

One of the central teachings of Judaism is that we have the capacity to repent of our wrongs and be forgiven. At the same time, our traditions recognize that there are some people who have hatred so intense that no amount of education, rehabilitation or reason can change them.

Indeed, this is a question at the very heart of this week's Torah portion. Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, stiffens his heart and refuses to respond to the plea of Moses and Aaron to let the Israelite slaves go free. Not once, but several times, Moses appeals to the ruler, but each time his heart goes cold, and the oppression of the slaves grows more harsh. Eventually, the Torah says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would not pay heed to the entreaties of Moses. A number of commenters over the centuries pondered how God could do this. If God gives us free will - and the opportunity to change our attitude and repent - how could God have made Pharaoh so implacable? A number of commentators, in a close reading of the Torah, point out that at first five plagues Pharaoh hardens his own heart, while after that it says that God hardens it. What this indicates is that while we do have free will, our patterns of behavior eventually make what we do a feature of who we are. If we decide to oppress and harm those around us, after a period of time we will automatically do so without giving our actions a second thought. The more we harden ourselves to others, the more that callousness and hate becomes a reflection of our very nature.

The hardened, stubborn heart is a source for the enduring power of racism and anti-Semitism - and touches on issues that have roiled American society and Western Europe.

This weekend as we mark the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. it is important to recall why so many Jews 50 years ago identified intensely with and took up the cause of the civil rights movement as if it were our own. For many Jews, the cause of civil rights for blacks was a moral imperative. In the 1963 telegram to President Kennedy, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "We forfeit (the) right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate Negroes." The civil rights movement was, he declared, an issue that demanded "spiritual audacity" as a nation.

The reason that the oppression of blacks in America resonated as a *cause célèbre* among Jews is not hard to understand. Less than two decades after the

Holocaust, Jews were still dealing with the trauma of Nazi regime whose anti-Semitism led to the most horrific genocide in our history as a people. For many Jews, the African-American story was a mirror of our story. We knew what it meant to be hated. We were heirs to a history of disenfranchisement. What's more, like us, black Americans had their very own Moses, Martin Luther King Jr., a man who quoted and infused life into scripture as good (if not better) than many a rabbi. In the 1960s, the notion of "Never Again!" - an activist approach towards history and societal responsibility - animated Jews not only to fight against anti-Semitism, but racism in any form.

In many ways, in the intervening decades African Americans in the United States succeeded in their struggle. Who in the 1960s could have imagined a black president, attorney general, lawmakers, and judges? Attitudes have changed. Yet the concerns Martin Luther King Jr. uttered about blacks living "on an island of poverty in an ocean of material wealth" still rings utterly true. The African-American population as a whole still suffers poverty and deprivation, as does no other group in America.

Consider the situation in Ferguson, outside St. Louis, which has been at the center of the controversy over race relations in this country since the summer. Ferguson's population is two-thirds black, and yet its mayor, city manager, and five of its six city council members are white, as are its police chief and all but three officers on its 53-member police force. The school board of the Ferguson-Florissant School District is much the same: more than three-quarters of the district's 12,000 students are black, but the seven-member board only one African-American member. Is it any wonder that black citizens there feel marginalized and disenfranchised?

Similarly, as a Jew, I have always felt a bit of an outsider, but the growth of anti-Israel sentiment in recent years, which has morphed into outright anti-Semitic hatred, has only increased my concern about the "stubborn heart" of hatred.

The attack in Paris last week is not out of the blue, but just the latest in a string of anti-Jewish attacks. In Europe - particularly (although not exclusively) in France - the pace and brutality of violence against Jews has been quickening. In March 2012 a French Muslim extremist murdered several young children in the

playground of Jewish school in Toulouse Jewish school. Another French Muslim crossed into Belgium last May to gun down four visitors in Brussels Jewish Museum in May. Last summer, during Israel's conflict with Gaza, at a number of anti-Israel rallies throughout Europe there were chants of "death to the Jews" and "back to the gas chambers." A few months ago two Palestinians hacked to death five people in Jerusalem synagogue. They were not warriors. They were what we are - Jews at prayer. The mask is off that opposing Israel isn't being against Jews, for the line between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism has been breached.

