It Can’t Happen Here, Can It?

By

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Could it really happen here? Could “it” – the kind of antisemitism that morphs and mutates into violent hate and rage – really happen here, in America? We hear too many individuals – celebrities, “influencers”, politicians, media personalities – speaking the “dog whistle” messages out loud. We hear ancient, hateful tropes “normalized”. We hear in criticism of Israel much more than legitimate policy differences. All conspiring to force the question, Could it happen here?

Already, we have witnessed too many acts of violence and trespass against our people and our institutions; too many instances where voices have been raised without being shouted down, too many acts that seem to find approving murmurs at the dark edges of the Internet and in more mainstream places. As a result, we find ourselves at a moment in time when American Jews feel the same vulnerabilities that our brothers and sisters have felt in too many lands and at too many times.

“I’ve heard in general that some people are claiming their EU citizenship,” a Connecticut rabbi said. “The EU offers citizenship to people who can prove that they were Nazi victims or descendants of Nazi refugees. It’s quite ironic to me that Jews are thinking about Europe as a place of refuge. That seems bizarre.”

Yes, it seems “bizarre” that we might look for sanctuary in a place that only a generation ago murdered us in unfathomable numbers; “bizarre” that such a place might suddenly seem safer than America.

We *are* safe here, just as our ancient brethren were once safe in Goshen, welcomed by the king, welcomed as kin of Joseph. All was well for them until… until a new king arose. Until circumstances changed. Until the aberration of a Jew’s safe harbor in the world found its historical correction.

Until things changed.

The question is, has a change begun here as well?

Our history teaches us that danger lurks always close by. Our experience tells us that, despite our charge to pursue justice always, the message that the arc of history bends toward justice has not borne lasting fruit. In America, the future is always bright. Implicit in that message is the soothing boast that it can’t happen here. But we Jews have outlived many great powers, often demeaned, beaten, and bloodied, but alive. We have experienced enough not to be swayed by myth. No nation, no empire, no civilization is greater than God’s truth.

There is no such thing as, It can’t happen here.

Not once in our long history have we walked any path, anywhere on the face of the earth, where we have not been reminded of the hatred that the nations feel toward us, reminded of the hate directed at us despite the gifts God has given the world through us, reminded of the suffering the nations visit upon us.

Pretending that it is not so does not serve us. Yet, we pretend what was will not be again. Not here.

At our Seder tables, we do not fully contemplate the words we dutifully recite, “…in every generation they rise against us to annihilate us”. For modern, American Jews, evil is about history, about other times and other places.

It can’t happen here.

Not in America.

In *parashat Toldot*, we feel the agony of yet another of our *imahot* struggling to conceive. With Rivka seemingly unable to have a child, Yitzhak prays to God that his line may continue. He seems to understand intuitively that despite the promise made to Avraham, Jewish continuity cannot be taken for granted. At the Seder, even as we rejoice over our freedom and redemption, we remember and declare that *she’bechol* dor va’dor omdim aleinu le’chaloteinu – in every generation they “…rise against us to annihilate us…”. How much plainer can it be that Jewish existence and survival is not certain? And yet surely the Jewish nation and the fulfillment of God’s promise cannot simply be a matter of a physical line. The challenge the *imahot* experience in conceiving is not so much an issue of barrenness as it is a statement that each generation is a miracle, and that the emergence *and survival* of each generation cannot be assumed, not physically and not spiritually.

Rivkah’s pregnancy is tough. “The children agitated within her, and she cried out, ‘If so, why am I thus?’…”  To emphasize the struggle that is to be, Chazal explain that this “agitation” Rivkah felt and sensed in va’yitrotzezu related to Yaakov’s wanting to be born when she passed by the yeshiva of Shem and Ever, and Esav’s desire to emerge when passing the temple of idolatry. In short, the agitation within her womb was the struggle that would express itself between the world of Yaakov vs. the world of Esav, a struggle that never ceases.  God says it plainly, “Two nations are in your womb.”

Her two as-yet-unborn infants represent two nations, two totally conflicting ideologies and ways of life - Israel and Edom. Their rivalry and struggle in the womb represent the future rivalries between them. As the Mizrachi puts it, “The turmoil within her was due to the irreconcilable conflict between the two nations that was already taking shape.”

The timeline of Jewish history is long. And *not one century* is free of our suffering; not one century in which the struggle between Yaakov and Esav is not manifest. Yes, sometimes the conflict is bloodier than at other times, but it always there.

As it has been, so it is. Until the advent of *Moshiach*. This is the truth of our existence. We have sometimes allowed ourselves to “dream” otherwise, but God is clear in His brief summary of Jewish history, “Two nations are in your womb; two regimes from your insides shall be separated; the might shall pass from one regime to the other, and the elder shall serve the younger.”

