

The Power of Love: Lessons from Charlottesville
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Even for those present, it was surreal. So much more so, it is hard for any of us to imagine how the members of our sister Reform congregation, Beth Israel of Charlottesville, felt six weeks ago today as they gathered for worship, just as we are doing now. Their Temple president, Alan Zimmerman, trying to describe what transpired that fateful day, recounts the following:ⁱ "

"On Saturday morning, I stood outside our synagogue with the armed security guard we hired after the police department refused to provide us with an officer during morning services. . . Forty congregants were inside. Here's what I witnessed during that time.

For half an hour, three men dressed in fatigues and armed with semi-automatic rifles stood across the street from the temple. Had they tried to enter, I don't know what I could have done to stop them, but I couldn't take my eyes off them, either. Perhaps the presence of our armed guard deterred them. Perhaps their presence was just a coincidence, and I'm paranoid. I don't know."

Several times, parades of Nazis passed our building. Some carried flags with swastikas and other Nazi symbols. All were shouting, "There's the synagogue!" followed by chants of *Seig Heil*, you will not replace us, Jews will not replace us, and Blood and soil.

"A guy in a white polo shirt walked by the synagogue a few times, arousing suspicion. Was he casing the building, or trying to build up courage to commit a crime? We didn't know. Later, I noticed that the man accused in the automobile terror attack wore the same polo shirt as the man who kept walking by our synagogue; apparently it's the uniform of a white supremacist group. Even now, that gives me a chill.

When services ended, my heart broke as I advised congregants that it would be safer to leave the temple through the back entrance rather than through the front, and to please go in groups."

Later that day, I arrived on the scene shortly after a car plowed into a group of peaceful protesters, killing Heather Heyer, as stunned onlookers scattered. It was a horrific and bloody scene.

"Soon, we learned that Nazi websites had posted a call to burn our synagogue. I sat with one of our rabbis and wondered whether we should go back to the temple to protect the building. What could I do if I were there? Fortunately, it was just talk – but we had already deemed such an attack within the realm of possibilities, taking the precautionary step of removing our Torahs, including a Holocaust scroll, from the premises."

And then, Alan Zimmerman shared the painful words, the sentiment that distresses us most of all, "This is in America in 2017. "

I need not relate every anti-Semitic incident that happened this year, at home or abroad, for us to know that Charlottesville, although the most blatant example, is not an anomaly or that it has not been a good year for the Jewish people. While we

wish these were isolated episodes, we know that are not. The Anti Defamation League detailed back in April, "Anti-Semitic incidents in the U.S. surged more than 1/3 in 2016 and have now jumped 86% in the first quarter of 2017." The report observed: "There has been a massive increase in the amount of harassment of American Jews, particularly since November, and a doubling in the amount of anti-Semitic bullying and vandalism at non-denominational K-12 grade schools."

Our college students are not fairing much better.ⁱⁱ What adds insult to injury is that not only are there anti-Semitic occurrences on campuses, but also that administrators, faculty, and students alike don't get what the "big deal" is and so rarely respond with empathy for the students or condemnation of the perpetrators. The result, our own Madeline Budman, a senior at Georgetown University wrote recently, "is a grieving, terrified Jewish community of undergraduates who can't make anyone understand why they are hurting so much."ⁱⁱⁱ

And we are hurting . . . so very much . . . as individuals and as a community. It is no wonder that a recent survey for the American Jewish Committee found that last year 21% of American Jews consider domestic anti-Semitism a "very serious problem." This year, that number has risen by 20 points to 41%.^{iv}

This sad truth has manifested itself in our area as well. Exactly three weeks ago today, during the weekend of September 8-10, vandals spray-painted a swastika on a street sign in the North End of Virginia Beach between 55th and 59th Streets. Although deemed by authorities not to be a hate-crime, it was none-the-less disturbing. In a string of e-mails amongst neighbors, one wrote: "What is going on? This is not the place we moved to fourteen years ago. This is so sad. I don't know who to report this to or what to do."^v

The first question is easier to answer; should this happen in anyone of your neighborhoods, or at your places of business, clubs, or schools, you can and should call the local police and FBI as well as our Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Tidewater. All of them can help with getting the information into the proper authority's hands so that the culprits can be caught and appropriately punished.

