response as old as time.

Our parashah tells the story of Moses' great-nephew Pinchas.

The Israelites had once again fallen into idolatry, and God punished them with a devastating plague.

Noticing that an Israelite chieftain had openly taken up with a Midianite princess, Pinchas takes a spear and kills them both. And the plague immediately stops.

But if the plague was punishment for idolatry, why would killing this couple end it?

A closer look reveals the deeper message.

The Torah names the Midianite woman "Cozbi," which means "My Liar" or "My Deceiver."

That was probably not her real name. But this story is not history; it's polemic. And just like polemics today, it uses names to make a point.

Rashi explains that the Midianites hated Israel so much that they sent one of their own princesses to seduce an Israelite leader, infiltrate the community, and lure the people into idolatry.<sup>2</sup>

Like the Imperial Wizard thousands of years later, the author of the Pinchas story is telling us to be afraid of foreigners.

They hate us. They despise our values. They come not to join our society in good faith but to undermine it from within. And unless we stop them, they will destroy us.

Or, to put it another way: "When they send us their people, they're not sending their best." "They're rapists and murderers." "They're eating your pets."

And it's coming from the other end of the spectrum, too.

On Wednesday, I watched the Democratic Socialist congressional candidate Melat Kiros interviewed on CNN after winning the Colorado primary.

When she was asked about antisemitism, she said protecting American Jews from hatred and bigotry is one of her highest priorities.

That's good.

But then she said: "I sincerely believe that part of that fight is going to be decoupling the conflation we are seeing of the actions of the State of Israel with the Jewish people and with Judaism, which is putting them at greater risk."

Make no mistake about it: This is a warning. As she said after October 7, violence against Jews is the "inevitable consequence" of aligning yourselves with apartheid, occupation, and genocide. So, keep supporting Israel at your own risk.

When influential leaders speak this way about any group, it becomes easier to marginalize them, strip them of rights, and justify violence against them.

Zealotry in the name of eliminating the threat becomes a virtue.

Indeed, when Pinchas kills those two people, God honors him as a hero.

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Since October 7, I've heard some Reform Jews say, "We're always standing up for other people. Why can't we just stand up for ourselves for once?"

But our movement's leaders have offered the right response: It's not either-or. Standing up for others is standing up for ourselves.

Because in times of crisis like these, xenophobia and antisemitism always rear their heads—and all who have come “to look for America,” to quote Simon and Garfunkel, are at risk.

The left won’t have our backs because we refuse to renounce Israel and our particularist identity. The right won’t have our backs because we were never part of the “plain, old stock” “heritage Americans” to begin with.

This fight is not just about immigration, or public schools, or even Israel.

It is about who belongs in America.

We Jews have a lot at stake in this fight.

And modern-day zealots—whether they’re wearing white robes or hipster beards—are already sharpening their spears.

1 Hiram Evans, “The Fight for Americanism,” *The North American Review* (1926).

2 See Rashi to Num. 25:15.