Two regimes. One dedicated to justice, morality, decency and ethics. The other to barbarity, viciousness, bloodshed. By definition, they cannot be in harmony. One must always have their upper hand, either on the battlefield or in men’s hearts and minds. There is not surety as to which will be strong. Only one thing can be, Chazal teach, “They will not be equally great. When one rises the other falls.”

“Two nations are in your womb” – shnei goyim b’bitneich. Goyim is generally spelled gimel, vav, yud, mem.  Here it is written, gimel, yud, yud, mem. Pronounced “goyim” it could read, “geyim” – proud ones. The Talmud (Avodah Zarah 11a) tells us this alludes to two great leaders who would descend from Yaakov and Esav – Antonius, the Roman emperor, a descendant of Esav, and Rebbi, the codifier of the Mishna, a descendant of Yaakov.  According to the Talmud, both geyim – proud in the sense that they were both extremely wealthy, so wealthy that they “… were always able to serve their guests radishes, lettuce and cucumbers, at anytime of the year, in season or not in season, even if they needed to be imported from far away markets…”

What’s missing here? Our focus is on two rival nations, on the conflict between good and evil and suddenly Chazal teach that the correct reading is not goyim but geyim? That our two thousand years of conflict and pain is somehow affected by… vegetables?

Clearly something much more significant is at work here, something that speaks to the Yaakov-Esav struggle, a struggle that would continue until “Saviors shall go up to Mount Zion to judge Mount Esav, and the Lord’s shall be the kingdom…”. Until that blessed time, we need some direction as to how to deal with Esav. And this is why we must turn our attention to Rebbi and Antoninus.

My grandfather, HaGaon Rav Bezalel Zev Shafran, (Sh’elot U’tshuvot R’baz - Yalkut HaChanochi 6) gives insight to the significance of the Rebbi and Antoninus relationship and its lesson for all times.  My grandfather analyzes this unique relationship between these two geyim, which is elaborated upon in detail and supported with many examples in an almost entire *Daf* of Talmud Avodah Zarah (10a,b) which conveys the closeness of the relationship between Rav Yehuda HaNasi (Rebbi) and the Roman emperor Antoninus.

In the opening story on the *Daf*, Antoninus turns to Rebbi for advice on how to establish his son as successor, something most unusual as it was the Senate that chose the leader and that body generally refused to have a son follow his father as emperor. Elaborating on the very close relationship between the two geyim, the Talmud also describes how Antoninus had a secret tunnel erected between their houses so that he could always visit with Rebbi and serve him as needed.  The communication between them was always open, honest and ***discreet*.**  (Antoninus eager to have his son succeed him, was nevertheless rightly concerned and obsessively worried about leaks.)  He sought Rebbi’s advice. Rebbi knew he must watch his words and tongue. So, he devised ways and means to never express his advice other than in “mashal v’chida” or just **“***b’remiza*”. My grandfather makes clear that he spoke *only* through allegory, never through a direct answer. Even to speak in whispers was unacceptable because one could never know, the Talmud writes, if a bird will bring the message through the heavens. (wiretapped!)

So, when Antoninus complained to Rebbi that the powers at Rome are badgering him, his response was to take him to his garden and pluck one radish, and then another and another... In other words, pluck them one at a time, not all at once.

So too lettuce. The Talmud tells of Gira, Antoninus’ daughter, who sinned with another man. Antoninus sought Rebbi’s advice as to how to handle the situation but did not want anyone to know of it. So, he did not as much as utter the words that she sinned /strayed. Instead, he sent *gargira*, a leafy green whose name was like hers. Rebbi sent Antoninus chasa – a kind of lettuce, whose meaning is to have mercy *Chasa*, that is, mercy. No leaks. No betrayal. Only discreet, responsible, trusting communication. My grandfather cites other examples from the Talmudic portrayal of this trusting relationship, including when Rebbi replaced large overgrown radishes with small radishes on his roof’s garden, conveying the message that the older, tired out ministers should be replaced with new, younger ones.

My grandfather’s lesson was to emphasize the discretion and trust these two giants, each of his own domain, developed over time; how they found the perfect way to communicate so they could never be misunderstood. Rebbi’s messages and responses were always filled with wisdom and sharpness (radishes!) that no one could ever “wiretap” or eavesdrop. Antoninus always understood the response he received.

We see in my grandfather’s wisdom that the Talmud was not concerned with vegetables at all! My grandfather concludes that these two *geyim* who were always able to serve their guests radishes, lettuce and cucumbers were never at a loss for trust, never at a loss for discretion. “…these two greats, communicated with each other b’remiza, discreetly, and never did they lack radishes or lettuce, because theirs was a language of allegory and riddle; in these riddles they were able to hide their most innermost thoughts, so others would never understand.”

We have always had faith that in America the tacit understanding between Rebbi and Antoninus prevailed; our “lettuce and radishes” could thrive here. But now I wonder. Now, I fear. Could it happen even here, in a land rich with lettuce and radishes?

Of course not.

Until it can.