

“I Don’t Hate You” – Finding Hope in a Fractured Time

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5784

By Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana

Congregation Beth Israel, Portland, Oregon

There’s an Israeli rap video making its way around social media, which really moved me. I know: Israeli? Rap? Not two things I would normally put together. Of course to be fair, my knowledge of the Rap genre is so thin that my only solid reference is the Broadway musical “Hamilton.” This earns me no street cred.

What I do understand of Rap, is the rawness, the power of language speaking unfiltered truth as the artist sees it. The ability of fast-paced rhythm and rhyme to make an idea stick – especially an uncomfortable one.

The video I have watched over and over again is titled “אני לא שונא אותך” - “I Don’t Hate You” – which an English commentator helpfully modified to “I Don’t Hate You. Well, Actually, I Kind of Do.”¹

The video is of two men, labeled by their T-shirts as “Leftist” and “Rightist” sitting at a round table alone in a small café. They are playing a game of backgammon, but what they are really doing is having an honest conversation - in song. They each begin their section proclaiming that they don’t hate. Really, they don’t hate. But, that they have to be honest about how they feel.

Their sharing is harsh, filled with name-calling and deep emotion. Their critique of the other is devastating. Both Right and Left get their searing turn at all that has been pent up for decades. I cringe at the recrimination and resentment, even as they repeat their claim not to hate.

And then, their venom spent, the two stand side by side while a memorial siren wails. They are both now wearing T-shirts showing them as holding the same military rank: Sergeants in the Israeli army. Above the army logo on their breast is the Hebrew abbreviation for “November ’95” – a reference to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin on November 4th, 1995 at the conclusion of a rally supporting the Oslo Accords. A Rightist politician speaking at a Leftist rally in support of peace, gunned down by a Right Wing religious extremist, in a moment that broke the nation.

¹ <https://danielgordis.substack.com/p/i-dont-hate-you-well-actually-i-kind>

On Twitter (without English subtitles):

https://twitter.com/therealkornezz/status/1686259860407558144?s=46&t=N5riM3aYwFN_OR3eU17E8A

There are so many layers that bring me emotional resonance. Despite the deep political and ethnic fractures which have long simmered in Israeli society, the shared responsibility of compulsory army service has been something which unified the Israeli people. Except where they didn't and where it still doesn't. Ultra-Orthodox Jews – the “Haradei” – and Israeli Arabs are exempt from the draft. The Haradei are resented by the Left for this and for other reasons. And Israeli Arabs are further excluded from Israeli society by their absence from what is usually a unifier – shared sacrifice through military service. A recent element of division in Israel is the refusal of some Israeli Jews, particularly of elite units such as Air Force Pilots, refusing to show up for compulsory Reserve training during the current protests, calling into question how unifying even army service is today. Israel today is rocked by unprecedented mass protests by the Left and smaller but more violent protests by the Right. As in America, Democracy is on the line.

And yet, in this video at least, when it comes time to mourn, Left and Right stand together. The end title reads: השוּנָא אֶךְ אֲנוּכִי? – “Am I My Brother’s Hater?” A clever twist on the biblical text from Genesis “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?”² And, movingly, at the very conclusion while the siren memorializing the war dead fades... the two sides embrace and chat together. Brothers at the end.

Israeli society is different from ours. But the rifts, the tensions, the violence and the recriminations they are experiencing is similar to what we are seeing at home. I find the protests inspiring, but the tensions in Israeli society mirror our own. You and I might say “I don’t hate” but our language and our actions speak otherwise. We easily label the other and denigrate them. We refuse to listen to their hurt, their resentment and despair when we are caught up in our own righteousness. “Am I my brother’s hater?” we could ask, if we were willing to be honest. What is powerful to me about the video is that the two sides listen to each other. They don’t walk away, even when the rhetoric is harsh. The person who posted the video wrote that there is not a single phrase in the song that he hasn’t heard from people close to him – family and friends. And we have all heard harsh words, slanders and slogans – certainly in our social media feeds and sometimes coming from our own mouths – about those who we consider to be “other.” But we don’t listen to those we disagree with. These days it is mostly political difference that puts us in the realm of hatred. Using party names as labels that supposedly fully define an identity, we fashion caricatures of their beliefs – those “others” who are not like us - without listening to their pain. We refuse to humanize. And we know they do the same thing to us. It is easier to exclude someone, even if they are family or friends – than to allow ourselves to be challenged. It is easier to hate.

