

Yom Kippur Morning

Dear Roni, Tom, Danielle and Yonatan:

“I hate you!”

I'll never forget the first time you said these words to me - Tom.

I know you didn't really mean it, but you were VERY angry. You might recall - I intervened in a fight between you and your sister and to make matters worse, I sided with her. As I remember, the situation escalated very fast, we all lost our tempers, and as you were storming away to your room, just before slamming your door - you shouted, “I hate you”. I was stunned. No actually, I was crushed. And, I too went to my room and I cried.

For HATE is a powerful word.

And while hate is not a new phenomenon, it feels as if it is more pervasive these days. It's affecting all of us, slowly eating us from within. It feels as if it's more violent and spreading faster than we could ever imagine - sadly, we have social media to thank for that.

But hate is not just a feeling, it's a fact. After all, hate can be “measured.”

The ADL reported 4000 antisemitic incidents in the last year alone. An increase of +36% and the highest number on record since ADL began tracking these incidents in 1979.

And while it is natural that as a Jewish community we take notice and express great concern about these antisemitic incidents, we cannot ignore the fact that out of the 11,000 hate crimes reported in 2022 - only 15% of these were incidents related to religion, and half of these, or roughly 7.5% toward Jews. 63% of the hate crimes were motivated by race - mostly anti-Black hate crimes. And 20% of hate crimes were related to sexual orientation, gender and gender identity.

What can I say, there is a lot of hate out there?

And not just here in the United States.

It's true in Israel too. The hate is palpable in the streets, and with every week of intense protests, more and more acts of violence are occurring. I worry that Israel is on the edge of a civil war, and I fear it's only a matter of time until blood will be spilled.

Hate can be deadly, yes - directly to those who are targeted by it - but even more so to those who carry it within their heart and souls. Hate is toxic - it erodes you from within. Hate causes you to see the world in black and white, no gray, no colors, blind to the beauty of creation. Where there is hate, there is no room for complex ideas, for diversity, or nuance.

Poet Maya Angelou writes that "Hate has caused a lot of problems in the world but has not solved one yet."

There is so much hate all around us, it is everywhere - it is like rust rapidly eating at our protective gear, and like mold, quietly spreading behind the walls of our sanctuary, until one day, it will become inhabitable.

I find myself tempted to give up. To throw away the banners of tolerance, to lower the flags of love and compassion to half-mast, to blow up bridges and start building walls. My evil inclination is tempting me to stop being the rabbi and the person who tries to bring people together, who tries to help everyone around him see that there is a spark of God in each and every human.

And if this degree of hate is creeping into my soul, I worry that if this is how I feel, then what about you? What about my congregants? Who day after day, feel a sense of despair and are searching for tools.

So once again, on this day of reflection and introspection - I turn to our Jewish wisdom for guidance.

As you were taught, B'tzelem Elohim - all people were created in the image of God, V'Ahvata et haGer - you should love the stranger among us. These and many other teachings are true, and beautiful, but sadly, they are no longer enough.

They are failing us. It's time for new and perhaps radical ideas. Here are three that I think might help you, help our world.

The first is a new interpretation of who is a hero.

You might recall me telling you that according to our tradition a Jewish hero is one that controls their own evil inclination. But today, I want to share an alternative definition, one that I believe is even more powerful. It comes from a book called Avot d'Rabbi Natan - where they ask-

Who is the strongest of the strong?

And the answer is - one who turns someone who hates them into someone who loves them.

You see my children, it's not just enough to be a loving, kind person in a world full of hate. It's not enough to hope that the light we pour into the world will cast away the darkness, and that the love we offer will drown the hate.

As hard as it sounds, and against our intuition, Avot d'Rabbi Natan suggests that the only way to defeat hate is to actively engage with our enemies in acts of kindness.

To illustrate this idea, the rabbis present a dilemma. One you might not come across everyday - it is a dilemma about two donkeys.

One day, you are walking down a path and you come across two people each with a donkey, and they both need your help.

The first person is actually a friend, and this friend needs your immediate help to unload the very heavy cargo from the back of his clearly suffering donkey.

