

Yom Kippur Morning 5787 (2026)

Dear Roni, Tom, Danielle and Yonatan,

I will never forget the first time, Tom, you used the four-letter word.

It's not a word we used or encouraged at home, but nevertheless you said it.

I can't remember exactly why we argued. But it escalated very fast, Tom, and then you turned to me, with a sharp, stabbing look and said,

I hate you.

I remember being flooded with a mixture of emotions: failure, shame, and heartbreak.

When I calmed down, I remembered that teenagers sometimes need to hate a parent, just enough to prove they're their own person.

Tom, you needed to hate me. And at that age, and in that moment, I could accept that.

But I'm having a very hard time accepting the hatred I see and feel all around me these days.

I know hatred has always existed in the world. But something feels different now.

It isn't only that hate exists, it's how far and fast it travels - a single hateful thought or comment can reach millions in seconds.

And what used to live at the margins now sits comfortably in plain sight. Hate has moved into too many hearts and made itself at home. It's become part of us.

And when I say hate I don't mean the word in the way Yonatan uses it when he says he hates hummus. I don't mean it in the way a Red Sox fan speaks about the Yankees, or what snowbirds feel about the weather in Chicago in December.

I'm talking about how just three weeks ago, a man named Ousman Ceesay walked into a parking lot outside a gay bar in Tucson Arizona and shot two men he had never met to death. He never even went inside. When police searched his home, they found a list of LGBTQ businesses and their addresses. No argument. No provocation. Nothing happened between them at all. Just a list, and a plan, and two men who never had a chance.

I'm talking about how just one 5 weeks ago, a man named Larry Montes forced his way into Central Synagogue's Friday night service, smashed the two Shabbat candles, punched a sixty-three-year-old female congregant in the face, and spat at and headbutted the security guard who restrained him, all while shouting antisemitic and racist slurs.

I can go on and on with examples. But there is no need.

You yourselves live in an environment that seems to be saturated with hate. A recent study found that Israel's polarization is higher than it has ever been. Fifty nine percent of Israelis named internal division as the country's greatest threat. Seventy percent said they believe voters who disagree with them are harming national security.

We live in scary times, and what's most scary is that we've learned to accept it as normal.

BUT WE SHOULD NOT.

And as we enter a year themed Love your neighbor as your self - I think we first have to better understand hate.

Judaism views hatred as one of the most spiritually dangerous traits a person can possess.

The Torah explicitly forbids harboring hatred: "You shall not hate your brother in your heart" (Leviticus 19:17).

In Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Yehoshua names three things that remove a person from the world entirely, an evil eye, the evil inclination, and sinat habriyot, hatred of one's fellow human beings.

Notice what he's really saying. Not that hatred harms its target, though of course it does, but that it removes the hater from the world of the living, shrinking their entire world down to the size of their grievance.

Maimonides teaches that hate destroys the body's health.

Two thousand years later, science proved him right.

At Duke University, cardiologist Doctor Redford Williams found that beyond cholesterol, blood pressure, and family history, hostility is the best predictor of heart disease. People who scored high on chronic anger had far higher rates of heart attacks, and higher death rates overall. Not surprisingly, he titled his book on the subject Anger Kills.

It does not stop at the heart. Unresolved hatred floods our bodies with stress hormones like cortisol, and over months and years that wears down our cells and speeds how quickly we age.

Psychologically, the picture is no kinder. Rumination, replaying our grievances again and again, is one of the strongest predictors of anxiety and depression.

Jewish wisdom knew this first, the medical world followed.

Hatred never stays contained in the box marked for its target. It leaks into our mind, heart and cells. It affects how we sleep, how

we parent, how present we are with the people we love us. It changes us, and not for the good.

Why am I sharing all this with you now?

Partly because we're heading into another election season, midterm elections here and full-scale elections in Israel, and the temperature is rising. It used to be that we disagreed with our neighbors. We argued about taxes, about judges, about how best to keep this country and this world safe. Now, increasingly, we do not just disagree. We hate.

We do not think the other side is merely wrong. We think they are cruel and dangerous.

