

In a World of Hate

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So, Liana just got her driver's license. As with most parents, it feels like yesterday that we were just trying to navigate how to bike-ride around the neighborhood while avoiding traffic. Now Liana is the traffic. When Liana first got behind the wheel, we took the advice of friends and made our way over to the Coca Cola bottling plant here in Needham where traffic is relatively light. After creating a simple circular route, we carefully made our way. Not accustomed to sitting in the passenger seat (Yes, I'm one of those drivers.)....I watched closely as Liana set her foot on the brake, started the car...and slowly made her way. Haltingly she glided into each turn....and developed a feel for just when to accelerate and when to let up on the gas. She learned how to park. And, importantly, she learned how to respond to the other drivers around her.....

Recently....during one of my own highway treks, I discovered what was clearly a 'vintage Boston' bumper sticker. It said: "Don't get upset. Just drive like I do." It spoke succinctly to the well-earned reputation of Boston as being the epicenter of aggressive driving. Indeed, to drive successfully in Boston is considered a badge of honor. At first, the bumper sticker made me smile. But then....as I drove farther along....my mind wandered as it often does when I am behind the wheel. I moved from thoughts of aggression on our roadways....to thoughts about the rising tide of anger in our societal-ways.

By now, the headlines of hate are so commonplace that we run the risk of being desensitized to them.

This summer, in southern California, a 91-year old man from Mexico was beaten by a woman shouting that he should go back to his own country. According to news reports, when others saw what was happening, inexplicably, some of them joined in to attack the man. "Don't get upset....Just drive like I do."

Also this summer, in Illinois, a woman wearing a red, white, and blue T-shirt with the words: "Puerto Rico" on it was accosted by a man who shouted that – quote - she shouldn't be wearing that shirt in the United States of America. The incident – captured by the woman on her cell phone – continued with the man demanding to know whether she was a US citizen....of course not realizing that residents of Puerto Rico are US citizens.

According to Vox.com...over the past several months a new genre of news coverage has emerged. It is called: "Living While Black" and it relays the increasing number of incidents of people dialing 911 to report people of color who are engaged in everyday acts – like napping in a public place....or sitting at Starbucks.....or mowing the lawn.

One year after the chants of Charlottesville – frustratingly....frighteningly.....the echoes of hatred not only reverberate across the country, but they grow louder. The Anti-Defamation League – one of our country’s most reliable organizations for monitoring and mobilizing to fight extremist behavior – has reported a significant increase in US hate crimes over the past several months. Massachusetts alone – since 2016 – has seen a rise of 30% in such incidents.....including the scrawling of racist graffiti here in Needham.

And it’s not just here at home. Around the world we are witnessing a rising tide of intolerance.

Last year, in Germany – a country that, given its Nazi past, has been exceedingly vigilant regarding hate groups – the far right Alternative for Germany (the AfD) received 13% of the vote in national elections – making it the first far-right political party to hold power in the Bundestag in decades. Several days ago, in Chemnitz – a town of 250,000 people – an angry mob numbering over 8,000 – including both extreme right wing party members and many ordinary German citizens - marched through the streets brandishing Nazi salutes.....chanting.....and perhaps most disturbingly, as described by eyewitnesses: gathered ‘in wild packs’ to chase after immigrants.

Italy now has a far-right governing coalition. Denmark has created what it actually calls “ghettos” to house poorer Muslim families – requiring that quote: “ghetto children” – be removed from their families beginning at the age of 1 - for 25 hours per week so that they can learn Danish ways and Christian values. The persecution of the Rohingya by the government of Myanmar continues and has been deemed an active genocide by the United Nations.

Last October, a group of us from Temple Beth Shalom travelled to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. We did so to explore the region’s rich history and the Holocaust, as well as to meet Jewish community leaders and residents. Our safety while there was never in question. It was, however, striking, to see throughout the Hungary’s countryside political billboards vividly vilifying the Hungarian born, Jewish philanthropist George Soros. Such placards are a far from subtle Anti-Semitic strategy of Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his Fidesz party. Just this past March, Orban was quoted as saying: “We are fighting an enemy that is different from us....not open, but hiding; not honest, but base; not national but international; (it) does not believe in working but speculates with money; does not have its own homeland but feels it owns the whole world.”

