

WAVE OF ANTI-SEMITISM?

As the firemen were battling the arson fire which destroyed a synagogue in California last week, the Rabbi remembered that there was a Torah in an out-of-the-way place. A nearby fireman volunteered to try to find it. He plunged into the savage fire. A few minutes later, he appeared at a window, gasping for breath. He tried again, and finally stumbled out with the rescued Torah.

"I will be eternally grateful to him," said the Rabbi.

Later, another Rabbi commented on a difference between that tragic night in Redwood City, and the burning synagogues in Nazi Germany which he had witnessed. On Krystalnacht, the German firemen were there not to rescue Torahs, but "to fan the flames."

But against the background of that profound difference, what is happening? In recent weeks, there have been reported a rash of "episodes": swastika markings, harassment, other desecration or vandalism at synagogues and yeshivas in various parts of the country. A New York newspaper asked: "Is there some kind of an epidemic? Is it all really anti-semitism?"

It is not at all certain that there is a higher rate of vandalism or arson at synagogues or other Jewish institutions, than there is at Christian churches, or other conspicuous buildings. But, then, what about the anti-semitic phone calls and letters? What about the swastikas? What about the activities of the Nazis and Ku Klux Klan?

Serious campaigners against anti-semitism must distinguish between different *kinds* of anti-semitism -- just as doctors must distinguish between different variations of a disease, in order to apply the right medicine in the right place.

1) Organized Anti-semitism: This refers to a group which is formally organized, with one of its prime purposes being to oppress Jews. Its ultimate objectives are political. If it would vandalize a synagogue, it would do so in order to make some public point -- and as part of a long-range agenda of anti-semitic activity.

2) Ad Hoc Anti-semitism: This refers to individuals who commit a specific act out of hatred for Jews. When such people vandalize a synagogue, they do so primarily to vent their personal hatred. They have no long-range political objective or organization.

3) Auxiliary Anti-semitism: This refers to those who have a primary objective other than anti-semitism -- but who are willing to use anti-semitism to further that objective. In one recent case, a juvenile gang went on a vandalizing tear out of sheer scandalizing perversity. They vandalized a number of buildings which had no Jewish connection -- and they also vandalized a synagogue. When they came to the synagogue, they scrawled swastikas on the wall because they knew that would be most scandalizing in that case.

Or a neighborhood group may want to get rid of a religious school, whatever its denomination; but if the religious school is Jewish, they may be willing to pluck all the anti-semitic strings they can find.

Earl Raab

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The fact is that the anti-semitic episodes rarely have had any connection to Organized Anti-semitism. But that is no reason for complacency. There has been a dangerous tendency to down-play the importance of Ad Hoc Anti-semitism, and especially of Auxiliary Anti-semitism. Public officials and media observers will say: "Oh, that's not really anti-semitism. The perpetrator is just a psychopath." Or: "That's not really anti-semitism. The perpetrators mainly had something else in mind."

But a public climate in which psychopaths are more likely to turn to anti-semitic psychopathy, is dangerous. Most dangerous of all is a public climate in which people are more willing to accept and use anti-semitism as auxiliary to their other purposes. That indeed is the main gate to disaster, and always has been.

We will combat such a public climate credibly and effectively, not by making blunderbuss charges, but by coolly evaluating each episode for what it is -- no more, and certainly no less.

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