But putting politics aside, I'm sharing this because I learned something about hate. It is not only a danger for people less educated, less spiritual, or less successful than you. It can touch all of us. It happened to me.

As we approach the third anniversary of October 7th, I can finally come to terms with my experience with hate.

It was in the days after October 7th, three years ago, when the images and stories kept coming and I could not turn away. And somewhere in those days, without ever deciding to, I noticed something had changed in me. When I saw the images of suffering in Gaza, children pulled from rubble, families searching through concrete, I felt nothing. Not sorrow, not conflict, nothing at all. Worse than nothing. I felt a coldness towards anyone living there, an indifference that, if I am honest, was actually a kind of hatred, the kind that never announces itself, because it has already stopped seeing a person on the other side of the screen. I sat with that feeling for a long time before I was willing to name it out loud, even to myself, let alone to you.

That is not who I want to be. That is not the man who has taught you, and this congregation that every human being is created b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God.

I am not him.

And yet for a long while after that terrible day, that is exactly who I was.

I am telling you this because of what it taught me, not because I am proud of it. What it taught me is that real hatred does not most of the time feel hot. It feels cold. And it never stays contained to the person we aimed it at. It sits inside us, quietly, and slowly kills something within us.

I am not being poetic. I mean it the way the research means it. Hatred rarely punishes the person we aim it at. Most of the time, they never know it's there.

It punishes, almost exclusively, the one carrying it. How does the famous saying go? Hatred is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.

Hatred sat in my soul for a long time, like poison, killing me slowly until I decided I have to detox from it. And I did, and it's possible-not easy but possible. At the end of the day, it comes down to looking at yourself in the mirror and deciding what kind of person you want to be.

And today, I want to make myself, and you, this promise. I never want to hate anyone again in my life, and I never want you to either.

So let me ask you a hard question, but an important one. Do you hate someone? Is there a name that comes to mind right now, one you have never said out loud, not even to yourself?

Please take a moment to make the distinction between anger and hate.

Aristotle taught that hatred can be aimed at an entire class of people you have never met. It requires no personal injury at all, only membership in the wrong group. And hatred does not cool with time or an apology, because what it wants is not repair. It wants the other to simply cease to exist, in the argument, in the room, in the world.

Anger, on the other hand, is aimed at a specific person, provoked by a specific act, and cools once the debt feels paid, once an apology is offered or enough time has passed. You can be furious at someone you love deeply. Anger does not require you to stop seeing the person whole. Anger is not the opposite of love. It can even be a way of showing that you care.

We tend to confuse the two because we think hatred is simply anger at its hottest, anger that finally boiled over. It's the opposite. Anger runs hot, and hot things burn out. Hatred runs cold, and cold things settle in and stay.

Judaism does not ask us to suppress anger. The rabbis called it positive anger, or educational anger, anger used on purpose to correct, to protect, to resolve. But anger left unaddressed does not simply pass. It cools, and once it cools, it hardens into hatred.

Tom, that afternoon, you didn't really hate me, you were angry at me, and I'm glad you took it out and confronted me instead of letting it become something colder.

The Torah teaches this point very clearly.

In Leviticus 19, the portion we read later this afternoon, God gives us a strange sequence of instructions, almost like directions for exactly this moment in history.

Lo tisna et achicha bilvavecha, you shall not hate your brother in your heart.

Immediately, in the very next breath, hocheach tochiach et amitecha, you must surely rebuke your neighbor.

Only then, v'ahavta l'reacha kamocho, love your neighbor as yourself.

Read carefully, these are not three unrelated rules stacked together. It is a path.

Torah is telling us that the opposite of hatred is not silence, and it is certainly not avoidance. It is honesty. If something your neighbor or friend did wounds you, Torah does not ask you to swallow it and let it curdle in some dark corner of your heart until it hardens into something else. It asks you to say it, directly, to the person's face, before it metastasizes into hatred.

Love, in this reading, is not the absence of conflict. It is what conflict looks like when we refuse to let it calcify into hatred.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, spent much of his later writing warning about this pattern. He taught that political and religious violence rarely begins with a raised fist or a declaration of war.

