

Antisemitism- What is our response?

Opening Questions to throw out for Class Discussion

Has anyone in the room experienced antisemitism?

What do you think the root cause of antisemitism is?

If asked to speak in front of a non-Jewish audience about antisemitism what would you say?

Part 1- What causes antisemitism?

Read carefully this essay written by R' Elchonon Wasserman, a great Rosh Yeshiva before World War 2 who was murdered by the Nazi¹:

Ezekiel prophesies that in the [era of] "footsteps of the Messiah" a solution will be proposed among Jews: "We will be as the nations" [Ezekiel 20:32]. The actualization of the prophecy began with the Berlin Enlightenment (Haskalah), almost 150 years ago. Its proponents masked what they were doing with the words, "Be a Jew in your home and a person in public." The fruits of this approach quickly ripened. Their children apostatized. Their slogan amounted to an undermining of the foundations of the Torah. The Torah had warned that Jews should be separated from the nations in their whole lifestyle. "And I have set you apart from other peoples, that ye should be Mine" [Leviticus 20:26].

The Maskilim came and said exactly the opposite: "Be only like the nations." God said about this: "In that ye say: We will be as the nations . . . shall not be at all." "Surely with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm and with fury poured out" [Ezekiel 20:32–33]. It will begin with "a mighty hand." If that does not help, the "outstretched arm" will come. If this also does not help, then there will be a "fury poured out." We cannot know in which of the three processes we now are. The near future will show us. In any event, it is clear that the prophecy of "shall not be at all" will be realized. The nations are driving us away from them in a murderous way. It is said, that it is difficult to be a Jew. A wonder has occurred in recent times. It is increasingly difficult to become a gentile. The gentiles are driving us back.

It is said in the name of the Gaon [dean of scholars Yosef Dov Ber Soloveichik], the author of Beit Halevi, of blessed memory: It is written, "He who separates between light and darkness and between Israel and the gentiles" [Havdalah service at end of sabbath (sic)]. There is a specific distance between light and darkness [twilight]. One cannot change the distance, lengthen or shorten it. It is the same between Israel and the gentiles. There is a specific distance as to how far they should be one from the other. If the Jews approach too closely, the gentiles push them back. From this, one

¹ Essay found here <https://jewishaction.com/jewish-world/what-did-the-rabbis-have-to-say-about-anti-semitism/>

can understand why the more the Jews have approached the gentiles, the more severely the Jews have been repelled. We see this now in the lands where Jews have completely assimilated, how horribly the gentiles push back. It was also this way in Egypt when the servitude became difficult. The Jews began to emulate the Egyptians, thinking that through this their situation would become easier. What did God do? "He turned their heart to hate His people" [Psalms 105:25]. The more they wanted to assimilate with the Egyptians, the greater the animosity of the gentiles toward them. When the Jews realized their mistake, the redemption came. The same will be with us. "If you are separated from the nations, you are Mine. If not, you are with Nebuchadnezzar and his friends" [Rashi ad Leviticus 20:26]. . . .

"In the generation that the son of David will come, the face of the generation is like the face of the dog" [Mishnah Sota 9:15, and B. T. Sanhedrin 97a]. . . .

The Hofets Hayim of blessed memory used to give a second meaning to "the face of a dog" (in the name of the sage Rabbi Yitshak ben Hayim Volozhiner, author of Nefesh Hahayim, of blessed memory). The nature of a dog is that if one throws a stone at it, the dog runs to bite the stone. When a Haman arises against Jews, we need to know that it is only a stick with which Jews are being punished from Heaven. "O Asshur, the rod of Mine anger" [Isaiah 10:5]. There is no sense in waging war with the stick, since there is no shortage of sticks in Heaven. There are "many messengers to the one God" [Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah, Parashah 18, Siman 18]. We need rather to employ measures so that Heaven will not cast the stick. However, in the [era of] "footsteps of the Messiah" there will be no knowledge. We will run like the dog to bite the stick. We see this now, when our modern [Jewish] leaders have declared war on the mightiest nations in the world. What is our strength and what is our power? We take shots with articles in Jewish newspapers? With what result? It only incites the snakes further against the Jews. The leaders only see the stick. They do not want to know who is hitting with the stick. "Yet the people turneth not unto Him that smiteth them" [Isaiah 9:12]. . . .

—Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman (1874-1941, Lithuania), Ma'amar Ikveta Dimeshicha (1938), trans. by Gershon Greenberg in Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust, S.T. Katz, ed. (New York and Oxford, 2007), 31, 33

1. How would you explain the cause of antisemitism according to R' Wasserman?
2. How do you understand the idea of Torah wanting the Jews to be separate from the nations of the world?
3. Is the only solution to antisemitism to be completely separated?

Approach of R' Sacks

*There is an explanation that has become popular in modern times, that it is Israel's destiny to be isolated, friendless, hated, abandoned and alone, as if antisemitism were somehow written into the script of history. I do not believe this. It isn't. None of the prophets said so. To the contrary, they believed that the nations of the world would eventually recognise Israel's God and come to worship Him in the Temple in Jerusalem. **Zechariah (8:23)** foresees a day when "ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'" There is nothing destined or inevitable about antisemitism.*

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/balak/not-reckoned-among-the-nations/>

1. How does R' Sacks view the relationship between Israel & the nations of the world?
2. How does this help guide us in our response to antisemitism?

Rabbi Sacks on what our attitude should be going forward:

“After the Holocaust we need God more than ever. For there is no limit to the evil men may do when they no longer believe that anything is sacred.”

Letters to the Next Generation II, p. 40

“If you were to ask what our response to the Holocaust should be, I would say this: Marry and have children, bring new Jewish life into the world, build schools, make communities, have faith in God who had faith in man and make sure that His voice is heard wherever evil threatens. Pursue justice, defend the defenceless, have the courage to be different and fight for the dignity of difference. Recognize the image of God in others, and defeat hate with love. Twice a year, on Yom HaShoah and the Ninth of Av, sit and mourn for those who died and remember them in your prayer. But most of all, continue to live as Jews.”

Radical Then, Radical Now, p. 184

Rabbi Sacks reminds us to look at the previous generation for inspiration in this mission

“The majesty and mystery of Judaism is that, though at best Jews were a small people in a small land, no match for the circumambient empires that periodically assaulted them, Jews did not give way to self-hate, self-disesteem or despair.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Ceremony & Celebration*, p. 85