

**Hatred ... and Peace**  
Sermon for Rosh Hashanah Morning  
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Over the last several weeks Israelis of all parties, the politically conservative and liberal alike, have been agonizing over a recent horrific incident in Jerusalem, when several Arab boys were brutally beaten up by a mob of Jewish boys. 17 year-old Jamal Julani ended up in the hospital for a week and would likely have died on the scene had not an Israeli medical student administered CPR—Jamal's heart had stopped. Eight teen-agers described as “ultra-Orthodox” were arrested, most claiming innocence but one admitting he did beat Jamal, adding, “For my part, he can die. He's an Arab.”

The reaction in Israel was the sort of phenomenon that we in America have seen when hatred erupts. Someone is assaulted, even murdered, because of his sexual orientation, or her skin color. We Jews are sometimes the victims. Just last month a Sikh Temple near Milwaukee was shot up, and half a dozen people killed, only last month. We cluck our tongues. A few solidarity rallies are held. Some sermons are delivered. And the news cycle moves on.

But in Israel, very much to its credit, along with those sorts of reactions, the Education Ministry ordered all Jr. High and High School classes to have a discussion of hatred and violence. The Education Minister who issued the order said no doubt some of the students would defend the act, but instructed the faculty that “the unequivocal message must be a condemnation of racism and violence.” The speaker of the Knesset, Reuven Rivlin, visiting Jamal in the hospital, apologized for Israel and said the incident was “a microcosm of a national problem that

could endanger Israeli democracy.” It is the government’s responsibility, he said, to address the problem.

A New York Times report of one of the classroom discussions quoted a 17 year-old Arab student who said he was not surprised Jewish teens beat up an Arab teen. “People are taught to hate, so they hate.... From the age of 5, they say ‘Death to the Arabs.’” When the teacher responded that not long ago the class had seen a film in which Palestinian children were chanting, “Death to Israel, death to the Jews,” the young man—as the reporter put it—“appeared defeated, and said, “There is no hope when you see things like that.”

There is hope, actually, as long as most people—Arabs and Jews alike—are appalled. But how are Jewish kids not going to learn to hate when they live in a society under constant threat, knowing that as they finish high school it will be their turn to go into the military to defend the nation against hostile Arab neighbors—including radical Palestinians firing missiles from Gaza. And how are Arab kids not going to learn to hate when West Bank Palestinians constantly complain of oppression and humiliation, and even the 1.2 million Arab citizens of Israel often feel like second class citizens?

The racist incidents and rhetoric from the Jewish side are especially depressing because they so often emanate from the settler movement and the extreme Orthodox. Anat Hoffman, who heads the Reform movement’s Israel Religious Action Center, in a newspaper Op Ed piece, documented ultra-Orthodox rabbis—on the public payroll—preaching that Israeli Arabs are “the

enemy,” stereotyping them as violent, and urging Jews not to sell or rent apartments to non-Jews. Israel, Hoffman notes, has laws against racist incitement; but no one ever prosecutes these rabbis.

The Jewish view of hatred, of course—we will read it from the Torah before this Holy Day season is past—is clear: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In context in Leviticus 19—feel free to check it when you get home—that does not just mean your Jewish brother or neighbor. It means everyone. Part of the import of the early stories in Genesis is that there is one human family, with every member *‘b’tzelem elohim*, “in God’s image,” which is why, the Midrash adds, “he who hates a person is as if he hated God.” (Pesikta Zutari Behaalotcha; in *The Talmudic Anthology*) In the Torah portion we just read Abraham almost sacrifices Isaac, while in the Koran—same story—he almost sacrifices Ishmael. Where both traditions agree is that Abraham is the father of us all: Isaac and Ishmael, we and the Arabs, are brothers and sisters.

Jewish stereotyping of Muslims is not confined to Israel. Just a few weeks ago I was sent an article—one of those email forwards—purporting to be by a Spanish journalist saying that Europe had made a horrible mistake—“we killed the Jews and then we welcomed hundreds of thousands of Muslims who are making crime-ridden, garbage dumps of our beautiful cities.” I hadn’t seen this particular fraud for several years, but that is what it was and remains; snopes.com made very clear that the journalist doesn’t exist and the article is an internet hoax. The first time I got it—from several Beth-El congregants that time—I had just been to Spain, the

cities of which are not garbage dumps, but quite lovely. So why are we so anxious to believe, so ready to spread, to “forward” in this case, such hate-literature? Because there really are enemies out to get us; and when a state of hostility drags on year after year, decade after decade, generation after generation, it brings out the worst in everyone. Jews are not exempt. But as hatred’s victims so often and so disastrously through the ages, we of all peoples should know better.