The second part of the query: "I don't know what to do," is something that every one of us is feeling. We see these things happening all around us, whether through media reports or shared experiences, and we are shocked, angry, and afraid. Like Alan Zimmerman, we ask ourselves: how can this be happening here in the United States of America in the year 2017? Hasn't this war been fought? Didn't we vanquish the Nazis? The short answer is: no. Certainly Hitler is dead. But in an era where we know so little about one another, where whole groups of people are targeted for suspicion, shame, and disdain, hatred in the form of neo-Nazism is as prevalent as ever.^{vi} My friend and colleague, Robert Nosanchuk, explains the phenomenon this way, "In truth, it is easy to hate someone you barely know. Going back to the Bible, all it took for Egypt to turn to state-backed oppression and slavery was for Pharaoh to assert in fearful tones that the Israelites were growing in numbers and may rise against us."^{vii} Hitler used a similar argument about the Jews.

What Rabbi Nosunchuk says is surely true of the ancient Egyptians, of the Third Reich, and of White Supremacists today. Yet, as Jews, while we are justifiably fearful, mistrusting, disgusted, and even angry, do we really hate the perpetrators of

Charlottesville? Do we hate them as much as they hate us or, even, because they hate us?

I have heard from you and so many others myriad ways in which these heinous events have motivated or even inspired us to respond . . . and not one of them involves confronting hate with hate. Instead, we have, as a congregation and a community, rallied peacefully for unity; spoken forcefully for justice; and engaged in dialogue for better understanding. You have asked for more opportunities to explore racism, bigotry, and anti-Semitism; for trainings on how to answer these evils whenever they rear their ugly heads; for ways to effect change through advocacy; for opportunities to come together to support one another through prayer and song.

And whether or not you agree with their means, the recent movements to remove Confederate Statues from public spaces, with which the Charlottesville rally ostensibly began; or to take a knee during the singing of the National Anthem; are also non-hateful and non-violent responses to institutionalized racism in this country. And both forms of peaceful protest have proven effective ways of raising the much-needed conversation about race in our nation to the public fore.

I actually believe that, whether or not we know them personally, hating someone is not easy at all. In truth, the energy it requires of us is staggering -- consuming our thoughts, weighing us down, and inhibiting our ability to live our lives fully, to laugh, and, even, to love. So many have spoken of its poisonous effects. Rabbi Harold Kushner of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* fame writes: Refusing to hate "is not a favor we do for the person or peoples who offended us. It is a favor we do for ourselves, cleansing our souls of thoughts and memories that lead us to see ourselves as victims and make our lives less enjoyable."^{viii}

And, in fact, in Jewish tradition, hatred is a sin. In *Sefer Haredim*,^{ix} we read: "As to baseless hatred (*sinat hinam*) it is written in the Torah, 'You shall not hate your kinsman in your heart.' (Hatred) is indeed the source of all evil . . . The commandment 'Love your neighbor as yourself' includes the observance of the entire Torah. On the other hand, hatred includes the violation of the entire Torah."

Strong words, but so true. Hate violates all of Torah because it negates everything we believe in as Jews . . . especially on these High Holidays. These values include: our belief in the inherent holiness and the potential decency of every human being; our conviction that each of us has the capacity to do *teshuvah*, to repent and change; our hope that we have many opportunities to freely choose a life of blessings; our ideal that each of us has the ability to make a difference; and our faith in the existence of a good and benevolent God.

Pharaoh and Hitler, and their ideological heirs, chose cruelty over compassion and hate over love, but remember that, in so doing, both brought destruction upon their countries, their families, and themselves. The corollary is true as well; as one survivor of the *Shoah* often told her grandchildren: If I can hate any human being, then the Nazi's triumphed.^x In other words, if the outcome of hate is to become hateful, that haters win.

