

Fighting Antisemitism with a Stiff Neck

We will never return to the false sense of security we felt on Oct. 6.

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“Non-Jews respect Jews who respect Judaism, and they are embarrassed by Jews who are embarrassed by Judaism.” – Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

We will never return to the false sense of security we felt on Oct. 6. The massacre the next day not only caused us to question our safety in Israel, it also removed the veil hiding global antisemitism that was bubbling beneath the volcanic surface of the places we considered our homes.

While our soldiers fight for their lives on the front lines in Gaza, those of us in the Diaspora face a different type of challenge — a world where discrimination, suspicious glances and hate-filled slurs assail us daily. Being called a genocidal murderer on your morning commute, it turns out, is not the most uplifting way to start one’s day.

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We need ancient guidance on addressing evil and those who challenge our identities. I believe it can be found in one of the most misunderstood passages of the Haggadah. This passage tells us how to address those who are wicked, b

of the Hebrew text may be lost on many who are unfamiliar with the language or are rushing through the seder to reach the festive meal.

Four sons ask questions in the *Maggid* section of the Haggadah. To the wicked one who asks, “What are these things for you?”, we are advised to “blunt out his teeth!” At first glance it appears the rabbis are advocating violence: Take your fists and strike him in the mouth. A closer read, however, tells a more intriguing story.

The Hebrew words, “*hakkeh et sheinav*,” literally translate to “blunt out his teeth” — the same words used in another rabbinic text commenting on an earlier confrontation with evil. Years after fleeing his evil brother Esau’s murderous wrath (Gen. 27:41), Jacob encounters Esau on his way back to Canaan. Surprisingly, Jacob isn’t met with a violent act of vengeance. Instead, the verse tells us that “Esau ran towards him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him, and they wept.” (Gen. 33:4) Curiously, the Torah scrolls contain a series of dots over each letter of the word “*Vayishakeihu* [and he kissed him].” According to one midrashic interpretation, the dots are meant to suggest the kiss was insincere and even violent:

“R. Yannai said . . . [the dots] teach that he didn’t come to kiss Jacob but rather to bite him, but Jacob’s neck turned to marble; and thus the teeth of that wicked one were blunted. Thus, when the text says ‘and they cried’ – this one cried over his neck and this one cried over his teeth.” (Genesis Rabbah 78:9)

R. Yannai’s creative interpretation is based on an etymological observation that the Hebrew word describing Esau kissing Jacob, *Vayishakeihu*, is almost identical to the word *Vayishakheihu* which means “and he bit him.” According to R. Yannai, the dots over the word *Vayishakeihu* are meant to teach the reader that what really happened is far different than what the literal text depicts. It wasn’t a reunion of brotherly love, but a murder attempt.

More interesting, however, are the Hebrew words R. Yannai uses to describe the effect

of Esau's attempt to bite Jacob's neck: "*hikhe et sheinav shel oto rasha* [the teeth of that evil one were blunted]." Read closely, these words are nearly identical to the phrase used in the Haggadah to describe the response to the evil son, "*hakhe et sheinav* [blunt out his teeth]." Additionally, R. Yannai's decision to identify Esau only as "*oto rasha* [that wicked one]" further highlights the reference to the *rasha* of the Haggadah. The rabbis intended for these texts to be understood as references to each other.

While R. Yannai's interpretation may seem fantastical, it offers a profound insight into Jacob's personality. The notion of a neck turning into marble recalls the biblical characterization of the Jewish nation as an "*am k'shei oref*" (Ex. 32:9), a stiff-necked or stubborn people. While this characterization is typically used by God to justify punishing the Jewish nation for sinning with the Golden Calf, it is also used in Moses' prayer to God as a reason to justify their forgiveness (Ibid. 34:9).

In an evocative sermon, R. Norman Lamm explained that while a stiff neck can cause one to ignore truth, it can also lead to loyalty and the ability to remain steadfast in one's beliefs. "To be unbendingly evil is worse than idolatry; to be unbendingly G-dly is the greatest virtue. What is dogged obstinacy in the service of a bad cause, is valorous constancy in the service of a good one," remarked R. Lamm. Moses beseeched God to forgive the nation because it was the very stubbornness that led the people to sin which ultimately became their greatest tool to remain loyal to God during difficult times.

R. Yannai's metaphor of Jacob's neck transforming into marble may symbolize his unwavering commitment to his beliefs. We can also posit that R. Yannai didn't intend that Esau literally bit Jacob, but rather made biting remarks toward him. Esau mocked Jacob's choices and identity.

R. Yannai's interpretation provides a lesson in confronting evil. Instead of retaliating, Jacob chose to stiffen his neck — to display stubbornness, confidence and loyalty to his beliefs. One method for confronting evil, R. Yannai teaches, is to show your

antagonizer that their “bite” is ineffective.

The text of “*hakhe et sheinav*” in the Haggadah suggests that beneath the literal translation of the text lies an alternative method more suitable to our contemporary predicament in America. There are times when the correct approach is not to blunt evil’s teeth, but to develop inner confidence in our own beliefs. Terrorists in Gaza must be eliminated, but the approach to antisemitism in America is a different battle, in which stubbornness and pride are more effective than the sword.

Mitchell Leshchiner exemplified this approach during his middle-school graduation in Vernon Hills, Illinois shortly after the 2019 Poway synagogue shooting. Leshchiner didn’t normally wear a yarmulke, but the 14-year-old donned one while receiving his diploma in front of hundreds of onlookers. “It was important to make a statement that we’re still here, and that no matter what happens, we’ll still be here,” he said.

“We’re still here” is the message we need to display more than ever in a post-Oct. 7 world. Many are understandably fearful to identify as Jewish in crowded areas. Yet with rare exceptions, one can still wear a yarmulke or *Magen David* necklace in public areas in America without getting physically attacked. The streets of America will tragically turn into the streets of Berlin, however, if it becomes increasingly unpopular for these symbols of Jewish pride to be seen by others. Cowering in fear only gives fuel to the bullies. America needs to see that “we’re still here” and we will always be, unabashedly proud of who we are.

If your life is not in danger, display your loyalty to your cause. Consider wearing yarmulke in the streets. Wear your *Magen David* necklace so others can see it. Have the courage to post pro-Israel sentiments on social media. If someone rips down a poster of our hostages, hang up another. Most importantly, keep your head high and be proud to be a Jew. There is a time and place to fight our enemies, but to earn their respect they must see that we respect ourselves. Stiffen your neck and the *rasha*’s teeth will fall out by themselves.

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