FEAR AND HATE

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Also available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7Di4JKHYF0

Over the past few weeks when I met with congregants in my office I often began the conversation by asking them how their summer was? For the first few weeks of September, as we enjoyed uncharacteristically warm and dry weather, clear blue skies and bright sunny days – nearly every person responded to my question with an admonition, "Don't use the past tense, summer isn't over yet."

I get it, having now lived here for a year, I know how precious these few months of sunshine and summer truly are; I dread the grey wet days ahead. But I must tell you, I could not wait for ***this*** summer to be over.

This was the summer of the horrendous kidnapping and murder of three teenage boys, Gil-Ad, Eyal, Naftali, and the revenge killing -- condemned throughout Israel -- of the young Palestinian boy Muhammad. This was the summer that Palestinian children were once again used as human shields by their sadistic leaders, who seem to want only the deaths of innocents on both sides.

This was the summer that young Jewish boys died to defend an ancient but seemingly impossible dream, *l'hitot am hosfshi bartzenu*, to be a free people in our own land. One of these young men, Max Steinberg, went to preschool at my former congregation in Los Angeles. "Children are being sacrificed again upon the altar," Elie Wiesel cried out from the pages of the NY Times, and we cried with him.

This was the summer of rockets and terror tunnels. Tunnels dug to attack, kill, and kidnap Israelis soldiers and civilians. Targeted from above by rocket fire - more than 150 a day; and below by terrorists literally burrowing under the fence – a nation living in constant fear, with only 15 seconds warning to get to the shelter, if there is warning at all. Fear that in spite of all their preparations, their readiness, their strength, in spite of the best defenses, the best army in the world, something could still get through. The smallest crack in the Iron Dome could bring down all we have built, our hopes and dreams.

But it wasn't only a nation that lived in fear; once again it was Jews around the world. This was the summer the mobs howled for vengeance, the rocks and bottles raining down on the synagogue walls as the worshippers huddled inside.
It was a scene from Europe in the 1930s – except this was Paris in the summer of 2014.

This summer URJ Camp Kalsman gave out t-shirts with a giant Jewish star on the front (hold up shirt) and I had to think twice about letting my kids wear them when we walked downtown, because I feared it wasn't safe to be a Jew.

This was a summer of terror. This was a summer of fear.

The sages teach: “Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.” Ok, that wasn’t a talmudic quote, it’s from Yoda in Star Wars, but his insight mirrors those of the rabbis.

“Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.”

“When fear gives way to anger it is all too possible to rationalize kidnapping three Jewish teenagers and executing them at point-blank range, or forcing a shy-looking Palestinian boy to drink gasoline and then burning him alive. In the escalating violence between the groups, atrocities become ‘necessary acts of war’ or ‘vengeful justice.’”[i]

Anger does have its uses. It is certainly an appropriate response to the kidnapping of young boys, the murder of innocents. There is something comforting in the tenor of anger; it caps the bottomlessness of grief by bringing direction and focus. When there is no consolation, anger supplies a reasoned response to pain.[ii]

But I worry about the direction the anger takes us: where does anger go? For when anger boils over it gives way to hate, and hate changes you.

This summer, Major General (Ret) Avigdor Kahalani, one of Israel’s greatest war heroes, a veteran of the Six Day War, The Yom Kippur War and the First Lebanon War, rode out in a jeep to speak to the young soldiers of an IDF unit, preparing to go into Gaza as the ground campaign was about commence.

The young soldiers of the IDF gathered around him, they leaned in close as he spoke in a hushed and somber tone befitting the enormity of the moment on the eve of yet another war, for yet another generation.

The General began:
“We never taught you to hate. Not this army, not the Israel Defense Forces. We never taught you to hate. And there are armies in the world who do that. And maybe it works to a degree; maybe by hating the enemy, you are a fiercer fighter. I don’t know. But we never taught you that. And I’ll tell you why: if we teach you to hate, you can’t undo that. You’ll come back from the war and it won’t be the ‘enemy’; it will be your brother in law, or your neighbor or your former friend. Once you teach people to hate, they’ll find someone to hate. So we never taught you that.”

Hatred is neither crazy nor insane. It is a condition to which every one of us is susceptible, both individually and collectively. As such, a moral life, a moral society, and a moral universe is one which takes responsibility to ensure that hatred and its by-products racism and bigotry, is attacked and destroyed before it leads to suffering.

Our Torah, time and again, admonishes us to stay far away from hate for it is destructive to its core.