So how can we combat *sinat hinam*, baseless hatred, like that we witness in our society today? Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), the first Chief Rabbi of the modern State of Israel and a renowned religious philosopher, was asked the

same question. His revolutionary reply was so simple: to counteract *sinat hinam*, baseless hatred, we must practice *ahavat hinam*, gratuitous love. I know what you are thinking: Come on, how idealistic can you get? And, in many ways, you are right. Rav Kook is not suggesting we take on a mob of torch wielding Nazis and invite them to a dialogue group; this would be as foolish as it would be futile, not to mention extremely dangerous. But several people have tried to thoughtfully, honestly, and effectively extend a human hand to misguided individuals. Their true stories are both instructive and inspiring and I'd like to share some of them now for us to consider.

In March of 1994, Rabbi Steven Fink and the members of Temple B'nai Jeshurun awoke one morning to find neo-Nazi graffiti and swastikas scrawled on their synagogue. The perpetrators were a nineteen-year-old male member of the Aryan Nation and his seventeen-year-old girlfriend. They were charged with felonies for their hate crime, and under ordinary circumstances would have been sentenced and jailed, no doubt deepening their hatred and assuring them a life of alienation and conflict. A deputy district attorney, Fred Gay, approached the temple's rabbi with a radical idea. Would the temple membership be interested in meeting with the two perpetrators to explain the damage done by their hate crime and to work out a sentence? The temple agreed to meet.

Present at the meeting were the two offenders and six members of the temple leadership, including two Holocaust survivors and a former Israeli military officer. It soon would be discovered that the boy was from a broken home, a ninety-eight-pound weakling with a hearing disability. When he was sixteen, he had run away from home and was taken in by the Aryan nation. The girl was unsure of herself and had no idea what neo-Nazi meant.

Many raged that the two should have the book thrown at them, while others argued that throwing them in jail would just create two more hardened criminals. After heated debate, the parties agreed that the harm could be repaired if the offender complied with the following: The two defendants were to do one hundred hours of service for the synagogue under the supervision of the temple's custodian; one hundred hours of study of Judaism and its history with the rabbi; a referral to a hearing specialist for the young man; a requirement that he remove the Nazi tattoos on his arms; and attainment of employment skills and psychological assessment of both offenders, as well as fulfillment of requirements for a GED. After successful completion of all of this, the charges would be dropped.

Instead of going to jail, the couple learned Jewish history and culture, their personal needs were met, and while working with the wise custodian, they gained confidence in themselves, finished their high-school equivalency exams, got married, and had a child. Rabbi Fink and the custodian were invited to their wedding.^{xi}

Another true story: Derek Black, a not-yet-eighteen-year-old-college student, was already considered the heir apparent to our country's white nationalist movement. His father, Don Black, was the brains behind *Stormfront*, the Internet's first and biggest white nationalist site with 300,000 users. His mother, Chloe, had been married to David Duke, who was Derek's godfather and he was raised accordingly.

Not long after arriving, Black was outed on his college campus as an anti-Semite. Understandably, most students kept their distance, but one of his classmates, Matthew Stevenson, the only Orthodox Jew at the school, decided to invite Black to a Shabbos Dinner. It turns out that it was the only social invitation Derek had received since arriving on campus, so he agreed to go. Matthew Stevenson told the other guests, "Let's try to treat him like anyone else." Pretty soon, Derek Black became a regular at these Shabbat meals. And eventually, he rejected the ideas that had once filled him with such hatred.

