



LeoBaeckTemple

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“Too Heavy a Burden”

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This summer, my family and I escaped for a little change of venue – a hiking trip up in the Sierras. It was good for the body and good for the soul to get out on the trails... until we started noticing how many people were hiking without facemasks, in defiance of all the posted signs. Some at least went to the trouble of pulling their shirts up over their faces as they saw us coming. But many simply walked right up to us, faces uncovered, greeted us politely as if there was no pandemic, and just continued on their way.

I tried not to let this get under my skin. Tried, but did not succeed. Attrition took over. The more smiling, maskless hikers we passed, the angrier I became – about the hubris, the insensitivity, the danger they posed to others, and not only on the trails. And gradually, I could feel my revulsion at their decision becoming a revulsion at them – presumptions welling up inside me about who they were, what they believe, where their allegiances lie, all their falsehoods. I felt myself starting to migrate from hating what they did to just hating them.

It's not something that makes me proud, mind you, but it's hardly a surprise. That is, I'm hardly unique. Perhaps you caught the story this summer of Rick Rose, a 37-year-old Ohio man who made headlines when he died from COVID-19 just two months after declaring on Facebook that he was “not buying a f---ing mask” and only three weeks after posting photos from a crowded pool party he'd attended. His final posts were about how awful it felt to be out of breath. International news outlets carried the story as a cautionary tale, but unwittingly, they triggered a feeding frenzy of comments under his Facebook posts – a mixture of loving consolation from family and friends, vicious mockery and chastisement of a dead man from thousands of strangers, and even a few people willing to celebrate one less COVID-denying vote in a swing state this fall... all in plain view for his loved ones to read. It was an absolutely horrifying mirror to look into – a mirror of American hate.

From inside the cauldron, most of us take comfort in seeing our ideological adversaries as the purveyors of hate, not us. Of course, both ideological sides see it that way, so maybe we're all pretty hate-filled at the moment. After all, it's easy to see the hate packed into Derek Chauvin's knee as it choked the life out of George Floyd for nearly nine unthinkable minutes – less easy to see, for what it is, the hatred we contribute to the march of human degradation... and even when we do see it, we are quick to justify or defend it, since its targets, we have concluded, so richly deserve it. "Serves Rick Rose right to die," says the voice of justified hate.

It's Yom Kippur, our day for coming clean. For me, that means confessing that I have grown weary and ashamed of the hatred I tolerate in myself. Or as the late hero John Lewis put it, I have found that "hate is too heavy a burden to bear." It does not make me better. It does not make me more effective at catalyzing change. It only makes me meaner. I like myself much less with all this hatred churning in me. And it is debilitating, exhausting to hate, isn't it? Haven't you grown weary of toting your hatred around, weighing yourself down with an impulse you know is destructive – to yourself and to the cause of justice in whose name you likely defend it?

The problem, of course, is that it's very hard to kick the hate habit when hatred is being commoditized – when we are being cultivated deliberately to hate each other. To escape the destructiveness of hate is to swim against a mighty current these days. But if you've felt a bit of your own destruction lately... or feared it... it would be wise to listen to someone widely regarded as American history's greatest expert on self-destruction, which he himself acknowledged in his greatest moment of reckoning. I'm talking about none other than Richard Nixon, a man not often quoted from this bima. He was literally minutes from boarding that helicopter as the only president ever to resign, and from that posture of disgrace, he spoke these words to his family, friends, and staff loyalists: "Always remember, others may hate you, but those who hate you don't win unless you hate them, and then you destroy yourself."

Now, if you can't take that from Nixon, take it from me – we are doing ourselves no good at all by giving into our propulsion to hate. And not a single one of us actually wants to be more

hateful, even if we feel our hatred is warranted. So – what to do to stop it? The answer, of course, is what it has always been: the only antidote to hate is love.

I know – it's hazardous to talk about love while family members and friends are excising each other from their lives because they see things so differently. I get that this is a moment when love sounds at best quaint, and at worst dangerously naïve. Of course, if you're thinking that right now, it's probably worth pausing long enough to consider what this moment in history has done to you.

On this day, when we ask ourselves not who we can defend being, or who the world has beaten us into being – we are here to ask: Who do we want to be? Do we want to throw in with the cynics who believe the worst about humankind, or the visionaries who have architected the best in humankind, over and over again throughout history?

When we think of our heroes, is there a single one of them who gratified our impulse to hate? I know it's fashionable to consider this the most fraught moment ever – but are we really vain enough to think that we happen to live in the one and only moment that is so dark and cynical it is immune to love? Plenty of the greatest practitioners of love in our country's and our world's history – people like John Lewis – stuck with love, even in the face of hatred so deadly it would make us blanch. Are we strong enough, brave enough, to do the same?