The problem of what hate is doing to us was crystalized for me this summer when I read a review of a new book by noted Israeli sociologist Idan Yaron and his colleague educator Yoram Harpaz. Their book, Scenes from School Life, is a three-year study of racism among secular Israeli High School students. It is a hard and troubling read and to be completely honest, I am hesitant to share it with you this morning because it is an ugly side of modern Israel, and of growing hatred in Jewish communities around the world. But if these High Holy Days are about anything, they are about *Hesbone Hanefesh* examining our soul, individually and as a people. And Jewish souls are filling with hate.

The book begins with the following statement from a grade 10 girl in a secular high school in central Israel:

"For me, personally, Arabs are something I can't look at and can't stand." She continued, *"I am tremendously racist. I come from a racist home. If I get the chance in the army to shoot one of them, I won't think twice. I'm ready to kill someone with my hands, and it's an Arab. In my education I learned that ... their education is to be terrorists, and there is no belief in them. I live in an area of Arabs, and every day I see these Ishmaelites, who pass by the [bus] station and whistle. I wish them death."*

I read that and I was stunned, just like you are now – is this who we have become? No it's not, but then yes it is, for some of us. It's one study, it's authoritative, it's scholarly, and its findings concur with those of the head of the Israeli Ministry of Education Shai Piron, who issued the following statement to all Israeli school children at the start of the school year a few weeks ago:

"Last summer shook us all. It touched on questions of personal and national identity, revealing the beauty of the solidarity of the Israeli people. But last summer also revealed manifestations of ugliness, hatred and racism. We will do everything to fight them. We dedicate the first week of school as well as the school year to addressing the scourge of racism and talking with students about the aspects of tolerance, acceptance of others and the eradication of racism in our society."[iii]

Israel is taking the rise of hatred and racism seriously and so should we.

When the young hold views more racist and bigoted than the generation before, we begin to see the problem. Yaron and Harpaz's descriptions throughout their three-year study, and Minister Piron's letter to students reveals that such hatred is becoming a basic element among more and more Israeli youth, and a key component of their identity.

"It is easy to be horrified when an innocent 16-year-old is burned alive. But it is the more mundane forms of racism that must be combated, [like those of the girl in grade 10] if we are to prevent the next sadistic murder. In every nation there are individuals who can and do commit such acts. It is our responsibility to make sure that they do not find legitimacy for their barbarism in the public sphere."[iv]

"Do not hate your fellow in your heart," the Torah commands us.

It's not easy. **Hate** is easy.

If someone has done us harm, it is natural to feel anger, hate. What then are we to do in order to fulfill the command, "Do not hate your brother in your heart"? The Torah's answer: Speak. Converse. Challenge. Remonstrate. We can do all of that, we just can't hate because hate leads to suffering; to revenge killings, to the vandalism of Price Tag Attacks, to lawlessness.

In May of this past year, Nobel laureate Elie Weisel organized an international conference on hate in Oslo, Norway. The glittering list of invited participants included four Presidents and Prime Ministers, and 70 writers, scientists and academics.

The two questions that shaped their deliberations were, "Why do people hate?" and "Why do people band together to express hatred?" Although the speeches were beautiful and the resolutions were firm, the entire event was fairly predictable, except for their primary conclusion, which seems so at odds with common sense.

Ask anyone what the opposite of hate is, and they will tell you it's L-O-V-E. But the consensus of these most accomplished, powerful and thoughtful people was that, "Only the belief in and execution of the L-A-W can defeat hatred."

The opposite of hate is LAW. For millennia Judaism has taught that law is the indispensable expression of love and decency. "A people abandons law at the peril of their own character, justice and survival,"[v] wrote Rabbi Brad Artson.

The greatest example of this is the Torah itself, the very word Torah means Law.

The root of the word Torah comes from the letters Yud-Raish-Hey, which are also two of the same root letters of the Hebrew word for Fear, יִרְאָה (Yirah) Yud-Raish-Aleph. The difference between the two is the letter HEY and the letter ALEPH. We know the power of the HEY it was letter added to Abram and Sarai's name to connect them with God. HEY is the name of God it represents justice and holiness. Aleph as you will recall is a silent letter. Thus, all that is necessary for fear to conquer law and for hate to then take root in a people or in a society is for there to be silence.

Too often we are guilty of silence when it comes to Israel. I was almost guilty of this as well, as I questions if I had the courage to deliver a sermon on this topic. We don't talk about the hard things, the troubling truths, the reality of what sixty-seven-plus years of war is doing to us as a people, what it is doing to the dream of Zionism. Slowly by slowly, it is breaking us down.

I love Israel, I support Israel, I dream of Israel – and because I love, support and dream of Israel, I worry about Israel. I worry that it will be attacked from without, but I

worry just as much that it will erupt from within. Let the IDF, let the politicians, let the negotiators focus on our enemies. Right now, I am worried about *us*.