Another final true story: An African American, as well as a musician, actor, and author, Daryl Davis, has an unusual hobby: He meets and befriends white supremacists. *Emes*, the truth, Davis travels around the country, seeking out self-proclaimed Aryans, so that he can ask them one question: "How can you hate me if you don't even know me?" Crazy as it sounds, Davis believes that if he begins by listening, by giving the person a platform and letting him air his views, then he will reciprocate. He knows it is a novel idea in this day and age to listen to anyone we disagree with, especially to do so with white supremacists. However, and remarkably, with his technique, Davis has achieved the impossible; he has convinced two hundred members of the KKK and other white supremacist groups to renounce their views.^{xii}

Rabbi Fink, Matthew Stevenson, and Daryl Davis share a common belief that hating people for being hateful obviously isn't getting us anywhere. Like Rav Kook, who advocated meeting baseless hatred with gratuitous love, or the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who said "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that," these three men believe that perhaps, one person at a time, we might be able to change minds and hearts for the good. Like many of you here today, I'm not sure, if faced with similar circumstances that I could do what they did and reach out to someone who ostensibly hates me solely for whom I am. But also like many of you here today, I'm not certain that I couldn't. After all, when peering into the soul of another human being, aren't we more likely to choose kindness over cruelty, to choose love rather than hate? That's the thing. There are so many more of us lovers than there are haters and we have the capacity to meet every one of them with hundreds, no thousands, no tens of thousands of us who are determined to unite us rather than divide us.

Indeed, Alan Zimmerman, the president of Charlottesville's Congregation Beth Israel, with whose words we began, also said the following of that awful day. He wrote: And yet, in the midst of [it] all . . . other moments stand out for me: John Aguilar, a 30-year Navy veteran, took it upon himself to stand watch over the synagogue through services Friday evening and Saturday because he just felt he should; a frail, elderly, crying Roman Catholic woman and at least a dozen other complete strangers who stopped by just to ask if we wanted them to stand with us on front steps of the synagogue; the strength of our clergy and Temple members who would not be intimidated by hate; and the outpouring of love and support from Jews and non-Jews alike all over the world. In other words, even in the midst of the largest neo-Nazi march in our nation in 40 years, our people and the hundreds of millions of good people everywhere could still affirm the power of love over hate.

The Holy One of blessing and the wise editors of our *Torah* knew that this was hard work -- to bear witness to evil and hatred and to our own pain and

suffering and that of others, and still to prefer faith and hope, to choose life and blessings. Otherwise, the Torah wouldn't need to assure us that we do have the power to fulfill this destiny, that it is not beyond us or too far away from us, that it is not in the heavens or across the seas. "No," the Torah insists, "We do have the capacity for love, and justice and good. And it is so very near to us that it is in our own mouths and our own hearts and we can surely do it!"^{xiii} And so we must. Amen.

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Alan Zimmerman, "In Charlottesville, the Local Jewish Community Presses On," ReformJudaism.org, Aug. 14, 2017.
- ⁱⁱ Madeline Budman, "Healing and Resisting through Challah," *Bossier Magazine*, September 26, 2017.
- ⁱⁱⁱ "U.S. Anti-Semitism Incidents Spike 86 Percent So Far in 2017 After Surging Last Year, ADL Finds," *ADL Press Release*, Apr. 24, 2017.
- ^{iv} Eric Cortellessa, "Poll: 77% of American Jews Have Unfavorable View of Trump," *The Times of Israel*, Sept. 13, 2017.
- ^v From private e-mail amongst Virginia Beach North End neighbors provided by Lisa Bertini.
- ^{vi} Rabbi Robert Nosanchuk, "Time to light millions of candles to find our way out of the darkness," *Cleveland.com*, August 27, 2017.
- ^{vii} *Exodus* 1:9 - 11.
- ^{viii} Rabbi Harold Kushner, "A Favor We Do Ourselves," *Jewels of Elul*.
- ^{ix} Rabbi Eleazar ben Moses Azikri, *Sefer Haredim*, Chapter 66, a 16th century spiritual and ascetic kabbalist manual.
- ^x Ferenc Raj, "Hatred is the Root of All Evil," *AmericanRabbi.com*.
- ^{xi} David Lerman, "Justice that Heals," From *Chicken Soup for the Soul at Work: 101 Stories of Courage, Compassion and Creativity in the Workplace*, editors Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, 2012.
- ^{xii} Bethany Mandel, "We Need to Start Befriending Neo Nazis," *Forward.com*, August 24, 2017.
- ^{xiii} *Deuteronomy* 29:9-14; 30:1-20.