

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Battling Anti-Semitism – Beyond “Hating the Haters”

There has been a lot of focus Anti-Semitism lately. Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, always reminds us of the most horrible times of racism and bigotry. The same week that Israel and the world commemorated the Holocaust, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) came out with disturbing results of a recent survey. According to statistics, Anti-Semitism is on the rise worldwide and at home. 14% of Americans harbor some sort of negative feelings about Jewish people. At a recent meeting of rabbis that I attended, Dayan Gross, Executive Director of the Southwest Region of ADL, said, “Anti-Semitism and hatred will always be here. It’s our job to be aware and make sure that people don’t act on their hateful feelings.”

When I looked at the survey questions and answers (available at www.global100.adl.org), it brought up my own skepticism about statistics in general. The 3000 people willing to answer the phone surveys were asked a series of questions about their own feelings about Jewish people. If participants answered a particular way, they were considered Anti-Semitic. For instance, 84% did not think “Jews have too much power in business” and the same percentage responded to “Jews have too much power in international finance markets.” 90% did not believe that “Jews have too much control over global affairs,” and 66% do not believe that Jews are more loyal to Israel than their country of residence. Depending on whether you are reporting the negative or the positive, the statistics can be more or less disturbing.

Statistics can only tell us part of any story. An actual conversation with real people tells us much more. There are many ways to combat hatred. Sometimes I feel that the more we call attention to hate-filled actions, the more some people might feel a kinship with those ideas. I have yet to see statistics about the numbers of interfaith dialogues that promote tolerance and understanding; the local pulpit exchanges that help people of different faiths understand each other; the combined efforts of respectful people who go beyond theological and political views to help one another. Recently, a number of Jewish institutions and cemeteries experienced vandalism. Christian AND Muslim groups came out to assist their Jewish neighbors to restore the vandalized property. These acts of loving-kindness do not make the headlines nearly as much as the original hateful act. Even more significant is the fact that when the Christians, Muslims and Jews were working together on a shared goal, they learned more about each other as people; not theology or philosophy or politics...just the humanness of raising children, paying bills and living life. When we get to know the person behind the label, we find the shared humanity that GD created.

Eli Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, author and Nobel Prize Winner said, “The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.” Hate-filled extremists can cause a lot of damage. Those extremely passionate about righteousness can do a lot of good. Most of the world is indifferent. Battling hatred does not have to always be a battle when “we” and “they” can get past being “us” and “them.”

Casey Stengel, the Hall of Fame baseball manager for the Yankees, seemed to understand a little bit about indifference when it came to managing a baseball team. He said, “There are 25 guys on my team. 4 or 5 would run through a wall for me. 5 or 6 hate my guts. The rest are undecided. All I gotta do is keep the ones who hate me away from the ones who are undecided.”

That’s where we can make a difference. Perhaps, those who hate will always hate. But we can influence the “undecided,” or even the apathetic. All we have to do is get close enough to one another to demonstrate true righteousness. Someone’s bound to catch on. Many already have.

L’shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon