

Jewish Report

Erasing caricatures

WITH ALL the rhetoric against Israel bandied about these days in South Africa and also worldwide, it is easy to believe the country has no friends, that it is totally isolated and surrounded by enemies.

In our local South African context, for example, even our major trade union federation Cosatu has adopted openly hostile stances towards Israel. Much of the hostility derives from historical struggle perceptions forged during apartheid. And the present government is no friend of Israel, although it does maintain a "correct" diplomatic relationship with the country, albeit without real warmth in it and little apparent desire from South Africa's side to enhance the relationship.

A remarkable exception to this was during the period in office of former President Nelson Mandela, who made a very public visit to Israel in 1999, accompanied by the late Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris - who Mandela affectionately referred to as "my rabbi". During the governments of Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, however, that openness has unfortunately changed.

Israel still has many good friends, however, though they are often under the radar. Last Sunday's Israel Advocacy Seminar at Beyachad in Johannesburg (see page 3) illustrated this. Participants included the African Christian Democratic Party, Fairplay SA, the SA-Israel Forum and Bridges for Peace.

Among the South African general population there is no deep-rooted historical anti-Semitism or anti-Israel sentiments. There is great ignorance about the country and the ties of South African Jewry to it, and a significant proportion would be hard-pressed to even find the country on the map.

A corollary is that these people are vulnerable to being influenced by anti-Israel activists towards a hostile position. The vehemently anti-Israel groups in South Africa look for every opportunity to create or bolster such feelings.

It is too easy for supporters of Israel to mouth platitudes without actually doing anything. Thus it is all the more encouraging that such organisations and individuals would take the time and trouble last Sunday to come together as they did to learn about more effective Israel advocacy. They are not simply "apologists" for Israel; they do not take an Israel-is-always-right stance, but are real friends who accept Israel warts and all and want to ensure it gets a fair hearing.

We hope these initiatives will grow and reach out to broader sections of the population - even to some who are hostile through ignorance rather than knowledge about the country and what is happening there, and might be shown there are two sides to the story and any fair hearing must also present Israel's side.

Other excellent initiatives take non-Jewish South Africans - journalists, politicians, government officials, businessmen, artists, academics and so on - on visits to Israel, where they meet with a wide range of Israelis, from leaders and decision-makers to the man-in-the-street. They see the thriving democracy Israel is - albeit with flaws, as occur in all countries - where issues are hotly and seriously debated as is the case in any open democracy.

The country is a hub of culture and enterprise, with its people living and laughing - and agonising - not just a beleaguered war zone, as so many who are ignorant of the real Israel, believe.

Walking down the bustling Tel Aviv beach promenade, for example, from north Tel Aviv all the way down past the old city of Jaffa in the south, packed with people from all over the world, is a remarkable and inspiring experience.

The objective must be to erase the negative caricature perceptions of Israel which antagonists hold on to, and let them feel the texture and warmth of its people.

The goodwill among Israel's friends needs to be brought out and embraced. We live in tough times and the threats against Israel are real. The country needs all the friends it can get. Seminars such as Israel Advocacy are an important step.

OPINION AND ANALYSIS - FORUM FOR DIVERSE VIEWS

Sinai today: Divided we fall

CHIEF RABBI WARREN GOLDSTEIN

THE PAST few weeks have seen old, painful divisions and animosities erupt anew within Israel. Particularly tragic is that the catalyst for re-opening these wounds was the actions of a small group of criminals. That they were dressed in religious garb should not deceive us: their acts of verbal abuse and other degrading behaviour constitute a gross violation of Torah law and values.

In an ethical will to his children, Rabbi Pinchas, known as the Maggid of Polachak, one of the eminent Torah sages of the past few hundred years and a disciple of the Vilna Gaon, warned about false piety.

The example he gives is from the Book of Esther, when King Achashverosh hosted a grand banquet to celebrate the defeat of the Jewish people, the destruction of the First Temple and the fact that it had not been rebuilt.

At the banquet, King Achashverosh used the holy utensils of the First Temple, which he had received from his wife's grandfather, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon who

had destroyed the Temple. He also wore the clothing of the high priest.

The Maggid of Polachak says that a person who appears religious and pious on the outside but does not act so on the inside, is like King Achashverosh wearing the clothing of the high priest. King Achashverosh was an enemy of the Jewish people and wearing the garments of the high priest certainly did not make him the high priest.

So, too, says the Maggid of Polachak, a person who presents an outer image of religious faith and commitment yet does not live by those values, causes enormous damage. People who dress as religious Jews yet defy the Halacha's standards of interpersonal, ethical behaviour by assaulting, verbally abusing or degrading other people, or causing grievous emotional pain through the disgraceful misuse of Holocaust symbolism, are like Achashverosh dressing up in the clothes of the high priest.

A modern-day analogy: If a band of robbers were to dress up as



policemen and rob a bank, would you say that the bank had been robbed by the police? Obviously not; the bank has been robbed by criminals dressed up as policemen.

People who violate Halacha, which prohibits any form of verbal abuse or conduct which causes another person pain, are merely dressing the part of being religious. To call such people "religious extremists" would be like calling bank robbers "capitalist extremists" because they are trying to make money through extreme methods.

They are not religious extremists; they are criminal vigilantes, because they do not operate under the auspices or instructions of any recognised rabbinic authority.

Torah Judaism comprises two categories of mitzvot: bein adam laMakom - our responsibilities toward Hashem - and bein adam lachavero - responsibilities toward our fellow man. Torah Judaism cannot be compartmentalised.