True, millions marched in France last week in solidarity with the victims of the attacks. At the Golden Globes, the talk of the town was George Clooney and his new wife, Amal Alamuddin, who wore *Je suis Charlie* buttons. I don't want to rain on the parade, but I find such protests and claims of solidarity hollow. Legendary Nazi hunter Beate Klarsfeld, who lives in Paris, correctly noted that, "If this past week was only about terrorism against Jews, there would be little outcry here. After Jews were murdered in Toulouse a few years ago, there was hardly any protest. It's only because the attack at Hyper Cacher was linked to Charlie Hebdo that millions marched in the street." Jewish lives are, I hate to say, cheap in the market of public opinion. Yes, there has been much collective mourning - and the values of the West are under attack - but the racism that accompanied the attacks, the anti-Jewish sentiment that animated the murderers, is too often discounted.

Let us be clear - the attacks not only against Jews. That said, Jews are in the bull's-eye, we are the "canary in the cave", and we should not paper over the attacks in Paris with the claim that radical Islam is simply attacking liberal values. Jews were the target - at Charlie Hebdo (where two of the four journalists slaughtered were Jewish) and at the kosher market. Deborah Lipstadt, professor at Emory University gets it right, when she says, "It begins with the Jews but it never ends with them."¹

I want the many young people here this evening to hear me clearly. Do not be afraid. Yes, there are people whose "stubborn heart" is filled with hate for us. But do not cower. The best response is to be strong, be courageous, be proud of who

¹ <http://tabletmag.com/scroll/188387/hypocrisy-after-the-paris-terror-attacks>

you are as a Jew. In your schools, and in the larger world, there are bullies. Only when you and I stand strong - and stand together - can we defeat them. Do not be afraid! Strengthen your backbone. Be proud in defending your self, and all who may be different.

After the events of last week many people here are anxious, but we need to put things in some perspective. First, in the United States there is not a large disaffected and radicalized population of Muslims as there is in France. Second, while anti-Semitism does exist in other countries in Europe, the problem is particularly acute in France (although in a few other places, as well). Third, there are some signs this week that Western European governments are taking the threat against Jews seriously. French authorities are moved aggressively to rein in speech supporting terrorism. In Belgium yesterday authorities killed two people planning a terror attack. And French, German, Belgian and Irish police have at least 30 suspected jihadists behind bars on charges. Such moves should not be discounted, for in Turkey and Venezuela, for example, anti-Jewish activity has been tacitly supported. If radical Islam is to be effectively countered Western governments must continue to see the threat against Jews and Israel as the point of the sword of the attack against the West.

What can we do here? As I said this past Rosh Hashanah, our comfort and safety here must not lull us into complacency. It is no coincidence that anti-Israel sentiment in recent years is reflected in a growing anti-Semitism. It is appropriate to criticize Israel, but when the critique goes the very right of Israel's right to exist (as it too often does), when Israel becomes the primary target of the world's condemnation, it is time to ask if the "stubborn heart" of Jewish hatred is not behind the questioning.

What will I be doing? Continuing my support, for one, for the American Jewish Committee, an organization dedicated to educational programs to combat hate and ongoing political contacts throughout Europe to remind key leaders that an attack against Jews is an attack against all. In addition, I urge you to not give in to hatred. I affirm the teachings of Reform Judaism that say that democracy, liberalism, the freedom of speech, the press and religion are not only Western virtues; they are truly Jewish values. Finally, small though it may be, I plan to

wear a button in coming days to remind others to remember that the attacks are not only against free speech and Western values.

The "stubborn heart" of racism lives. But, as in the days of the Pharaoh we must remain with steeled resolve and courage. Have faith in a God who affirms the equality of all, the freedom of every man and woman, (black and white, Jews and Gentiles) and the dignity of the Jewish people. *Am Yisrael Chai* - the people of Israel lives. Or, as the button I will wear will say in solidarity with my people: *Je suis Juif*.