

Healing Hate in Others and Ourselves
High Holy Days 5779 AM
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I feel it everywhere. When I read the paper, when I listen to the radio. When I look at Facebook. When I open up my email. When I talk with anybody about world events or American Politics. I hear it in the words spoken by those with whom I agree and those I do not.

HATE. It's everywhere, and it makes me want to hide.

But the truth is, there is nowhere to hide, Not just because it feels like hate is everywhere but because it is IN everyone. We just won't admit it. It makes more sense to point at others and their need to change instead of paying attention to ourselves.

But at this moment...self-inquiry is a must. And these high holidays are here to help, as Rabbi Michael Strassfield explains, "The holidays are not about doing the Jewishly Jewish things that only Jews do. They are about awareness and mindfulness and paying attention. How do you live a life when you're paying attention?"¹

By turning inward- examining our imperfections we might be able to go beyond our annual vague pledges to try and 'do better.' **Through the process of teshuvah** we can work to change our behavior....and both ask for and grant forgiveness from and to others. **And through greater awareness,** hard work and humility strive to achieve RENEWAL...a return to a more whole and holy version of ourselves.

We human beings always seem to have a lot of work to do on ourselves. But from a Jewish perspective, it's not that we are inherently sinful. We are all, primarily good—and have the capacity to be loving, generous, protective, kind and

¹ Pogrebin, Abigail. *My Jewish Year- 18 Holidays, One wandering Jew*, Fig Tree Books, Bedford, NY, 2017., p2

thoughtful beings. But there is darkness too... and with that, comes a propensity to be suspicious, guarded, territorial and self-obsessed.

Psychologists have shown in study after study that we are hard wired to 'protect our own'....which is good. But we are also conditioned by society to push away anyone that is different than ourselves....not so good.

Fortunately, according to evolutionary biologist E.O Wilson, while human beings are consistent in their codes of honor-- making sure to protect those within their circle, we are also endlessly fickle with reference to whom the codes apply. In distinguishing between in-groups and out-groups, the precise location of the dividing line is shifted back and forth with ease.²

In other words....there is hope for our hate.

Zochreinu l'chaim, melech chafetz ba chaim, v'chotveinu l'sefer haChayim, l'ma-an cha elohim Chayim.

Remember us for life, sovereign God who treasures life. Inscribe us in the book of life, for our sake, God of life.

We chant these words, over and over again during our High Holy Days. We ask God to remember us for life...to be written into the book of life...to help us choose life...because life is...after all a treasured possession.

But in order for us to truly renew ourselves and the world, we have to be willing to be self-critical, we must acknowledge that dark side and come to terms with the hate that resides within.

Now I fully recognize that no one wants the rabbi to get up on Rosh Hashanah/ Yom Kippur and tell them that they are hateful people. It's not pleasant....it's not a great way to make friends and influence people. But I am sure that you, like me,

² Kohn, Sally, *The Opposite of Hate*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2018, p.104

have unkind thoughts about others...now and then. I am sure that you, like me, can feel some discomfort when you are out of your element or get angry when things don't go your way. I am sure that you, like me, have strong political opinions and can't fully fathom why some people- see things so differently.

And according to experts, all these feelings are actually forms of hate. They may feel rather harmless in isolation, but there is plentiful research to suggest that different kinds and severities of hate build on one another. The ADL (the Anti-Defamation League) classifies five overall categories in what it calls its pyramid of hate.³

At the base of the pyramid are things like stereo typing, the use of exclusionary language, and the belief in the inherent superiority of some groups and the inferiority of others. The next level includes individual acts of prejudice, like bullying, name calling, and unspoken but harmful acts of social avoidance. Then there are institutional forms of discrimination, whether in employment or housing policy or the political system- the kind of hate baked into our institutions and our norms, and actually, encouraged by them and taught to generation after generation. One step further is bias-motivated violence, such as terrorism or hate crimes, and at the top comes genocide.⁴

We tend to reserve the term "hate" only for the most conscious and most extreme forms of cruelty. Not the small acts of meanness each of us has perpetuated. Talking about others behind their backs. Purposely excluding others. Yelling at the customer service representative when we don't get what we want. I could keep going....but I think you get my point. You don't have to be unethical or an evil person to exhibit hateful behavior.