The second is an enemy, not the kind that wants to kill you, but one that you know doesn't really like you, doesn't like who you are, or what you represent. This person needs your help to load his heavy cargo - from the ground - onto the back of his donkey.

The rabbis ask - who should you help first?

The answer seems so clear - a friend with a suffering animal versus an enemy and no suffering animal.

Well, it might surprise you that the rabbis, without hesitation, say that you must help... your enemy load his donkey.

For helping your enemy might be the only opportunity you ever have to do an act of unwarranted kindness towards them. The only chance to break through the wall of hatred they have built. To take the first step on the path of turning an enemy into a friend.

And this is what it means to be a hero, to conquer your evil inclination to hate that person, to conquer your inclination to turn your back to them. And to do exactly the opposite - be kind to them.

It's a radical idea - and I am picturing you rolling your eyes right now - (a trait you excel in).

You giggle to yourself - what a naive view of the world, what an impossible task.

But it's not, there are inspiring stories all around us of people who did exactly this.

One powerful example is the story of Derek Black as told in the book "Rising out of Hatred" by Eli Saslow. Black grew up at the epicenter of white nationalism. His father was a grand wizard of the KKK - founder of a prominent racist website. His godfather was none other than David Duke. By the time Derek turned 19, he was regarded as the "leading light of the next generation of the white nationalist movement." He was groomed to be the future leader of the movement. You might be surprised to learn that he grew up here in West Palm Beach. From the 3rd grade, he was homeschooled and had little, to no, interaction with anyone who thought differently than his family.

When he turned 18, he went to college, and he tried to hide his identity. He was successful just for a short period of time until he was exposed and most of his new "friends" chose to cut ties with him, protest his presence on campus, and even pressure the university to expel him.

What would you do? Would you cut all ties with him? Or would you be part of a very small group of Jewish students, who had befriended him before they knew of his background and decided not shut him out but rather started inviting him to their weekly Shabbat dinners!!?

Yes, a group of Jewish students invited our country's next leading white nationalist for Shabbat dinner! They engaged him, they challenged him and ultimately, they convinced him that everything he believed in was wrong. In 2019, Derek Black publicly rejected white nationalism.

These students did not know the outcome of their invitation, they had no guarantee it would make a difference, all they knew was that they had the ability to offer Black an undeserved and unwarranted act of kindness.

I have other stories, but I think you get the point.

So let me move to my second radical idea...and that is to understand the true meaning of the sentence "Ve'ahavta le'reacha kamocho."

The traditional translation we use is : "love your fellow **as** yourself" - but if we look closely at the Hebrew - you know that is not the true meaning of the phrase - if it were, the Torah would say **v'ahavta ET - not Le, Et reacha Kamocho**.

Le reacha means to - or towards - we are commanded to act in love towards, not to feel love for.

No - I do not need to love my neighbor, and no I do not need to love my enemy! What I must do is show love towards them - show them kindness - so that they can see my true, good, loving nature, and stop being hateful.

Rabbi Shai Held teaches that Judaism doesn't ask of us to interpret love just as an emotion or even just as an action - but rather to promote the idea of love as an orientation that includes both emotions and actions. Love is not about what I feel – but it is first and foremost a statement on how I choose to face those who share the world with us.

A great example of approaching love as an orientation was displayed by Bruriah, the wife of the famous Rabbi Meir. The Talmud tells the story of how one day on his way home Rabbi was rattled by the behavior of hooligans he came across. He prayed for God to kill these horrible people, but his wife, Bruriah, a truly righteous woman, urged him to instead pray that God eradicate evil from the world, not the evildoers.

What a powerful message. We must differentiate the idea from the person - for those who hate are the victims of their own hate, like Derek Black, they

were taught to hate, they were never exposed to the goodness, nor the kindness of those whom they deemed as the enemy.

And please - PLEASE do not dismiss me as being naive.

