

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780- Responding to hate with compassion

Rabbi Mara S. Nathan

At the beginning of the summer, making small talk over dinner with a group of friends, Amy mentioned she'd gone to the dealer for a car wash that day. One of the women smiled and said, "Why would you go all the way to the dealership, just to get a free car wash? Wow Amy, You really *are* a Jew, aren't you!"

When she told me this story I asked her, "What did you say?" She said, "Nothing!" And if you know Amy she's never at a loss for words.

A few weeks later, my friend Scott told me another story. He was meeting with a new appliance supplier at his office where he manages apartment buildings. He thought he was negotiating a fair price but the man accused him of trying to "Jew him down." I asked him what he did? He said, "I kicked him out. What could I say?"

And then I remembered an experience I had back when Isaac was in fourth grade in New York. We were at school for his family history presentation. Each child was supposed to prepare a dish that reflected their family's country of origin. One of the moms noticed that our sweet noodle kugel was a big hit and asked me about it.

I told her the project had actually been a challenge since our ancestors had fled to the U.S. from Russia to escape antisemitic persecution. "Persecution?" She said. "Everyone knows that Jews have all the power. You control all the banks and the media, right?" What did I do? Me? the Rabbi? I looked at her blankly and just walked away.

I bet you have had a similar experience. Someone you know, who you liked-- even trusted--Says something so hurtful in such a blasé way. Expecting, in fact, that we will agree with their attitude. And more often than not, we have no words.

But words are necessary, not just when we need to respond to large scale acts of hatred like the massacre in Pittsburg or the shooting in Poway. Or when there is vandalism on the walls of a synagogue or in a Jewish cemetery. But in the small, day to day encounters, when we are confronted by anti-Semitic slurs, snide remarks and conspiracy theories we need to respond. Not with anger, but with words that show our knowledge, our courage, our clarity and also our compassion. Yes, Compassion! Even though it seems counterintuitive.

Why have so many people hated Jews for so long and in so many places? Dr. Deborah Lipstadt, in her recently published, *Antisemitism: Here and Now* articulates our frustration: “It is hard, if not impossible, to explain something that is essentially irrational, delusional and absurd. That is the nature of all conspiracy theories, of which antisemitism is just one....¹

Anti-Semitism has not only remained impervious to *erasure*, it has morphed and evolved throughout history into what she calls a “toxic brew of race, religion, politics, and pseudoscience.... *Today we continue to see these ideas expressed on both the left and the right...*²

For example, Democratic freshman Rep. Ilhan Omar of Minnesota posted a now infamous tweet that suggested that the pro-Israel lobby had bought its influence on Capitol Hill, writing: “It's all about the Benjamins.” On the right, National Republican Congressional Committee Chairman Tom Emmer, also from Minnesota, sent a letter to party members identifying three “left-wing radicals: billionaires George Soros, Tom Steyer and Michael Bloomberg,” that he says “bought control of Congress for the Democrats.”³

¹ Lipstadt, Deborah E., *Antisemitism Here and Now*, p 7-8

² Lipstadt, p 16-17

³ JTA, *National Republican Congressional Committee chairman sent letters saying Soros, Steyer and Bloomberg bought Congress*, 8/4/19

So, which is it? Are Jews controlling the left ... or the right? Or maybe we control everything! As implausible and absurd as this sounds to us, Jews are regularly blamed for most evils in the world.

As the Holocaust survivors in our midst reach an advanced old age, their stories of survival may sound like ancient history to our young people. Yet physical violence in Europe, and the reappearance of ugly stereotypes, like the cartoon in the NY Times of guide-dog Netanyahu leading a blind Trump, Are chilling echoes of anti-Semitic propaganda of the past...How do we respond?

In past generations, our parents and our grandparents felt it was imprudent to call out anti-Semitic remarks in the moment. And if they did speak up there *were* REAL consequences at the office, at the country club and at school. Maybe you still feel the pressure of those potential consequences. But our tradition tells us that we cannot allow our identities to be formed by fear.

Reb Nachman of Bratzlav the 18th Century Hasidic master writes *k'she-adam tzarikh la-avor gesher tzar m·od, ha-k'lal v'ha-ikkar shelo **yit-paheid** k'lal*.

As the official Breslov translation puts it, "When a person must cross an exceedingly narrow bridge, the general principle and the essential thing is not to frighten yourself at all."⁴

We sing these words often. But it turns out the words we sing are not exactly what Reb Nachman wrote. He did not write, "lo l'fached klal" "don't be afraid at all" rather he wrote "lo yitpcheid klal" which to an ear not familiar with Hebrew might not sound so different, but it makes all the difference in the world.

It turns "fear" from something someone does to you, into something we do to ourselves. It says, the world is a narrow bridge, (it can be a scary place) but we mustn't be consumed by our own fear.⁵ Like those who faced challenges before us, we can speak up for what we believe in...for our traditions, culture and faith; finding solace and strength with each other.