In country after country..... the trop is the same: Anti-Immigrant....Anti-Muslim....Anti-Semitic....Animus inspired by race....Ideologies that direct hatred toward “others” who supposedly threaten the quote-unquote “purity” of a given nation’s population.

As noted Stanford University political scientist Frances Fukuyama has noted: “What you’re seeing now is really insidious, because it’s coming from within democracies.....(It is) a new type of threat that I don’t really think we’ve seen in my lifetime.”

For Jews, these are intensely familiar messages.and with an eye toward Jewish collective historical experience, our rabbis created a name for such hatred. It is called: Sinat Chinam.

We read it annually as part of our High Holy Day liturgy:

Al Cheit Shechatanu L'fanecha b'Sinat Chinam.

It is our way of seeking forgiveness for the personal acts of malice and prejudice that we may have committed during the past year.

Importantly, “Sinat Chinam” is not just any kind of hatred. In Hebrew, the word “Sin’ah” --- just as it’s snake-sounding “SSSS” suggests – means “Hatred.” The additional word: “Chinam” is a qualifier. On its own, “Chinam” means “free.” But in this case it means: “free from specific reason related to the object of anger.” “Sinat Chinam,” according to our rabbis, is a hatred that is all-the-more toxic because it is, as it were, baseless....grounded in nothing.

Sociologists and commentators tell us that one reason for the rise in hatred that we are experiencing is the dramatic and rapid changes taking place all around us. Thomas Friedman cogently describes this dynamic and its challenging effects in his book: Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide for Thriving in the Age of Accelerations. Here, Friedman highlights the rapid shifts taking place – concurrently - in the realm of technology.....through globalization.....and in changes to our climate.....and he notes how all of these are adding to our societal angst and uncertainty.

In technology, for example, Friedman notes that since late 2006 we have seen an explosion in advancement – radically changing the ways that we live. In just the past 12 years we have seen the emergence of the iPhone, Facebook, and Twitter. Between 2007 and 2014 – largely due to the revolutionary success of the iPhone - mobile traffic on AT&T’s national wireless network increased 100,000 percent. The capacity for computer storage has exploded. And we have seen exponentially faster and more efficient processors – enabling even greater innovation in every sphere of life.

But, as positive as many of these technological advancements have been, as Friedman points out....they have also been extraordinarily disruptive. With a dramatically shifting market place many people are finding themselves left behind – leading to a rise in resentment. Skill acquisition – something once achieved during one’s years in school and intended to last a lifetime – now requires constant lifelong learning in order to keep up with the rate of development. With the ability to communicate so far out in front of our ability to manage it, we are dealing with the new challenge of how to respond to the easy dissemination of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news – as well as their toxic effects. And with communication now reaching practically every corner of the world, new cultural ideas and expectations are being spread far and wide. Some populations who are either not ready for some of these changes or who simply don’t agree with them – are pushing back – causing unrest in a

number of communities and countries.

At the same time, as Friedman notes, increasing global temperatures are adversely affecting farming, food production, and access to adequate water resources. This, in turn, is putting added pressure on more poverty-stricken societies in regions like Africa and the Middle East....frequently sparking unrest, civil war.....and leading to increased migration.

In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: “Bad things happen when the pace of change exceeds our ability to change, and events move faster than our understanding. It is then that (people) feel the loss of control over (their) lives.”

Traditionally, Rosh Hashanah is our time to reclaim control over the lives that we are living....and to consider how we, as individuals, might contribute to society’s greater good.

It is a message that is echoed in our calendar. According to the Talmud, Sinat Chinam was so widespread amongst the Jewish community in the first century CE that not only the Great Temple but also all of Jerusalem were destroyed by the Romans. Each year, traditionally, we mark this catastrophe on the holy day known as Tisha B’Av. And, as such, Tisha B’Av has come to represent the dire consequences of an unrelenting hatred arising amongst people.