Each different form and degree of hate stems from the same societal and psychological phenomena. And they not only divide us against each other

³ Kohn, Sally, *The Opposite of Hate*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2018. pg. 6

⁴ Kohn, pg. 6 (see also www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/pyramid-of-hate.pdf)

But play a part in enabling us to dehumanize groups of ‘others’ whether we realize it or not. Each of us has a role to play in creating a climate in which further hate becomes more likely and even in the most extreme cases deadly.⁵

It's pretty hard to concede our role in social shaming, bias, discrimination and even violence. Everyone thinks that their own base motivation is good. Pick a genocide, a racial or religious conflict from ancient history all the way to the present day. When interviewed, people who have done truly evil things have an astonishing capacity to convince themselves that they're not essentially evil people; they believe those they hate or inflict violence on are the ones who are hateful, who deserve what they got.⁶ This doesn't only apply to Rwanda or the most recent humanitarian crisis of the Myanmar Rohingya. It includes both sides of the Israeli Palestinian Conflict. It includes the racial violence and tensions here in the United States.

And the excuses we tell ourselves are the same ones that terrorists, rebel fighters and militia members tell themselves too, if only on a different level. We can't always point at others and exclude ourselves from the problem. It is important to acknowledge our own behavior and biases. As Mahtma Gandhi taught, “if you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed- but hate these things in yourself- not in another.”⁷

This year I have had the honor of serving as co-chair for a national search committee to hire the next chief executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis- the CCAR. One of our most important tasks thus far has been to form the committee itself. Our goal was to create a committee that was as diverse as possible In terms of age, rabbinic placement, geographic location and yes, gender and sexual orientation. I think we did a pretty good job in choosing sixteen talented rabbis with a wide variety of work and life experiences. So, my co-chair and I were surprised when the question of implicit bias training for the committee

⁵ Kohn, pg. 7

⁶ Kohn, pg. 27-28

⁷ Kohn, p.119

was raised again and again by members of the CCAR, both women AND men.

What was the purpose of our carefully curated- uber diverse committee if it wasn't to protect us from inherent bias? Aren't we all thoughtful, enlightened human beings? Yes. But, as conservative columnist William Saletan has written, "There's way too much research on implicit bias to deny its existence.... Implicit bias isn't an accusation. It doesn't mean you're bad. It means your normal."⁸

So, it is valuable for everyone to become more aware of the implicit associations our brains make for us without any self-awareness-on our part. It's like the operating system of a computer that constantly makes decisions we neither see or even consider. Implicit bias tests and anti-bias training enable us to stop and ask ourselves, why we think what we think, why we say what we say, and why we do what we do. No one sets out to be discriminatory...to be hateful....But there are mountains of irrefutable evidence that shows it happens all the time.

We went ahead and had that training last week. And, though one hour was not nearly enough time to fully address "the inescapable mental residue" as facilitator Maria Morukan called it, I did come away with the understanding that while we each have the capacity to be slow, deliberate and logical in our judgements, our brains automatically default to fast, instinctive, and emotional decisions.

In other words, we feel good and right when we 'go with our gut' because we gravitate to people who are just like us. But unless we can first admit and second reckon with our biases about gender, about race, about politics, about religion... the assumptions, the frustrations, the fears.... they go unchallenged. The hate remains.

⁸ Kohn, p. 124

To overcome bias, we must pause again and again and access our more reflective way of thinking. Only then are we choosing true teshuvah and choosing the kind of life that God has intended for us.

But what happens when you are not the hater but the hatee?

When someone attacks us it's natural to either try and ignore them or fire back with more hate. Both are understandable impulses. Susan Benesch, lawyer and researcher who studies dangerous speech, argues for another tactic-- responding with expressions of empathy instead.

In her research she has found, that responding to hate with compassion, not only interrupts cycles of hate speech but can positively transform interactions as well as people's actual beliefs.⁹

A poignant example of this is a Twitter exchange that comedian, Sarah Silverman had with a San Antonio man, Jeremy Jamrozy this past January. Silverman, a Jew, generally known for her crass and generally offensive humor was trolled by Jamrozy who responded to one of her tweets by calling her an extremely vulgar term.