⁴ Nachman of Bratzlav, Likutei Moharan (II:48)

⁵ Rabbi Jill Berkson Zimmerman

Last spring a mom in Palm Beach, Florida wrote an email to the principal of her son's school to inquire about the kind of Holocaust education the kids were receiving. William Latson, the principal, responded saying the school had "a variety of activities" but that the lessons were "not forced upon individuals. as we all have the same rights, but not all the same beliefs." "Not everyone believes the Holocaust happened," he wrote.⁶

It's astounding that something like this could happen in Palm Beach County, the largest Jewish community in the country.

Over the course of the next year, this parent, along with another mother met repeatedly with the principal as well as the Superintendent. And while Lawson made a visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. there was no formal apology or change in policy. The Palm Beach County School District did not feel that his actions merited disciplinary action or a formal reprimand.

Until the Palm Beach Post broke the story. One year (and three days later), the district reversed course in the face of international criticism and an online petition with over 20,000 names. Latson was reassigned to an undisclosed district position.

It took a lot of courage for that mother to keep on pushing. It would have been easier to let it go... to just complain to her friends in private. But even when she was initially brushed off, she kept asking for clarification, better education and proper fulfillment of the law. (In 1994, Florida passed a Holocaust Education Mandate similar to the one Texas passed this Spring.)

She was one woman, writing one email, trying to make sure that her child and his classmates were given the chance to learn the lessons of the Holocaust. She understood that allowing hateful rhetoric to go unchallenged is dangerous, and that prejudice in any form will always lead to more prejudice.

⁶ Marra, Andrew, *Spanish River High's principal refused to call the Holocaust a fact*, Palm Beach Post, 7/5/19

I know that when we hear anti-Semitic remarks our emotions take over. It's difficult to engage in a civil discussion.⁷ But just as it is important to call out hate in others, it is just as essential for us to maintain our authenticity and integrity. That is why we are better served to start from a place of generosity and compassion. How might Amy's story or Scott's or mine turned out if we didn't assume malicious intent?⁸ Chances are, we have *all* unknowingly made insensitive remarks too.

In her book, *Braving the Wilderness*, Brene Brown shares such an encounter. During a speaking engagement, a woman approached her during a break. "Your work has changed my life. It saved my marriage and shaped my children. I came here today because you are an important teacher in my life....I trusted you...[but] you've proven to be a fraud."

[The woman went on]: "You said that you felt "really gypped" during your story.. Gypped! ... It's spelled G-Y-P-P-E-D. Like gypsy. It's an anti-Semitic term that degrades gypsies."

I am sure I have used this term hundreds of times, but until I read this story, I had no idea it is a racial slur. Neither did Brown. She immediately apologized and I can assure you neither she nor I will ever use that word again.

If I say something hurtful, I want to know about it. Even if, in the moment I am embarrassed or ashamed. It's worth it. I want to believe that most people in their daily lives would like to be kind and thoughtful. I want to believe that most people's anti-Semitic comments (the off-handed ones that seem to come out of nowhere ...the ones that leave us speechless, angry and feeling betrayed) come from a place of ignorance rather than spite.

If we are able to react from a place of calm, clarity and compassion, we model graciousness and kindness and we educate and further dispel falsely conceived

⁷ Brown, Brene, *Braving the Wilderness*, p.90

⁸ Brown, p.95

truths and stereotypes. Even if your heart starts to race and you feel your face get hot, a simple “Can you please tell me more...”, might actually build a bridge or create a new ally instead of fortifying barriers of misconception, misinformation and ultimately isolation.

We are lucky that we live in a city where interfaith ties are strong, and local officials see us as allies and friends. This can bring a measure of comfort during these troubling times. But on an individual basis, we still have the potential to change another person’s life, or at least their outlook. If we are able to pause, take a deep breath, and ask a calm question, there is a chance that we can open someone’s heart.

We might be rebuffed. But when we treat the person in front of us as a human being, we begin to build a society that is responsive, inclusive, and kind, and we are true to the people we most want to be.

Tonight, we begin a new decade in the Jewish calendar: 5780. And we must reconcile with the tension between rising anti-Semitism and a growing acceptance in America of our faith and tradition. We cannot allow the prejudice of some, to be our sole frame of reference as we live our lives as Jews in a non-Jewish world. We have the ability to claim our own narrative. *Lo yitpcheid klal*. We do not have to be consumed by fear or anxiety.

On this Erev Rosh Hashanah, let us commit to stand up to anti-Semitism! Not by ignoring fear but by using it as a lens to see the fear that is within others. Let us confront misconceptions, stereotypes and hurtful language with courage and compassion. And let this be a year, when our Jewish faith, our Jewish culture and our Jewish community inspire pride, connection and action within us all.

AMEN.