A TALE OF TWO VIDEOS
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When I started to think about this sermon last week it was going to be about the Temple Judea High Holy Day Video we released, Call Your Zeyde. My plan was to share the truly heart warming and inspiring comments and feedback we have received from around the world. The video has gone viral with more than 22,000 views as of this morning, has been reposted by the Reform Movement and the Jewish Telegraph Agency and was featured this morning on the front page of the Daily News.

I was going to talk about the power of our little video to bring people together. Emails that I received from orthodox Jews in Israel who can't stop playing the song with their children. One orthodox Jew who wrote, "even though we don't agree about much in Judaism we can certainly agree to call our grandparents on Rosh Hashanah." That's a pretty low bar of agreement I will admit but it's a start and I'll take it in the spirit it was offered. Besides, agreements come as the result of dialog, and anybody with whom you can have a dialog can be communicated with in the future!

I wanted to share with you that colleagues of mine, Rabbis and Cantors who saw the video, say that it inspired them to make their own with their congregations. And most proudly I wanted to share a note we received from an elderly Jew in Florida who said his grandchildren called him out of the blue to play the video and wish him Happy New Year – he says he hadn't heard from them in 2 months.

Who would have thought our little YouTube would have such a big impact on so many? On so many THOUSANDS? Well I hoped it would but how can you know for sure if people will like what you like?

And then an amateurish hate-filled YouTube titled "Innocence of Muslims" was translated into Arabic and the Middle East erupted in violence once again. Western diplomatic missions are under siege, our Ambassador to Libya and members of his staff are murdered and US influence in a region that has vital economic and security interests for the US and Israel is further eroded.

Where our film was created to make fun and bring a little laughter to the Jewish world in the New Year – this film was designed to breed hatred. Created by a network of right-wing Christians with a history of animosity directed toward Muslims it was intended to debase and debunk Islam to an English speaking Christian audience. Then when translated into Arabic, and while we don't know who translated their purpose could only be to demean and enrage the Arab world.

You can't always know what people will like or find funny – but you can usually tell with 100% accuracy what they will find offensive.

I would say that the people who made this film should know better, but they knew exactly what they were doing, I think they even got what they wanted and more. They showed Fundamentalist Arab Radicals to be just that: Fundamentalist Arab Radicals. They uncovered seething Anti-American sentiments is a region where we have been engaged in overt and covert warfare for more than a decade. And they laid bare the weakness of US influence over newly installed revolutionary Islamic regimes in countries where we previously supported the same dictators the revolutionaries ousted at the point of a gun.

None of this is new or should be a surprise. Yes elements of the Arab world want to destroy America and Israel. They shout 'Death to America' and 'Death to Israel' and I take them at their word. What I don't understand, what frustrates and angers me is why these film makers are helping them achieve their goal?

And before you throw up the hand of Free Speech – let's talk about that.

Free speech is an integral part of a free society. Yet, like all freedoms, it requires responsibility and self-discipline in its exercise. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, in his famous Supreme Court opinion, declared that freedom of speech does not allow one to shout "fire" in a crowded theater where no fire exists. Thus, even this most free of all our freedoms, the right to say what we wish, must be subject to some limitations in order for society to function.

Judaism expects even more of us. Judaism is focused on obligations not rights. Which is why Torah and rabbinic law do not provide nearly the protections of free speech that are afforded in the US Constitution. Call it another challenge of being The Chosen People, but we are held, as we often are - to an even higher standard when it comes to what we say.

Speech is deemed the most powerful force in the Torah. With speech God created the world, with speech (and a few plagues) Moses freed the slaves, with speech God commanded the Torah. Speech and its appropriate use is a big deal in Judaism.

The limitations on speech fall under the category of Lashon Hara, evil speech. In the Torah *lashon hara*, is the reason Miriam is exiled from the community, and one of the reasons Moses is not allowed to enter the biblical land of Israel. Yes he hit the rock, but before he did that he called the people rebels and some commentators say it was that sin for which he was punished.

The Talmudic rabbis go as far as to say that slander, tale bearing, and evil talk are worse than the three cardinal sins of murder, immorality, and idolatry. Of one who indulges in *lashon hara* they say that he denies the existence of God, and that the Almighty declares "I and he cannot live in the same world" (Babylonian Talmud Arakhin 15b).

And so now the real pickle of the issue. Alan Dershowitz writing an Op-Ed piece for Haaretz, one of Israel's leading daily newspapers, writes:

"Religious fanatics who are easily offended by those outside of their religion who violate the rules of their religion cannot serve as censors in democratic societies. The threat or fear of violence should not become an excuse or justification for restricting freedom of speech."

And I agree with him – we should not allow the fear of violence to censor speech. Were that the case Martin Luther King Jr. would never have had a dream. Susan B Anthony would never have demanded the vote, and, and, and …

But there is a world of difference between those acts of valedictory courage and the patently stupid and blatantly offensive words and images of this YouTube film. By the Jewish standard of *l'shon hara* there is no excuse for their actions. As a Jew you cannot insult another person. You can speak truth to power, you can protest and petition; you can even take up arms to defend a just cause. But you can't just go around calling people names, that's just not allowed.

But Jewish Law aside, to use the first amendment to defend and protect the verbal equivalent intentionally kicking a hornets nest does a disservice to the principle that so many have risked their lives to preserve.

I do not excuse the acts of violence perpetrated by the Arab street on our diplomats or our embassies. But I similarly do not excuse, defend or protect the act of verbal violence perpetrated against them by this film. Both are wrong, both will only lead to more bloodshed, more violence. Neither makes America or Israel safer and that is my ultimate test.

Dershowitz concludes his article with the following:

"Individuals have the right to pick and choose which expressions to condemn, which to praise and which to say nothing about."

I condemn them both, the video and the riots. I blame them both, the video and the riots. And I understand them both, the video and the riots. They have reasons to hate us and we have reasons to hate them. But not the reasons in the YouTube video..

So, we learn yet again two lessons we already knew: words can do terrible harm and mindless violence still persists in this world. Our Temple was recently the producer of words that spread warmth and good across the world like a rainbow. With every word we speak, with every post in Twitter or Facebook or YouTube we each constantly make choices about what we will say or won't say. The Torah requires that we take these choices seriously. Everyone, ***EVERYONE*** knows that continuing this cycle of violence will never ultimately end in a more peaceful world. We have a

way to stop violence, an easy way, by not encouraging it, and by instead doing what we here at Temple Judea so recently demonstrated in our video.

And while we're leading the way, let's go ahead and take the message of our little video to its logical conclusion. Let's talk to each other. Let's use our freedom of speech to speak out against the violence of words ***and*** the violence of deeds. And then maybe everyone can start to listen.