I wish someone would make a rap video like this for us in America today. Could we actually listen to the other side saying hurtful things about us? Could we remain at the table and still say “I don’t hate you”? What grabs me in the Israeli video I saw, is that the two sides do listen to

² הַשְׂמֵר אֶתִּי אֲנֹכִי - Gen. 4:9

each other. They don't defend, they don't argue – they say their piece and they listen to what the other has to say. They allow the other the dignity of their argument. It is hard to hate someone when you have truly listened to their pain.

“I Don't Hate You.” A powerful echo of the biblical commandment: **לֹא־תִשְׂנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְכֶם** “You shall not hate your brother in your heart.”³

But wait, we might say. It's one thing not to hate. But, come on, Rabbi – some people are just really, really wrong! You can't expect me to listen to them! Their views are hateful, hurtful and destroying our society. If they would just come around to my way of thinking, everything would be just fine! I don't hate - but, if I did hate, my hate would be righteous.

Let me tell you why there is nothing new under the sun.

In the Talmud⁴, the rabbis argue about why the two Temples were destroyed and Jewish sovereignty eliminated for what would wind up being 2000 years until the establishment of the modern State of Israel. The First Temple, the rabbis claim, was destroyed because of grave sins that took place among the people and in the sacred space itself. But, the argument goes, in the Second Temple period the people "were righteous and engaged in Torah, mitzvot and acts of kindness" - **מִפְּנֵי מָה הָרַב?** the question is asked: Why was it destroyed if they were so righteous? **מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהִיְתָה בּוֹ שִׂנְאָת הַנֶּחֱם** comes the answer – Because there was **שִׂנְאָת הַנֶּחֱם**, wanton hatred, during that time. Later commenters explained that the people felt so righteous in their behavior, that they grew suspicious of anyone who didn't behave exactly as they did. That righteous suspicion led to hatred. That hatred led to violence. And that violence led to their destruction. The Romans were only the external force which crushed the divided and hate-filled, hollowed-out core.

מִפְּנֵי שִׂנְאָת הַנֶּחֱם because of wanton hatred, hatred allowed to run free - the Jewish people so long ago lost their way, lost their sense of peoplehood, and they lost their freedom. Hatred, even righteous hatred, destroys and corrupts. In Pirke Avot (2:11), the Ethics of our Ancestors, Rabbi Joshua said **שִׂנְאָת הַבְּרִיּוֹת, מוֹצִיאִין אֶת הָאָדָם מִן הָעוֹלָם** “Hatred of humankind puts a person out of the world.” We are removed from others when we exclude others, when we allow hate to separate us.

And hatred also removes us from ourselves. Hatred diminishes us even as it negates the other. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was no stranger to the ways that hatred leads to violence, gave a sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church titled “Loving Your Enemies.”⁵ In it, he said:

³ Lev. 19:17

⁴ Yoma 9b

⁵ “Loving Your Enemies,” Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, November 17, 1957 -

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/loving-your-enemies-sermon-delivered-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

We usually think of what hate does for the individual hated or the individuals hated or the groups hated. But it is even more tragic, it is even more ruinous and injurious to the individual who hates. You just begin hating somebody, and you will begin to do irrational things. You can't see straight when you hate. You can't walk straight when you hate. You can't stand upright. Your vision is distorted. There is nothing more tragic than to see an individual whose heart is filled with hate.

