

The Sin of *Sinat Hinam*, Senseless Hatred

As of last week, it seems that the much-discussed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran and six world powers has been settled in Congress- at least for now. For months we have been bombarded with commentaries, social media postings, articles, and webcasts weighing in on the issue in one way or another. If you had hoped that I too would weigh in on the topic in this forum, I am sorry to disappoint you (and you have to forgive me, it's Rosh Hashanah). And if you wanted me to refrain from mentioning Iran at all, because you are worn out from the discussion, I am also sorry to disappoint you (same forgiveness rule applies to you). I am happy to discuss my feelings with anyone who asks at another time, but when it comes to such a sensitive and divisive policy issue, on which I am not even close to an expert- the sanctity and serenity of this day is too great to be disturbed by something that might cause hateful bickering.

This then, is where I want to begin. I feel very strongly that the entire experience we have just been through in dealing with the Iran issue speaks to one of the greatest sins being perpetrated by Jews and non-Jews alike in today's world -- the sin of poisonous, vitriolic, and hateful speech that is divisive, dangerous, and completely counterproductive. Last month, the U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro received death threats, along with threatening letters and posts on Facebook, and was even called a "kapo" (if

you're not familiar with the term, Kapo refers to the Jews who were forced to work for the Nazis during the Holocaust).

And I am sure most of us have heard how just a few weeks ago, when Congressman Jerrold Nadler from New York, came out as the only Jew in the House of Representatives planning to vote for the deal, he was not only called a "Kapo" but people told him that he was, "a True Traitor to (his) people and the USA," and that, "The blood of Jews and Israel are on (his) hands."

This hateful speech has distressingly become the norm. The fact that the discourse on any controversial issue reliably devolves in this way is a sign that something is very wrong.

The rhetoric certainly influenced the public stance of the Reform movement on the Iran issue. Rather than take a particular political position, they chose to instead focus their public comments as follows:

When our people gather...for the High Holy Days, members who support the deal will pray alongside those who do not. If the harsh judgments and rhetoric continue between Washington and Jerusalem – and within our American Jewish community – we will be deprived of a deep commonality that binds our people together. Calling those who oppose the deal "war mongers" shuts shown constructive debate; calling those who support the deal "enablers of a second Holocaust"

ends thoughtful discourse.

(http://urj.org/about/union/pr/2015/?syspage=article&item_id=118381)

In other words, to go back to a truism from my childhood: *It is not what you say, but how you say it that matters.* My friends, I know I am not alone in feeling that these past few months have been extremely disheartening when it comes to the way that many people are speaking to one another when it comes to this Iran issue. And it has to stop. This is simply not the Jewish way to engage, speak, argue, tweet, post, or comment online.

Yes- there is extremism all around the world. And yes, we must take a stance to help rid the world of evils and fanatics such as ISIS, Hamas, Hezbollah, Boko Haram, etc. And yes, it is a Jewish value to hate evil. As Psalm 97, which we recite every Friday night, teaches: "Oh you who love the Lord, hate evil." But we must remember to direct our hatred towards actions and not individuals. And we must remember that even when we feel hatred towards evil individuals, this should not lead to us spreading more hate, but instead to taking thoughtful action. As the great sage Yoda from Star Wars once warned:

Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering."

Though it may make us uncomfortable to hear, intolerance, hateful speech and even vengeful behavior is not an issue reserved for others or for "those people." It is our problem as well. You may remember this summer when an Orthodox Jewish fanatic in Israel, who had just been released from prison after serving ten years for stabbing marchers at a 2005 gay pride parade in Jerusalem, repeated his crime by stabbing six other people in this summer's Jerusalem Gay Pride Parade. His senseless hatred was responsible for the death of an innocent 16-year-old girl in the crowd, Shira Banki.

That very same week, in the West Bank, suspected Jewish fanatics set fire to a Palestinian home, murdering an innocent 18-month-old baby named Ali-Saad Dawabesh, and hospitalizing his father, mother and 4-year-old brother. The perpetrators sprayed Hebrew graffiti reading "revenge" and "long live the Messiah" as windows were broken and firebombs were thrown.