I hope you are not expecting me to tell you next how to break the cycle of violence and hatred between Israelis and Palestinians. Israelis are to be applauded for their efforts to turn a tragedy into an opportunity for education against hatred. But until they make peace with at least the Palestinians, and ideally with the Arab world, it is not going to work very well. I suspect that even though the current hard-line Israeli regime would compromise—the Israeli public would demand it!--if there were a Palestinian partner to compromise *with*. But there is not. That could change. But not, apparently, under Machmud Abbas. So those of us who think that there must eventually be peace because it is in everyone’s best interest, the so-called doves, have been forced into hibernation with no sign that spring is near.

Some thought the so-called “Arab Spring” might bring progress. It might yet. But the irrational hatred in the Arab street and the murder of an American ambassador and three staff members last week should dampen naive optimism. That dictators have fallen, and elections have been held, in a couple of Arab nations is certainly a positive sign long-term. Syria’s Assad will likely be next. But the only direct relevance to the Israel-Palestinian dilemma is that

everyone can see what Jews in Israel and ‘round the world have been arguing for decades: Israel is not the problem! The Arabs’ problems derive overwhelmingly from corrupt Arab leadership, lack of commitment to education, to economic development, the oppression especially of women—writing off the creative and economic potential of half the population. The kleptocrats used Israel as an excuse, a distraction: “don’t blame your leaders, blame the Jews! The Arab street” may yet figure it out: they may not like Jews, but their real problem has always been greed and corruption.

Does that, then, get Israel off the hook? Not where Palestinians are concerned. They, too, have been victims of corrupt leadership who squandered one opportunity after another to compromise—to make a state on the West Bank, for instance, before there ever was an occupation and thus no settlements to worry about. Does that mean they must forever be denied a state alongside Israel, and the dignity and self-determination that could go with it? This is the American and Israeli official policy goal. The only alternative to two states is one state, and it will either not be Jewish or not be democratic. Jews can argue ‘til the cows come home that Palestinians were ill-served by their leaders, that there was no such thing as a “Palestinian people” prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that peace is fraught with risk and peril. All true. But just as you cannot say to Jamal Julani that it is his own fault he got beaten up (it really was a hate crime), you cannot say to a couple of million Palestinians, “tough luck; you should have had better leadership.” There is plenty of guilt to go around; Israel keeps undermining moderate Palestinians. But there is no “moral equivalence.” Rabin tried to compromise. Barak tried. Sharon tried. Where is the equivalent Palestinian list? But the effort must not stop.

Both sides must educate for mutual respect. Every bit helps. In Israel it can help. In the Arab world it can help. Even in far away Texas it behooves us to show that Jews and Muslims are brothers and sisters, fully capable of enunciating shared faith in the one God, shared pride in common ancestry, and shared ideals: faith, justice, compassion, love, peace. None of us practice those as well as we should. But at our best and most authentic we all preach them.

I say “at our best and most authentic” because, again—and I take no pleasure in saying this—there is a Jewish element, mostly but not exclusively Orthodox, preaching the inferiority of others, and placing land above human life on the scale of human values. That is not Jewish! Much though we love the land of our people’s birth and history, and will fight ever leaving it again, we know that Jacob and Esau, after bitter rivalry and years of enmity, like Isaac and Ishmael before them, reconciled. Jacob came back to *eretz yisraeyl*, as have modern Jews, with gifts for Esau. When Esau hesitated to take them, Jacob insisted: “Please accept the gift I have brought you, for God has been gracious to me and I have enough.” (Gen. 33:11) Jews, here, too, but especially in Israel, must stand up to the fanatic Orthodox—or the unyielding secularists, for that matter—our hard-liners and especially our violent fanatics, as Muslims must eventually do to theirs. Jews have returned to the land and built a vibrantly modern, hi-tech society. God has been gracious and we have enough to share.

Will this be the year peace arrives? *Halevai*, it should only be so. Not likely. What leader—Palestinian or Israeli—is going to stick his neck out while the Arab world, Palestinians

included, is in turmoil? You do not know whom you will be dealing with tomorrow. But every year is the year to keep trying, one person at a time, one community at a time here as there, to learn that the other shares a common humanity. Peace between Israel and her neighbors will not come in a blinding flash, but as the result of a long and difficult process. As our Reform prayer book, reflecting on conflict, tragedy and hate, put it:

If there is goodness at the heart of life, then its power, like the power of evil, is real. Which shall prevail? Moment by moment we choose between them. If we choose rightly, and often enough, the broken fragments of our world will be restored to wholeness. For this we need strength and help. We turn in hope, therefore, to a Power beyond us. (GOP, p. 221-2)

Let that be our hope and prayer as a new year begins: No more innocent victims. No more guilty victims, even. In the words of the prophet Isaiah: *Shalom shalom larachok v'lakarov*. Peace, peace to *all*, the near and the far. (Isaiah 57:19)

Amen.