YOM KIPPUR AM 5787
Seeking Humanity in a Dehumanizing World
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When the San Antonio Spurs battled the NY Knicks in the NBA finals, I thought my head would explode! It was exciting to be part of something so big (Even if you aren't a fan- how could you *not* get sucked in?) But it was also a little complicated since as you know I am from New York. And even though I'm not a die-hard Knicks fan, my father, my brother and many people I know are.

The folks back home could not quite fathom how a NY girl would root for the San Antonio Spurs, but I did, and I was totally obsessed thinking about and talking about basketball all the time, watching every game until the final buzzer.

The Spurs had a disappointing outcome for sure. And while I AM truly happy for the Knicks who won a championship after a 53-year drought. I was shocked by the way NY fans treated San Antonio fans when the Spurs were at Madison Square Garden and even more, how people I know and love vilified our beloved star player Victor Wembanyama. "He is a horrible person. Violent and rude." one friend said. Another agreed, "It was so disrespectful that he walked off the court at the end without shaking people's hands."

When I reminded them of how the Knicks players battered Wemby at every turn, that a Knicks fan threw eggs at him outside his New York City hotel, how he is only 22, they wouldn't listen. Almost every New Yorker I know doesn't care about what Wemby does for the community or who he is off the court or what a generous teammate he is. In their basketball narrative, he is the chosen enemy and they have no problem denying all signs of his humanity.

Maybe your response to this is, Wemby is going to be fine. This is the price to pay for talent and fame. And that's probably true. But I've been thinking about how easily we put people in boxes of our own making to suit our own narrative and how often this leads us to say horrible things, or worse, act in horrible ways. We lose sight of the fact that our chosen enemies are people, whether it's because our pundits and social media feeds say so, or because they practice other religions, come from other countries or are our political opponents, they're still human.

Psychologist Nick Haslam would say that this is the first indication that we are guilty of dehumanization: a representation of others that "[involves] denials of humanness-however mild, commonplace, or subtle."[1]

[1] Wackerhausen, Anne-Catherine, "Dehumanization Clarified: What are we talking about when we talk about Dehumanization?"

Simply put, when we are not careful, we all too easily disregard that they, like us, are created in the image of God. We forget Rav Hillel's most famous teaching, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to another…." [2]

If I asked you to think about an image in the news that you have seen or a description you have heard in the last six months that stripped away the humanity of another person, I know you could all easily come up with at least one. And if I asked you to dig deep and think about a time when you felt dehumanized- by the way someone acted toward you or spoke to you, could you conjure up that feeling? What about a time when you acted in a way that dehumanized someone else? Maybe you were scared, or angry. Maybe you were just impatient. It doesn't matter what our excuse is.

Jewish scholar Elana Stern Hain points out its like the Yiddish Passover song- Chad Gad Ya. Each seemingly insignificant act of aggression builds upon the one that came before. When we dehumanize another person we are part of a devastating cycle that feeds on itself. In this way we not only harm others, we lose sight of who we are and lose control of how we want our world to be.

Today on our day of repentance, we are called upon to recognize our failings, as individuals and as a society and resolve to do better. This requires us to challenge ourselves; to ask hard questions and wrestle with uncomfortable truths.

Do we ever question our own personal prejudices, or do we only criticize the behavior of others? When we turn a blind eye to the injustices that play out around us, is it because we feel powerless? Or is it because we don't want to acknowledge the role we play through our inaction and silence?

Remember, even the smallest things we do build on each other and ultimately it all affects our world. Every word, every action, every interaction matters. And unless we invest in the humanity of all other people we not only fail at this task, we risk dehumanizing ourselves as well.

Dehumanization is a heavy word. It calls to mind the Holocaust and concentration camps. It reminds us of the shameful history of slavery here in the United States or Apartheid in South Africa. It's the reality of undocumented immigrants in our country right now everyone one of them, assumed to be a criminal- all of them at the mercy of law enforcement. It was the experience of Israeli hostages held in terrifying captivity by members of Hamas after October 7th and it is the reality of Palestinian people terrorized by Israeli settlers in the West Bank every day.

[2] Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a

Dehumanization is a tool that gets used to dull our sense of propriety. We experience it in the way people use derogatory expressions or talk about other people in non-human terms, slowly often imperceptibly at first, stripping them of their human dignity.[3]

“He’s a horse's ass!” is how you might describe someone you think is incompetent. Rude, but seemingly harmless.

“You dirty rat!” is a thing you call someone you feel has betrayed you. Rats live in the shadows, they eat garbage. Where there is one there are most certainly many others. Most of us are scared of them, because even when we can’t see them we know they are there.

“Jews are Lice: They Cause Typhus,” read official Nazi propaganda in 1940s occupied Poland. How easy it was to convince people to associate Jews with filth and disease.

“Dehumanization is one of several means by which inhibitions against harming others are overridden,” explains Dr. David Livingston Smith. “...We should understand it as a…goal-directed, self-induced misbelief- in short, a kind of self-deception.”[4]

But why would anyone be motivated to do this?? For one, to gain power and control. Over the millennia human beings have become quite adept at this sort of self-deception, selectively disabling their own inhibitions against doing violence to others in order to benefit themselves. The political machinations, religious and racial discrimination, the xenophobia and homophobia we see around the world today are nothing new. They are convenient ways for those in power to control other people. The rest of us are often drawn in by such propaganda, slowly at first. Because it taps into our own feelings of insecurity, distrust and sometimes genuine fear.