Perhaps that is why, in our Yom Kippur liturgy when we enumerate our sins in the Al Chet, we include this one:

ועל חטא שְׂחָטָנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּשׂוֹאֵת הַנֶּחֱמָ:

And for the sin we committed before You by unwarranted hatred.⁶

I have great hope for the State of Israel, that they will not repeat the mistake of two millennia ago. That they will not let שְׂוֹאֵת הַנֶּחֱמָ - senseless hate - destroy them. There are hopeful signs there that democracy will survive and thrive and equal rights might be enshrined in a negotiated Constitution, something Israel has not yet achieved in its 75 years. There are signs of possible peace between Israel and her neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia, which can lead to peace and a just settlement with the Palestinians. Out of a crisis can come hope, if they can overcome hate.

And we also have a similar crisis in the United States. A crisis of faith in our institutions and our sources of knowledge. We are experiencing a threat to our Democracy not unlike what is happening in Israel. And we lack the unifying intuition of shared military service which can help hold a fragmented society together. Our divisions and our resentments are deep. Our fractures are more than political, in many ways they represent very different lived experiences and priorities of values. We are, and have long been, a divided nation. We each have our part in holding ourselves together. We can start by listening, by refusing to hate. We can keep senseless, even righteous hate, from defining us. We know that to hate is to lose our own sense of self. We get lost in our own resentment and pain and exclude the other. When we refuse to see, or hear or listen, when we let hate separate us, we lose ourselves. Can we turn our refusal to listen into a refusal to hate?

It takes a lot of courage to listen to someone with whom we disagree. Much easier to stay in our own bubble, to talk only with people whose views echo our own. But there is so much power in recognizing the humanity of someone you could easily demonize. There is so much dignity in refusing to hate.

In 2020, our city was deeply challenged by mass protests against police violence following the murder of George Floyd, and the violent police response to those protests. In August, one police officer, Corey Budworth, brutally struck a protestor, Teri Jacobs in the face with his baton during an evening protest. Ms. Jacobs filed a civil rights and battery suit against the city, and an

⁶ Mishkan Hanefesh – Yom Kippur, p. 90

assault charge against Budworth. The officer was indicted by a Multnomah county grand jury, marking the first time a Portland police officer faced prosecution for actions taken during the protest. The next day 50 officers resigned from the Police Bureau's "Rapid Response Team" in which Budworth served, in protest.

In lieu of a trial, Officer Budworth and Teri Jacobs agreed to a process of restorative justice. According to Multnomah County District Attorney Mike Schmidt, the process involved conversations facilitated by a professional, to help the two come to an agreement about what it would take for Jacobs to heal. Rather than face each other through lawyers in a courtroom, the two agreed to talk directly to each other, to hear each other. They refused to hate.

In a public apology video recorded at the request of the victim, Budworth acknowledged the harm he had caused and said:

the time spent with Miss Jacobs has given me an opportunity very few people have had since 2020 to reflect on what the events and time period meant to the police, protesters and the city at large. I understand that the harm that was caused was not limited to Miss Jacobs and was felt by others in the community when there was a great distrust of law enforcement.⁷

DA Schmidt, in talking about the process of restorative justice between the two said: "It's hard to actually look someone in the eye, understand that you caused harm and take accountability for that. If they can do it, all of us can do it."⁸

I agree. Even though it is hard, we can do it. We can listen. We can be listened to. We can find what unites us instead of focusing on what divides us. We can refuse to hate.

On these High Holidays, when we engage in our Jewish communal confession, let us recognize the sin of שְׂנֵאת הַנֶּזֶם – senseless hatred – in our own hearts and on our own lips. Let us honestly ask ourselves the question: הֲשׂוֹנֵא אֶךְ אֲנֹכִי? – "Am I My Brother's Hater?" Let us have the courage to listen to uncomfortable truths and open ourselves to the dignity of those with whom we disagree. May we have the resolution to say I disagree with you, but I will listen to you. Because, despite it all, "I Don't Hate You."

⁷ <https://youtu.be/vxOGxaO8h14>

⁸ <https://www.oregonlive.com/crime/2023/07/portland-police-officer-records-video-apology-to-protester-for-striking-her-in-the-head-with-baton-in-2020.html>