We see this happening more and more. Of course, name calling and other types of verbal and emotional bullying are not new, But the 'public' and viral aspect of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, SnapChat and so on. Has turned shaming and trolling into a serious psychological menace.

Sara Silverman could have ignored Jamrozy. She also could have gone back and forth- taunting him...escalating the hate. But she did not shame him back. Instead she responded with kindness. "I believe in you", she wrote. "I see your time line and I see what you are doing and your rage is thinly veiled pain.

⁹ Kohn, p. 44

But you know that. I know this feeling. See what happens when you choose love? I see it in you.”

During their initial exchange, Jamrozy opened up to Silverman about a troubled past and chronic back pain. She reached out to her 12 million Twitter followers, asking them to recommend a doctor. The tips poured in and Jamrozy said his new celebrity friend was making sure he followed through with getting his back checked out. He said Silverman has offered to pay for his medical treatment.¹⁰ “What she said broke through what months and months of therapy couldn't even do,” Jamrozy said. “...She just broke me down to where she made me more humble and nice and positive. She disarmed me.”¹¹

Not everyone’s anger or pain can be diffused in such a fairy tale way, but responding to anger or indignation with compassion can be amazingly affective.

Seeing the other, not as an adversary or a threat but as another human being
Seeking commonality---understanding that everyone has hopes and aspirations
Responding with compassion---recognizing that even the most unlikeable person we know has suffered challenges and pain, just like us....it helps break down the barriers of hate.¹² It helps us to choose a life in which we are brave enough to acknowledge our own negative feelings towards others, a life where we are open enough to respond to other’s hate with kindness. A life treasured by God.

Ok! We are all for being kinder, more patient and more generous people....
 You may even be willing to admit that maybe you have some hate inside.
 Because, if you are like me then probably there are people out there that you REALLY don’t like. And there are situations that REALLY make you angry.

¹⁰ Mendoza, Madalyn, mySanAntonio.com, January 3, 2018.

¹¹ Magary, Drew. *Silverman is the Troll Slayer*, GQ, May 23, 2018.

¹² Kohn, p. 172.

So High Holy Day sermons aside....What are our chances of actually turning that hate into love? Seems rather unlikely....I know. It's pretty much impossible to turn hate into love.

But don't give up on healing hate just because the stretch from hate to love seems too implausible. Consider the commandment ואהבת לרעך כמוך
 "Love thy neighbor as yourself" instead...I am sure you know it well!

Jewish tradition is very clear that the "love your neighbor" kind of love isn't the familial or romantic kind. The medieval Scholar Moses ben Nachman....the RAMBAN...Teaches "love our neighbor..." means we should wish upon our neighbor the same benefits that we wish upon ourselves. 15th Century rabbi Obadiah ben Jacob SFORNO... adds that we should be as concerned for their welfare as we hope others will be for ours.

If all hate is premised on a mind-set of otherizing, then "love your neighbor as yourself" is premised on equalizing the needs, the well being...THE VALUE of every other human being.

The opposite of love isn't hate, its indifference. Because it is indifference¹³ that enables us to let so much of the hating in the world go unchallenged. It is indifference that enables us...even if it is unknowingly....to hate others ourselves.

Rabbi Irwin Kula teaches that each Jewish holiday exists to respond to a particular yearning, we have inside. Our job is to look within, acknowledge and articulate that yearning for ourselves.¹⁴

These high holy days, these 10 days of repentance, are a response to our deepest desire to do better and be better. We yearn for respect...to be valued by others. And each of us wants to feel that we are a life treasured by God.

¹³ Ellie Wiesel.

¹⁴ Pogrebin, Abigail, p.14

We don't have to love people to stop hating them. You don't have to agree with people to stop hating them. But we do have to love our neighbor as ourselves. Treating them with civility and respect, recognizing that beyond our biases, our hurt and pain, our different customs, faces and feelings....we are all human beings. And the well being, the needs...the value of every human being should...be...the same.

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Remember us for life, sovereign God who treasures life. Inscribe us in the book of life, for our sake, God of life.

At this season of renewal we are given the opportunity to start again. May we each choose a life that is dedicated to healing hate. In others and in ourselves. May we endeavor to treat every single person we encounter with civility and respect--- a life treasured by God. For this is our path to Teshuvah...the way to RENEWAL... And a return to a more whole and holy version of ourselves. AMEN