Our rabbis, however, always made sure through their teachings to include a message of hope. Rosh Hashanah....they noted.....comes precisely seven weeks after Tisha B’Av. And so, they decreed that these seven weeks would be a time to reflect upon messages of consolation and comfort. In Judaism, as we know, seven is a number of creation and wholeness. And so this period between Tisha B’Av and Rosh Hashanah was declared to be a time of ascent – an opportunity to reflect upon how we might move ourselves and our world from the malice of Tisha B’Av to the peace and compassion at the heart of Rosh Hashanah.

Abraham, the Biblical personality upon whom we focus so much of our attention this day is perhaps best known for the ways in which he extended himself to others. Most famously, in the Book of Genesis, we learn of how – one day - Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of day. Looking up, he noticed three strangers off in the distance. Without hesitation or second thought, according to the text, Abraham lifted himself up and rushed out to greet them. He brought them back to his tent where he and Sarah offered them food and drink. In the Torah, these three men are described as having been angels. But Abraham didn’t know this. In the story, though he saw men....he treated them like angels. It is a perfect example of one who lives – as noted in the book of Psalms – as “Rofei l’shuv’rei lev....u’M’chabeish l’atz’votam” --- one who is a “healer of the broken hearted and one who binds the wounds of others.” It is perhaps the reason that Abraham is also described by the rabbis as “Av-Rechem” – “A father of divine compassion.”

It is a trait, particularly on Rosh Hashanah, that each of us is called upon to cultivate in our own lives.

Sebastian Junger is a bestselling author, editor, and award-winning journalist. He tells the following story:

“In the fall of 1986, just out of college, I set out to hitchhike across the northwestern part of the United States. I’d hardly ever been west of the Hudson river, and in my mind what waited for me out in Dakota and Wyoming and Montana was not only real America but the real me as well. I’d grown up in a Boston suburb where people’s homes were set behind deep hedges or protected by huge yards and neighbors hardly knew each other.....(And so there I was just) outside Gillette, Wyoming, one morning in late October 1986, with my pack leaned against the guardrail and an interstate map in my back pocket.

Semis rattled over the bridge spacers and hurtled on toward the Rockies a hundred miles away. Pickup trucks passed with men in them who turned to stare as they went by.....In my pack I had a tent and (all of my camping supplies)...And then I saw a man walking toward me up the on-ramp from town.

From a distance I could see that he wore a quilted old canvas union suit and carried a black lunch box. I took my hands out of my pockets and turned to face him. He walked up and stood there studying me. His hair was wild and matted and his union suit was shiny with filth and grease at the thighs. He didn’t look unkindly but I was young and alone and I watched him like a hawk. He asked me where I was headed.

‘California,’ I said. He nodded.

‘How much food you got?’ he asked.

I thought about this. I had plenty of food – along with all the rest of my gear – and he obviously didn’t have much. I’d give food to anyone who said he was hungry, but I didn’t want to get robbed, and that’s what seemed was about to happen.

‘Oh, I just got a little cheese,’ I lied. I stood there, ready, but he just shook his head.

‘You can’t get to California on just a little cheese,’ he said. ‘You need more than that.’

The man said that he lived in a broken-down car and that every morning he walked three miles to a coal mine outside of town to see if they needed fill-in work. Some days they did, some days they didn’t, and this was one of the days that they didn’t. ‘So I won’t be needing this,’ he said, opening his black lunch box. ‘I saw you from town and just wanted to make sure you were okay.’

The lunch box contained a bologna sandwich, an apple, and a bag of potato chips. The food had probably come from a local church. I had no choice but to take it. I thanked him and put the food in my pack for later and wished him luck. Then he turned and made his way back down the on-ramp toward Gillette.”

Junger concludes.....“I thought about that man for the rest of my trip. I thought about him for the rest of my life. He’d been generous, yes, but lots of people are generous; what made him different was the fact that he’d taken responsibility for me. He’s spotted me from town and walked a half mile out onto a highway to make sure I was okay....”

Abraham’s spirit – the spirit of one who is an “Av-Rechem” – can be found everywhere. Parent to an entire people – Abraham recognized that making widespread change meant starting personally....with a single encounter of grace. As writer Robert Hall notes: “The truth is that relationships are the most valuable and value-creating resource of any society. They are our lifelines to survive....grow....thrive. New York Times columnist David Brooks says it perhaps most directly: “There is no way to repair national distrust without repairing relationships one by one. This – he says – is where American renewal begins.”