I know we have REAL enemies. I know that there are those who seek our destruction, and no amount of love will change them. I am glad that Israel has one of the strongest armies in the world and I am proud we Americans do as well. As an IDF sniper fighting Hizbulla terrorists in Lebanon I have done my share in eliminating evil from the world, and I have no illusion that if we invite some of our worst enemies for a Shabbat dinner, we will solve all the world's problems.

But most of the hate I see these days is not the one that requires us to hold a rifle. Most of the hate out there is really just a manifestation of fear and anger. Fear of the unknown, fed by stereotypes and one-sided information, we are fed by algorithms and anger that my way of life is being challenged by your way of life. Remember - separate the ideas and the behaviors from the person themselves.

And now, on to radical idea number three.

Tishteku תשתקו

And for those not fluent in Hebrew - this means

SHHHHHH...

How often do we hear the words - "liberals" or "conservatives" or "the MAGA movement" in a hateful tone? Or how about "Orthodox Jews" or "transgender people", settlers, Arabs, Muslims, immigrants, refugees, or African Americans etc. In fact, not a day goes by without someone using a label of some kind. I too am guilty. It is easy to label people but....

Nothing good comes from labeling. It is dehumanizing. It is another way of seeing the world in only black and white, missing any nuance, or complexity. We fail to see that no two liberals or no two conservatives are the same, but rather that we are all unique. When we talk in such generalizations, we are not listening to Bruriah - we are turning our hate

and anger towards people not towards their words or actions. When we categorize all people in such ways, we fuel the flames of anger and hate.

We need to remember Psalm 34 - the Psalm I used to sing to you every night at bedtime when you were little.

מִי־הָאִישׁ הַחֲפֹץ חַיִּים אֲהַב לְיָמִים לְרָאוֹת טוֹב:

Who is the man who is eager for life,

Who desires years of good fortune?

The answer to that question - We all are.

So here is the formula:

נָצַר לְשׁוֹנֶה מִרַע וְשִׁפְתָיו מִדְבַר מִרְמָה:

Guard your tongue from evil,

your lips from deceitful speech.

סוּר מִרַע וְעֲשֵׂה־טוֹב בְּקֶשׁ שְׁלוֹם וְרַדְפָּהוּ:

Shun evil and do good,

seek peace and pursue it.

I know that most of us will never have that Shabbat dinner with a white nationalist but that doesn't absolve you of your part. I implore each and every one of you today to do the bare minimum you can do - not add more fuel to the fire of hate - please guard your speech from evil.

I want to end with this story:

A few weeks ago, I was driving in the car with Yonatan. We were chatting about all kinds of problems in the world, from hurricanes to hunger, from cancer to wars. At a certain point he asked me: "Aba, if you could solve one, but only one problem in the world, what would it be?" I had to think a

bit, but it didn't take me long to reach the answer - "I would cure the world of hate."

"Really? he asked, "Why hate before all other things?" "Because" I answered, "I believe that if we only learn to hate less, we will have so much more time and resources to solve every other problem."

"But is it possible? Can it be done?" He asked.

I didn't have an answer for him then, but I think I have one for all of you today.

My answer is the story about the child who wanted to challenge the rabbi at his temple, a rabbi known to have an answer to every question.

His plan was to hold a live butterfly in his hand and ask the rabbi if he is holding a live or dead butterfly. If the rabbi would say a live butterfly - he would squeeze his hand and show the rabbi a dead butterfly.

If the rabbi would say a dead butterfly - he would open his hand and show the rabbi it was alive. So, he did exactly that, when the rabbi heard the question, he paused for a moment, then he smiled with love and told the kid "The answer to your question, my child, is in your hand."

Yes, we each have to do our part in quenching the fire of hate. We each have to remember what Hillel the elder answered when he was asked to teach the entire Torah on one leg - he said V'ahavta l'reacha kamoc'ha "DO NOT DO UNTO OTHERS WHAT YOU DO NOT WANT DONE TO YOU, THE REST IS DETAILS - GO FIGURE IT OUT".

If we only remember what matters most - the rest will fall in place, the answer is in each and every one of our hands.

G'mar Chatima Tovah.