This, the Torah tells us, is how the Israelites became slaves in Egypt. At the end of the book of Genesis, Jacob and his family settle there after his son Joseph saves Egypt and all the surrounding lands from famine. Prosperous and content they chose to stay, assuming it would always be that way.

But as the book of Exodus opens, a new King comes to power who does not remember Joseph. This king sees the Israelites as a threat so he stokes fear in his people. Imagining their nefarious intent, he tells them, “Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war, they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.”[5]

With no evidence that the Israelite population poses any harm, Pharaoh convinces his people to enslave them.

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[3] Wackerhausen, Anne-Catherine
[4] Livingston-Smith, David, “Paradoxes of Dehumanization”. (pg. 429-431)
[5] Exodus1:10

And eventually, the Torah reports וַיָּקֻצוּ מִפְּנֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃
the Egyptians dreaded the Israelites[6].

The word va-yakutzu- translated here as dread- is an unusual one. Rashi explains that it comes from the word *kotzim* thorns, something that is passively dangerous and only harms those who come too close. Maybe the Egyptian's dread is self-imposed, stemming not from the behavior of the Israelites but from what they have been told and have come to believe about them.

In convincing themselves that the Israelites are a threat they not only dehumanize them as slaves but rob themselves of their own humanity. Like a thorn that starts off as a nuisance, but whose presence eventually becomes unbearable, the Egyptians become disgusted with who *they* have become. And as the thorny problem of enslaving another people consumes them, they imagine themselves cast out from the land, convincing themselves that the children of Israel would be planted in their place.[7]

You might say that we are not the Egyptians. But we could be.

Just because we have been the victims of dehumanization throughout history doesn't mean that we aren't capable of succumbing to the same kind of dangerous rhetoric. When we watch leaders act callously towards vulnerable people all over the world. When we digest hateful propaganda about anyone who is different from us in the media. It's too easy to let our distrust, insecurities and fears take over.

But what are we supposed to do when we experience that dread? How can we make an impact on such ugly forces when we feel overwhelmed and powerless? What is the antidote that can help us raise up the humanity of others and protect ourselves?

First, Jewish tradition is clear in acknowledging that we will never be perfect. There will always be times in our lives when we feel less than fully human: when we give in to our lesser nature; when we respond with anger, or impatience; when we do things and say things that make others feel less than fully appreciated, maybe less than fully human. And there will always be times when others do the same thing to us. But we still have responsibility for our actions. And we still have choices we can make.

As the ancient midrash, Bereshit Rabbah explains: Rabbi Levi said: Six items serve a person; three are in his control, and three are not in his control. The eye, the ear, and the nose are not in his control – he sees what he does not wish, he hears what he does not wish, and he smells what he does not wish.

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[6] Exodus 1:12
[7] Kli Yakar

The mouth, the hand, and the foot are in his control – [the mouth,] if he wishes he toils in Torah; if he wishes….he curses and blasphemes. The hand, if he wishes, he performs a mitzvah; if he wishes, he steals; if he wishes, he kills. His foot, if he wishes he goes to theaters and circuses if he wishes he goes to synagogues and study halls[8].

There is so much we experience in this world that is beyond our control. And what we see and hear affects us in ways we don't always realize. Yet we still get to reject the trap that ensnared the Egyptians of our Exodus story, who are eventually destroyed by their own fear of the other.

In Exodus 10 in the midst of what we think of as the Passover plagues
The Egyptians are faced with a deep, impenetrable darkness.

וַיְהִ֥י חֹֽשֶׁךְ־אֲפֵלָ֖ה בְּכָל־אֶ֣רֶץ מִצְרַ֑יִם שְׁלֹשֶׁ֖ת יָמִֽים׃

…a thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days.

לֹֽא־רָא֤וּ אִישׁ֙ אֶת־אָחִ֔יו וְלֹא־קָ֥מוּ אִ֛ישׁ מִתַּחְתָּ֖יו שְׁלֹשֶׁ֣ת יָמִ֑ים

People could not see one another, and for three days no one could move about….[9]

What was this choshech afela? According to Rabbi Baruch Epstein in his Torah Temimah, it was the self-inflicted darkness of dehumanization manifested in their inability to see the Israelites as people but instead believing them to be an ominous threat to their way of life. With the plague of darkness God 'opens the eyes' of the Egyptians and in doing so, plunges them into a darkness they have created for themselves.

Will our eyes be opened? When we see dehumanization will we turn away in discomfort or speak up about what we see?

Will our hearts be opened? Will we recognize God's presence- the inherent humanity of each person we encounter? Or will we revert to excuses, sit in uncomfortable silence and give in to our sense of powerlessness?

Will our mouths be opened? Will we speak up for decency? Even when it's hard, even when it feels risky? Will we remember Rav Hillel's teaching- to avoid demeaning others if only because we know what it feels like to be dehumanized ourselves?

Only we can extract the kotzim- the thorns- the hatefulness that dehumanization brings before the discomfort becomes so natural that it consumes us in darkness. Every day we get the chance to decide: Will we add a sense of holiness to another's life or remove a bit of God's presence in the world?

[8] Bereshit Rabbah 67:3
[9] Exodus 1

The antidote to dehumanization is humanization and we have a responsibility to chip away at that which permits the darkness to thrive. For the goodness of those around us, for the goodness of those we may never know and for our own goodness too. Because God's presence dwells in every human being a potential spark of goodness that brings forth the light.

AMEN