It is this essential idea that inspired Temple Beth Shalom’s creation of the Chamberlain Interfaith Fellowship. It was started four years ago thanks to the leadership and vision of Beth Shalom members David and Sydney Feldman. The fellowship is named for Dr. Ted Chamberlain – of blessed memory – a close friend of David’s who served for years as a dean at Eastern University – a Christian-based university just outside Philadelphia.

Each year, the Chamberlain Fellowship brings together a new cohort of four TBS high school juniors and seniors and four sophomores from Eastern. A number of the Eastern students have shared that the fellowship was the first time that they had ever interacted with someone who is Jewish.

Throughout the year, the students explore Judaism and Christianity – the commonalities and the differences. They are led by faculty from both Eastern and TBS and they participate in two site visits – with the Eastern University students coming to TBS in the fall....and our TBS fellows travelling to Eastern in the spring. When together....the students learn about....question....and experience each other’s faith traditions as lived on campus....and in our congregation.

In addition to a healthy amount of socializing....the fellows also volunteer together on a social action project. New friendships are made.....and, through this personal encounter....perspectives shaped.

Jessica Nielsen, a recent participant from Eastern, reflected honestly upon her experience in the Chamberlain program in a blog post. She wrote:

“I...wrestle(d) with how much I ought to express my disagreements.....Still, I cannot help but share what was, for me, the most beautiful engagement of the entire weekend.”

She continued: “On the last night before we returned to Eastern, I found myself sitting next to Rahel Block, the coordinator of the event from Temple Beth Shalom, and Anthony Barr, one of my counterparts from Eastern. Rahel is Jewish, and identifies as part of the LGBTQ community. Anthony is an adopted, African-American Roman Catholic. I, in turn am Caucasian, and a convert to Eastern Orthodoxy.

Over the course of a number of hours, the three of us had very intense debates on the nature of sexuality, sexual ethics, the ends of marriage, the nature of parenthood, the good of adoption, legislating virtue, the nature of freedom, and much more. We would ask each other a question, and listen intently as the others shared their thoughts, our eyes often wide with surprised as we realized just how drastically we disagreed. The conversation was, perhaps surprisingly, full of laughter and smiles, as the three of us realized that each person was deeply thoughtful, incredibly courageous, and marvelously beautiful.”

Jessica continued.....“I found myself thinking of what C.S. Lewis once wrote: ‘There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal...It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit...’ By seriously engaging in intense debate, I had been confronted with the beautiful humanity of these others. We did not agree. Yet it was by taking them seriously and believing that their thoughts were worthy of response that the most beautiful friendships began to emerge.”

She concluded.....“Real friendship is hard, especially when entire traditions separate us from a shared vision of the good. Yet my experience with the Jewish Chamberlain Fellows, and my conversation with Rahel and Anthony, has taught me that people are worth knowing, and knowing fully. They are worth sharing with, they are worth spending time with, they are worth disagreeing with, and they are worth loving.”

Reading Jessica’s words, I couldn’t help but be reminded of the teaching by the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. who said: “Love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals.”

Rosh Hashanah is the time when we are asked to rediscover the power of compassion and understanding born out of love. In bold defiance of today’s rise in societal Sinat Chinam....we are called upon – in the spirit of Abraham – to pursue relationships that foster authentic connection...to turn away from our screens and turn towards othersencountering them “punem to punem” – “face to face” - and embracing our shared humanity. Only together, in this way, can we help – one encounter at a time – to help build a world of peace.

Liana was born less than two weeks before the September 11th terror attacks. During my Rosh Hashanah sermon that year I asked aloud: “What kind of a world has she been born into? What will her future be?” ---- This year, I find myself asking the same questions.....for all of us....for all of our children....and our grandchildren.

A Jewish answer is always one of hope...and potential. The world will be what we will make of it.

May we find the courage and strength to always stand up for the oppressed and vulnerable.
May each of us, in the coming year, actively seek out new opportunities to engage with people from different backgrounds.....beliefs.....ethnicities....and ways of life.
And may we be inspired by the knowledge that – through our compassion - each one of us has the ability to transform the life of another human being.....and together....the life of the world.

Amen.