Now, I don't know what religion these fanatics belong to, and I don't know what God they pray to, but they clearly do not know anything about our God, our Torah, or our way of Jewish living. They must have skipped the passage in our Torah that teaches, quite explicitly, that we are not to even feel, let alone express hatred towards others. In Leviticus we are taught:

*You shall not hate your brother in your heart. **Leviticus 19:17.***

Our Torah even extends the prohibition further by commanding us not to hate our neighbors. In Deuteronomy we read:

*You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your kinsman. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land. **Deuteronomy 23:8***

The Edomites, ancient enemies of the Israelites, and the Egyptians, who enslaved our people, were still regarded as fellow human beings, still seen as individuals made *betzelem elohim*. In other words, they were human beings made in God's image first, and our enemies second. And even still, we were commanded not to feel, let alone act, hateful towards them. While regulating our emotions may be difficult, if not impossible, regulating behavior certainly is not.

Our rabbis felt so strongly about the poisonous nature of hate, that they taught that the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E., not because of the Romans, but because of *sinat hinam*, the senseless hatred that existed among Jewish factions at that time. Just how far we have come, I am not so sure. But as Rabbi Joseph Telushkin reminds us:

Hatred, particularly when directed against a group, is the cause (along with untamed anger) of more suffering than any other human

emotion, and is a violation of Judaism's most fundamental principles. ...when asked to define the essence of Judaism, Hillel said: "What is hateful unto you, don't do to your neighbor, the rest is commentary (Shabbat 31a). In other words, "the essence of Judaism...is not to act in a hateful manner." (Rabbi Nachum Amsel)....(314).

Thankfully, the hate filled stabbings and arson attacks over the summer sent shock waves through the Israeli political establishment and general public.

Thankfully, these murders are the exception in Israeli society and not the rule.

But what does all of this have to do with us- you ask? We may not always say the nicest things about others, we may get a little impulsive or angry before we post something online, some of our comments about those we disagree with whether on the Iran deal or politics in general, may get a little bit heated- but we are not murderers and fanatics- you say.

That is true. But just listen to what Rabbi Benny Lau, a modern Orthodox rabbi in Israel, and the nephew of former Israeli chief rabbi, had to say at a rally in Zion Square, Jerusalem, to a group of protesters at a rally following the stabbing at the gay pride parade this summer:

"It is not possible to say `our hands did not spill this blood,'" the rabbi said. "Anyone who has been at a Sabbath table, or in a classroom, or in a synagogue, or at a soccer match, or in a club, or at a community

center, and heard the racist jokes, the homophobic jokes, the obscene words, and didn't stand up and stop it, he is a partner to this bloodshed...."

If we hear the slightest sound that can hurt, we must stop them in the first moment. **The fire begins there- it begins with the first insult, with the small racial slur- and not in the big inferno.**
(Motzei Shabbat, August 2, 2014)

In other words it starts with our words. It starts in ways that we think are innocent, but are, in reality, anything but innocent. It starts with the jokes at the gym, at the beach, at the party. It starts with the posts online that are filled with ranting, and name calling, and words that you would never dare say to the other person's face. It starts with the side comments at the grocery store, or at the office, or even in the synagogue lobby during a bar mitzvah.

I see and hear the hate almost every day, and so do you. It is so common that we are almost getting immune to it; something that is, in and of itself, a dangerous thing. And yes, we can hit delete. And yes, we can stop reading the post and comments of certain people. And yes we can walk away or just nod and smile. I have done any and all of these things. But on this Rosh Hashanah, as we spend the day focused on our behavior, we must ask

ourselves where and whether or not we are complicit. And we must strive, as mightily as we can, to knock it off!

It is the sparks that lead to the inferno. It is the first insult that leads to the destruction. It is the racist remarks, the labeling, the judgmental comments, the political "jokes," the name calling, the utter lack of respect for other individuals as fellow human beings by making what we think are "innocent comments," that causes destruction. "*I was just kidding.*" or "*Sheesh- can't anyone take a joke*" are often defensive comments for behavior that is, simply put, wrong.

We say that we "hate" the traffic and the drivers in the summer. We say that we "hate" the political candidates with whom we do not agree. We use derogatory terms to describe people who are somehow different than us. But when we use these terms, and these descriptions, and this language of hatred and disgust, it is we who are being hateful, bigoted, racist, and destructive.