On this Yom Kippur, I'm banking that you're not too far gone in this cesspool of hate to hear me out about love. Not the facile type of love that makes us all roll our eyes, because we're trying to stare down deep dangers here. I'm talking about the kind of love that is larger, more steadfast than those deep dangers. The love that defeats those dangers.

Our Torah commands us to love in only three very specific ways. We are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We are to love the stranger – the most oft repeated command in the entire scroll. And we are to love Adonai our God. That's the commanded love list in Judaism. Our teacher, Rabbi Sheila Weinberg, who has visited LBT several times in recent years, teaches that these are not, in fact, three distinct types of love – rather, they are a process. We draw upon our love of self in learning how to love the people we know, those closest to us – how to

want for them what we want for ourselves. We then allow our practice of loving those we know to teach us how to love those we don't know – the stranger, near and far, including those who may be really hard for us to love. And when we succeed in doing that, we have cultivated the capacity to love God – and here, we're not talking about loving some remote divine being... we're talking about becoming vessels of love who increase the store of love throughout all that lives.

A beautiful teaching. Simple to describe. Very, very hard to do, especially when so much hatred is being directed at us. But Rabbi Weinberg is onto something by defining love as a gift we understand first as that which we want for ourselves, so we can want it for everyone else, too. That doesn't feel so farfetched. After all, it's not as if we expect amorous affection from everyone we meet. We do, however, see ourselves as worthy of some important things denied to those who are hated. Dignity. Grace. Empathy. Fairness. We begin by wanting these for the people we know, so that we can grow into wanting them for the people we don't. And it seems that science aligns with the Torah in this regard, as there's evidence that human beings developed the ability to hate as an evolutionary adaptation, making it easier for a group of hunter-gatherers to justify taking more for themselves from the scarce supply of food, leaving competing groups with less than their fair share.

After a summer which ripped our country's racial fissures wide open, it's unsurprising that our temple is sticking its neck out even further than usual to advance the welfare of Black and Brown people, who have been systemically disadvantaged in too many ways to count – from the neighborhoods where they can live to the schools they can attend... from their safety in the hands of law enforcement to their safety from COVID-19, which is far deadlier for them than it is for us. That's not a coincidence. And it's not genetic. That's a systemic imbalance we tolerate because it's in our favor. If hate was an evolutionary adaptation designed to enable us to feel more at peace while taking more of the scarce food for ourselves, then love isn't some sort of mushy warm-heartedness toward those who have less; love is wanting all people to have the same shot at the scarce food. Love is wanting to reform the systems that promote unfairness to anyone – loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, and loving even those least like us as we love those most like us... filling the world with that kind of love.

Now, we tend to resist this type of logic because we see people who traffic in hatred much more than we do – whose hatred is, in fact, often aimed at us. Do we owe even them this kind of love? Well, if I were to say yes, I'd surely lose a great many of you, so instead I'll let someone else say it – someone who had much, much more to fear from hate than you or I do, even now. These words are from one of the lesser-known sermons of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He delivered it at his church in Montgomery, Alabama in November 1957, almost two years after Rosa Parks' courage turned that city into a raging inferno of hate... almost two years after his home was bombed by a white supremacist. So if you think you've got a high bar to get over on your way to loving your adversary, think about King's bar – and listen to how reminiscent his words are of the Torah and of Rabbi Weinberg.

Preached Dr. King, "In order to love your enemies, you must begin by analyzing self... within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, there is some good... The person who hates you most has some good in him; even the nation that hates you most has some good in it; even the race that hates you most has some good in it. And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every man and see deep down within him what religion calls 'the image of God,' you begin to love him in spite of. No matter what he does, you see God's image there.

"...Love," he continued, "is not this sentimental something that we talk about... It is the refusal to defeat any individual. When you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system, you love, but you seek to defeat the system.

"If you hate your enemies, you have no way to redeem and to transform your enemies. But if you love your enemies," said Dr. King, "you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption. You just keep loving people and keep loving them, even though they're mistreating you... it seems to me that this is the only way as our eyes look to the future."

Anything about which Dr. King and Richard Nixon agree is probably worth our noticing. But as this new year dawns, and we Jews feel dangers swirling around us – dangers we've not feared in a very long time, if ever – perhaps we should listen to our era's greatest teacher from the

place of Jewish endangerment, Elie Wiesel. He wrote: "If you see love as a compromise, a defeat, you're mistaken. It's a victory. In a time of war, when men are filled with death, this is the time to love. This is the time to choose. An act of love may tip the balance."

This is the time to choose. Who do you want to cast your fate with in the year 5781? John Lewis, Martin Luther King, Jr., Elie Wiesel and Rabbi Sheila Weinberg? Or whoever most succeeded in extinguishing your trust in their brave and proven vision for humankind?

Yom Kippur is for the truth about ourselves. And the truth is that the hate is too heavy a burden to bear. We lionized John Lewis when he said it – and then changed the world by it. Let us, in this new year of extraordinary consequence, be daring enough to live it.