I worry that the rule of law, of moral law, of a law that aspires to fulfill the Zionist dream that Israel and the Jewish people be a light unto the nations, a nation greater, more just, more righteous, more lawful than any on earth will be defeated by the power of hate.

I was in Israel just before Yitzhak Rabin was shot. I remember. Do you remember? For a moment we thought peace was possible, maybe even probable. And then peace was dead, and so was the man. Killed not by *them*, but by one of *us*. I remember all to well the wild fear of the unknown, the boiling anger that filled the streets and gave rise to the hatred, the act of vengeance.

The last time Jews had sovereignty in our own land it was destroyed not by an invading army but by *sinat chinam /* senseless hatred between human beings (brothers). When will we learn? When will we learn that all hatred is senseless, more than senseless -- it is corrosive and destructive? That doesn't negate our moral obligation and our sworn duty to defend Israel and the Jewish people, it just means that we must do it out of righteousness; not hate; within the law, not acting above the law.

Let me say it plain, the only reason the Jewish people ever have any unified support, whether from other Jews or from the vast peace-seeking majority of the rest of the world, is the ***justness*** of our cause. Lose that and we lose our soul. We have a right to a national homeland, and a right to defend it with every means necessary, even with guns and power. It is the place where our ancestors walked, where a new generation of modern Jews, extraordinary Jews, the likes of which the world had never before seen, Israelis - have fought and died so that the hope of two thousand years could finally be realized. But once we start becoming bigots, once we let hate compromise law, we lose the moral high ground, the righteousness of our cause, and the soul of our people.

In Deuteronomy 23, a parasha we read just two weeks ago in shul, Moses issues a law, he commands the people saying, "Do not despise the Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land." (Deut. 23:8)

This is an extraordinary statement by Moses. The Egyptians enslaved the Israelites, planned a program against them of slow genocide, and then refused to let them go despite the plagues that were devastating the land. And still Moses commands them, the law demands of them that they do not hate the Egyptians.

If the people continued to hate their one-time oppressors, Moses would have taken the Israelites out of Egypt but would have failed to take Egypt out of the Israelites. They would still be slaves, not physically but psychologically. They would be slaves to the past, held captive by the chains of resentment, unable to build the future. To be free, you have to let go of hate; you have to set aside fear. That is a difficult truth but a necessary one.

Do not forget the past, but do not be held captive by it. Be willing to fight your enemies but never allow yourself to be defined by them or become like them. Acknowledge the evil men do, but stay focused on the good that is in our power to do. Only in that way do we raise the moral sights of humankind and help redeem the world we share. Only in that way are the words of the prophet fulfilled, "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a mighty stream!" (Amos 5:24)

We can't be haters. It's not who we are, who we are commanded to be. We can't be silent because of fear, fear of being critical. And as your Rabbi I can't be silent. If someone in your family was doing something destructive, was wrapped up in the arms of hate, wouldn't you tell them, try to help them?

Like Moses commanded: let got of the hate, it's not who we are. We have to take the High School students and the other radicals and tell them they are wrong, they are not behaving as Jews, they are not behaving as Israelis. Hate leads to suffering, and the soul of Israel, of the Zionist dream, of the Israel I love, is suffering with hate.

Yes there are dangers out there, and we must be awake to them, but the far greater danger is that we succumb to fear and hatred. That we allow ourselves to be dragged into the pit and the mire of the very thing we were commanded to prevent: the senseless hatred, the *sinat chinam* that has been the undoing of humanity and the Jewish people time and again.

But not this time, not again.

"I am not a dreamer, nor do I romanticize our enemy. I am fully awake to the fact that there is a yearning among many to destroy our people and to destroy the land of Israel. However, knowing all this, I must not forget, we cannot forget that every human being is created in the image of God and has potential for moral renewal, to change, to seek as Proverbs proclaims, "ways of peace and paths of pleasantness."[vi] (Proverbs 3:17)

Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering. But we can change, that's what these holy days are all about. Now is the time for change, before it's too late, before hate changes us.

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[i] Shlomit Harrosh, Against the Racism of Fear - Shalom Hartman Institute July 15, 2014
[ii] Danielle Berrin, The Martyrdom of Steven Sotloff, Los Angeles Jewish Journal September 16, 2014
[iii] "Israeli students to talk about Gaza operation at beginning of school year", Jewish Telegraph Agency, August 19, 2014
[iv] Shlomit Harrosh, Against the Racism of Fear - Shalom Hartman Institute July 15, 2014
[v] Rabbi Bradley Artson, Love Is Not The Opposite Of Hate; Law Is
[vi] Rabbi Prof. David Hartman, Do Not Invoke Amalek Lightly, December 3, 2008