And why do we do this? Why do we use language of "hate?" Why do we write and say and post vicious things? Why do we forget the humanity of the

other? The truth is that some of our anger, and our hateful speech stems from a place of anxiety and fear. To quote one of our members, psychiatrist Dr. Karen Lang:

Anger functions as a defense mechanism against more difficult feelings: fear and anxiety. Anger serves as a way to externalize the negative feelings. I can be angry at someone or something. This way it is about him or her, and not about me. Consequently, I don't have to hold the feelings as part of my own internal struggle. We are masters of feeling distortion and dumping! (email, 8-27-15)

When we are anxious or afraid, we often lash out instead of dealing with that anxiety and fear. Many of these anxieties and fears are understandable. We are afraid of Iran's role on the international stage, and we have every right to be. We are anxious around people who are different from us, or who we don't understand. We are afraid of people who don't hold the same assumptions, values, or beliefs.

Some of us, instead of trying to understand a certain issue, or get to know a certain individual, or group of individuals, get into a defensive and aggressive mode where we lash out in hurtful and hateful rhetoric. Others, the extremists, whether in Israel or in South Carolina or in New Jersey, feed off of this culture of hatred, and end up translating the hate into dangerous and destructive action.

Ours is a tradition that demands we STOP this type of behavior. Ours is a tradition that demands we find healthy and productive ways to demonstrate love and affection instead of hatred and contempt. Ours is a tradition that reminds us that, as people of faith, we should strive not to be afraid. As we are reminded in Psalm 27, the psalm read every day leading up to and throughout these Days of Awe:

Adonai is my light and my help; whom shall I fear? Adonai is the stronghold of my life whom shall I dread? When evildoers draw near to slander me, when foes threaten- they stumble and fall. Though armies be arrayed against me, I have no fear. Though wars threaten I remain steadfast in my faith.... Hope in Adonai, Be strong, take courage, and hope in Adonai.

Fear is a normal emotion, but we must strive to work on overcoming our fears. We must strive to live lives of faith and of meaning-because fear, emotional, hateful, and rash responses are poison to the soul. Faith, love, thoughtful analysis, speech, and respectful behavior are the antidotes, which our tradition encourages us to pursue.

There is a story told about the famous Jewish singer and songwriter, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, who, having survived the Holocaust and escaped Europe, returned to his childhood home in Vienna to perform in the 1970's. When he

was asked how he could possibly give a concert in front of people, some of whom were responsible for the death of his family and for murdering his people, he is said to have responded. *"If I had two hearts, I could use one to love and one to hate. But I only have one heart ... so I use it to love!"*

Hevre, my friends, we each have only one heart. And it is a heart that we are reminded over and over again we must use for love. The Torah teaches:

V'ahavtah et Adonai Eloheicha- LOVE the Lord Your God with all of your heart, soul, and mind. (Deut. 6:4)

V'ahavtah I're'echa kamocho- LOVE your Neighbor (even when you vehemently disagree with them) as yourself (Leviticus 19:18)

V'ahavtem et ha-ger. And you shall LOVE the stranger (Deut. 10:19)- even if they look, act, and believe differently than you.

Enough with the *sinat hinam*, the senseless hatred.

Enough with the reckless, thoughtless, and dangerous posts on facebook, instagram, twitter.

Enough with the vilification of the other, the denigration of those with whom you disagree.

Hatred actually does have a place in Judaism. As I mentioned earlier, we are, *in rare instances*, permitted to hate evil, to hate those who do evil or incite others to do so (Code of Jewish Ethics, 326). But we must remember

to wield that emotion very carefully, thoughtfully, and infrequently. Because to do otherwise, to be sloppy with our words, irresponsible with our emotions, and hateful in where hatred is uncalled for, is to sin against the very core of what we believe as Jews.

Let us then, in this New Year, resolve to do better. Let us remember to choose love over hate, civility over obnoxiousness, and thoughtfulness over impulsiveness. Let us remember that we do not always have to be right in every instance. Rather, to quote from R.J. Palacio, author of the children's book *Wonder*, "when we are given the choice between being right or being kind, we should choose kind." There is simply too much at stake for our souls, and for our world to do otherwise.

*And when you go home, if you "hated" my sermon- well- then you probably have some work to do! **Shanah Tovah U'metukah.*** May it be a happy, healthy, and meaningful New Year.