

Shabbat Shalom!

Yesterday, I received a letter from an 8th grade language arts teacher here in the La Crosse area.

She says this has been one of the most challenging weeks of the 10 years she's been teaching.

"This week", she says, "I have needed to respond to questions related to those events as well as the Jewish population and faith. Questions like: What/Who are Jews? Are there any Jewish people in this area? How come Hamas hates Jewish people and Israel? and many more.

"Rabbi, I was privileged to spend a month in Israel during college, and I have learned a fair amount about the Jewish faith as part of additional travels, as well as my own personal study in preparation for teaching a unit on the Holocaust.

"However, I don't know that I feel comfortable answering some of their questions beyond the basics. That led me to search for support from you with the hope that you might direct me toward helpful information and/or resources. I am wondering:

"1. How can we best help students understand who the Jewish people are: the history, the faith...

"2. Are there resources that would allow me to help my students better comprehend the current situation in Israel and its impact on Jews around the world?

“3. Are there other questions that I should be asking? Is there something else that we could present to students that would be more helpful?”

“4. What can we do to help support the Jewish community in the La Crosse area and beyond during this time of crisis in Israel?”

The e-mail goes on for a while.

Wow, this is a great teacher, and she writes beautifully and thoughtfully.

OK, so how would you answer her students?

Are there Jewish people in this area? (yes, for 150 years!)
How can our local neighbors help us at this tragic time?

I offered to give her students an abbreviated class on antisemitism and Jewish history. What could I tell them in a short period of time?

Looking back at our history – the Crusades, the Inquisition, the pogroms, the Holocaust, the constant wars by the Arab nations.

Why DO they hate us? What do we tell these local school children who want to try to make sense of a world where they will soon be voting adults and citizens of the world?

Without writing a long paper – or a book – on antisemitism through the ages, I offered to teach a class.

The reason we are hated is not always the same from generation to generation. In the beginning of the last millenium, we were despised because we wouldn't follow the official religion of Rome. We gave the Roman Empire the tribute and taxes they wanted, but that wasn't good enough. A zealous group of Jews rebelled. That resulted in the final destruction of our Holy Temple and ultimately the mass suicide on Masada.

Despite the destruction, Judaism became "portable" and could thrive anywhere.

Later, we were hated because we wouldn't convert to Christianity and give up following G-d's laws as given in the Torah – what foods to eat, what day we couldn't work. Later, official church doctrine blamed us for the death of Jesus. Even though none of us were there 2000 years ago, for many people we continued to bear the collective guilt for his death, and deserved to be punished, or at least ostracized.

Local kings and guilds often prohibited Jews from many livelihoods except for banking and moneylending. Then, they attacked us to eliminate their debts.

The inquisition of the 1400s in the Iberian peninsula demanded that we give up our faith and become Catholic. Some fled, but many went the route of conversion. Yet, the slightest remainder of our practices, like lighting Shabbat candles clandestinely, or saying certain prayers, or forgoing pork could end our lives burned at the stake, the auto da fe.

Martin Luther of Germany tried to befriend and convert the Jews. When we rejected his efforts, he condemned us to death and destruction. He was most active exactly 400 years before the Holocaust. That legacy didn't go well for the Jews of Germany and everywhere Nazi Germany conquered.

Which brings us to this week's Torah portion, Breisheet, Genesis, in the Beginning:

**When God began to create heaven and earth—
the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—
God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.
God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.
God called the light Day and called the darkness Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.
(Translation courtesy of Sefaria.org)**

So G-d created this Light, before that it everything was darkness. What was this Light? There was no sun or moon yet. Nor any people who could see this Light.

Later in Jewish theology, we Jews are called “Or Lagoyim”, a “light unto the peoples of the world.”

What is this light? Some say it is the Torah, based on our eternal obligation to bring its laws and teachings to whole world.

Hitler – may his name be obliterated – wrote in Mein Kampf – his plan for the German nation – that the Jews were the conscience of the world, that Germans no longer needed them for this role. Instead, his followers would be the world's

conscience. The Nazis would decide what is right and wrong, no longer needing G-d's laws.

OK, his persecution of the Jews was also political. We offered a convenient scapegoat for the political and economic problems of Germany after they lost the first World War. By having a group to pick on, they were able to highlight their differences and their superiority.

Why does Hamas (and by extension, many Palestinians) hate us? Well, it is in their founding documents. They want to remove the Jews "from the river to the sea." They have legitimate claims that their travel and rights are limited in some ways, but does that give them the right to kill innocent civilians in a massacre, the likes of which have not been witnessed since the Einsatzgruppen of eastern Europe during World War II?

This Light can be many things – morality, conscience, love, it is what we offer the world. It is what we carry with us, surviving thousands of years of murder, persecution, destruction.

Despite it all, we survive, and continue to bring the Light - given us by G-d – to the rest of humanity. We bring Light to drive away the darkness.

Shabbat Shalom!