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Shalit visits family of slain tank commander



JERUSALEM - Former captive Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, has visited the family of his tank commander, who was killed in the same incident in which Shalit was captured. Shalit visited the family of Hanan Barak at their home in Arad last Sunday, Ynet reported on Tuesday. He told the family that he loved Barak. The family told Ynet that the visit gave them "closure". Shalit's parents regularly attend the annual memorial service held for Barak. (JTA)

AROUND THE WORLD NEWS IN BRIEF

BRAZIL REMEMBERS JEWISH AND AFRO-DESCENDANT SHOAH VICTIMS

RIO DE JANEIRO - Remembering the Holocaust was one way to prevent it from recurring, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff said at a memorial ceremony in Salvador on January 29.

Rousseff joined Jewish and non-Jewish officials at a ceremony remembering Jewish and Afro-descendants.

"We are here to express ourselves about a stain in the history of humankind," she said. "Remembering is a way to build the mechanisms to prevent it from happening again. The Holocaust, which some deny, will always stand as a paradigm against intolerance. Democratic societies have the power to fight crimes like the Holocaust so that they will not happen ever again."

She added that Brazil supported the creation of a "democratic and non-segregating" Palestinian state.

Claudio Lottenberg, president of the Brazilian Israelite Confederation, the Jewish umbrella organisation, recalled the 20 000 Afro descendants killed during the Holocaust. They had lived in Germany when the Nazis came to power in 1933. Salvador, with a population of more than 3,5 million, has the largest population of Afro-descendants outside of Africa.

Earlier this month, Rousseff approved an agreement to include Jewish themes such as the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia and intolerance in the educational curricula in Brazil. (JTA)



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OPINION AND ANALYSIS - FORUM FOR DIVERSE VIEWS

Sinai today...

Continued from page 6

The Telzer rosh yeshiva, Rav Mordechai Katz, was once asked how he explains a religious person who lies and cheats in business.

He responded: "How do you explain a religious person who eats on Yom Kippur?" The questioner responded that such a person is not religious. Rav Katz said that neither was the one who was dishonest. A person who verbally or emotionally abuses or degraded another person could not be called religious.

The severity of the sin of publicly humiliating someone can be seen in the Gemara's (Bava Metzia 58b) likening it to murder.

The perpetrators of these criminal deeds bear responsibility for their actions; the rest of society is responsible for the reaction to these events, which, tragically, have been allowed to poison the atmosphere and the relationships within the Jewish world, sparking a wildfire of dispute, suspicion and hatred in Jewish society, particularly in Israel.

The divisive rhetoric following these events has caused enormous damage to the fabric of Israeli society, pitting religious and secular - as well as different religious communities - against each other.

These recent events merely reignited old divisions and animosities. It is these divisions and the accompanying aggressive and hateful words which we need to remedy with kindness, respect and derech erez. All Jewish communities - however ideologically diverse, religious or secular - need to reach out to each other in friendship.

This is not a utopian dream. It has, as one example, been achieved to a large degree in the South African Jewish community, where, generally, Jews from across the spectrum engage with each other with respect and even friendship, albeit with all the natural human weaknesses and imperfections.

One of the great rabbinic leaders of the 20th century, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, known as the Chafetz Chaim, cried out about dispute and dissension - machloket - in many public letters and in his books.

He writes that machloket, together with its ancillary sins of lashon hara (verbal abuse) and the like, causes death, destruction and disintegration. He cites many Talmudic sources that show that the fire of machloket destroys marriages and families, synagogues and communities, and, ultimately, the whole of society.

The Chafetz Chaim cites the Talmud which says G-d will forgive the treachery of idol worship more easily than the sin of machloket.

The classic example of this is when G-d forgave the Jewish people for the sin of the Golden Calf but did not forgive those who were involved in igniting the fires of machloket in the sin of Korach's dispute; they were destroyed entirely.

The Jewish people are facing many challenges and threats at this time. It is a time to return to Hashem sincerely, and the first step toward this teshuva is to improve our relationships, to speak to one another with kindness and gentleness and open our hearts to each other.

As the Chafetz Chaim wrote in one of his letters addressed to the public, he was "very distressed that even in our Holy Land the deeds of the evil inclination have been successful and it too has fallen into the trap of machloket".

He concludes his letter with a heart-felt plea: "And therefore, my brothers and friends, have mercy on yourselves and Klal Yisrael, and let everyone in his place extinguish the fire of machloket so that His great Name should not be desecrated anymore and in this merit we will merit to hear the voice announcing peace in the world."

The Chafetz Chaim's metaphor of fire is poignant: When a dispute rages, it consumes everything in its path; its

destructive consequences cannot be predicted, as the Chafetz Chaim writes in that letter: "Who knows what can come from this? May G-d have mercy!" At the conclusion of this letter, he signed his name, "who writes with a broken heart".


How broken hearted would he be were he to see what is going on today? And what of G-d Himself? One great Jewish commonwealth was destroyed, says the Talmud (Yoma 9b), because of the sins of hatred, lashon hara and machloket. We dare not let that happen again.

We cannot allow the fires of

machloket, of these long-standing divisions and animosities, to continue burning. We need to find a better way for the future, a way of talking to each other - especially when we disagree - with kindness and respect, with simple derech erez.

From all sides of the divide we must bring to the public discourse the values presented in the verse (Mishlei 3:17) which describes the quintessential character of the Torah: "Her ways are ways of pleasantness and her paths are those of peace."

This article was first published in the Jerusalem Post.



Rabbi Dr Akiva Tatz


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