It begins earlier, in language, the moment we stop calling someone who disagrees with us wrong and start calling them evil, no longer a citizen but an enemy who no longer deserves a seat at our table. Someone has already stopped seeing that person as fully human, Sacks argued, and everything that follows becomes possible only after that.

So here is the question that matters to me most this year. If hatred does this much damage, to our hearts, to our cells, to our own capacity for joy, how do we actually put it down?

Torah already gave us the first step, the one I shared with you a few minutes ago.

Do not let it curdle in silence. Say it directly, to the person's face, while there is still a chance for your words to become a bridge instead of a wall.

That is step one, and it is not optional.

But there is a second step, and for that I want to tell you about a woman named Eva Mozes Kor.

As a child, Eva and her twin sister Miriam survived Auschwitz, where Doctor Josef Mengele used them, and hundreds of other twins, in his medical experiments. Decades later, Eva became known around the world for a decision almost no one could understand. She stood publicly, more than once, and said, I forgive the Nazis. Not because they deserved it, she was clear about that, and she spent much of her life still fighting to see Nazi war criminals held accountable in court.

She forgave, she explained, because she deserved to live the rest of her life without the weight of hatred sitting on her chest.

Forgiveness, for Eva Kor, was never a gift to the people who tortured her, it was the gift she finally gave herself, the day she decided their power over her would end.

I remember sitting with her story, feeling almost embarrassed. If a woman who survived Mengele's table could find her way to saying I do not hate them, what exactly was my excuse?

I have never suffered anything close to the suffering of those in Gaza, nothing close to what she suffered. And yet there I was, letting a hatred I never asked for take up residence in my own chest, for free, rent included.

So, I decided to cast it out of my heart. And I did.

But if I want to be fully honest with you, letting go of hate was not only about October 7th. It was also for things far less horrific but no less significant, painful, and personal, in my day to day life.

Like the divorce from your mother. I want to use this opportunity, on this sacred day, to ask your forgiveness. Even though we did our best to separate amicably - there were times you were exposed to angry and even hateful words. Anger and hate don't only hurt the person who holds on to them, it can also hurt those they love most who stand nearby.

And for far too long I carried hatred after being betrayed by colleagues I trusted and had invested so much in. It took me a long time to realize I was hurting myself by wasting time and energy on that hatred even though nothing could be repaired.

And, I carried hatred toward congregants we all considered to be friends who without any explanation, said and did things that felt as if I was stabbed in the back.

Without noticing, over the past few years, hatred found its way and settled in my heart as well, and I felt the harm it was causing, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, and I made the decision, no more. I want to choose Eva Kor over Marcus Eriz every single day.

I am making this choice for you, my beloved children. I am making it for you, my dear congregation. But even more so, I am making it for myself, for my heart, for my soul, so that I can be the best father, the best Rabbi, and the best version of myself.

So here, my children is my promise to you on this Yom Kippur, the holiest day of our year, when we stand before God seeking forgiveness and the chance to become someone slightly better.

And I promise you that whatever happens in this election, and the next one, and the one after that, I will not let it turn me into

someone who sees his opponents as villains rather than as human beings first. I promise to do all I can so that this year we vote our values without losing our neighbors, argue our convictions without losing our humanity, and disagree with our whole hearts without ever, even quietly, wishing another person out of existence.

I promise to keep telling the difference between being angry, which is allowed, which our own prophets modeled for us again and again, which is sometimes even holy, and hating, which is never allowed, no matter how justified it feels in the moment. And whenever anger rightfully comes, I promise to let it be in service of love and never let it ferment in its place.

I promise to find the courage to rebuke someone directly instead of hating them silently, because our own Torah taught me, long before any doctor or researcher could, that the path to love runs through honest confrontation, never around it.

I promise not to mistake the coldness of contempt for the clarity of conviction. The next time I feel that coldness in my chest, wanting someone to simply vanish from the argument rather than be answered in it, I will stop and ask myself one honest question: is this the fire of someone still willing to listen, despite our disagreements, or the ice of someone who has already decided the other side isn't worth arguing with?

And I will end with one last promise and another four-letter word.

I will always, always love love love you, more than words can ever proclaim.

Aba