

Corrosive Power of Hate

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Once upon a time, there was a man. He had a friend whose name was Kamtza, and an enemy named Bar Kamtza. This man loved a good party, and so one day he decided to host a huge celebration. He turned to his butler, and said: please be sure to invite my friend Kamtza to this party! His butler joyfully obliged. Days later, the party begins, and low and behold, the invitation had mistakenly been brought to Bar Kamtza instead of Kamtza. Bar Kamtza couldn't believe his luck, as he made his way to the party thinking about the possibility of a new friendship between him and the host.

The host was wandering through the party, joyfully watching all his friends having a great time, until he came upon Bar Kamtza. Startled and befuddled, he shouted: "you are my enemy! What are you doing here? Arise and leave."

Bar Kamtza, anxiously said to him: "Since I have already come, let me stay and I will give you money for whatever I eat and drink. Just do not embarrass me by sending me out. I will give you money for half of the feast; just do not send me away." The host said to him: "No, you must leave." Bar Kamtza then said to him: "I will give you money for the entire feast; just let me stay." The host said to him: "No, you must leave."

Finally, the host took bar Kamtza by his hand, stood him up, and took him out. After having been cast out from the feast, bar Kamtza said to himself: Since the Rabbis were sitting there and did not protest the actions of the host, although they saw how he humiliated me, I believe that they were content

with what he did. I will therefore go and inform against them. He went and said to the emperor: The Jews have rebelled against you. Thus began the destruction of the second Temple.¹

This story, from the Talmud, is told every year on Tisha B'Av, the only other 25 hour fast in our tradition. Within the tale, is our traditions' concern about hate, and the corrosive impact it has on people, and societies. The irrational hatred of the unnamed host, who is a reflection of each of us, causes the Temple to fall, and for Jewish life to change irrevocably. My friends, I worry about the level of hate in our world today. No one knows what the future has in store, but I worry about a calamity as devastating as the destruction of the Temple 2000 years ago. I don't know what it might be, but it is unfortunately far too easy to find countless examples of hate in our world.

Vladimir Putin has used the specter of Nazism, and the hatred it engenders, to justify his violence in Ukraine. As I think about the last two presidential elections, for so many Americans, their vote was cast not on the basis of political position or ideology. Rather, they voted against the person they hated, instead of for the person they liked. It is hate that continues to drive so many moments of domestic terrorism: from January 6, to Coleyville Texas, to Buffalo, and far too many to name.

Hate is a powerful emotion. When we truly hate something, there is no possibility for redemption, no quarter given nor offered, a belief that the focus of our hatred is irredeemable and damned. There is no place in our world for hate: its venom is poisonous to everyone: the hater, its focus, and everyone around them. And yet: we live in a world, and a country that is consistently and carefully encouraging us to hate the other. To see them only as an obstacle

¹ Gittin 55b:17-56a:5

to our goals, as only the embodiment of the ideas we vehemently disagree with. Not a fully breathing person who deserves respect because they are also created in the image of God. Hate breeds hate: we learn to hate others because they hate us, but as Dr. King reminds us: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."²

I don't know if you've heard of Derek Black. He has many infamous relatives: his father, Don Black, who started Stormfront, the first major white nationalist website and host of regular radio show, and his godfather, notorious former KKK Grand Wizard, David Duke. All peddlers of the worst kind of hate.

But I want to tell you about Derek, a young man who was carefully groomed to become the next leader of the white nationalist movement. Homeschooled, and indoctrinated in his family's white supremacist views, Derek was given every opportunity to become the leader they wanted. Until he went to a liberal arts college in Florida. When he first arrived, he figured the easiest way to be ostracized was to espouse white nationalist views, so for his first semester he kept it all to himself. Derek tried to be anonymous on campus while still calling in to his father's radio show.

As he was leaving for winter break, his secret came out: his face and his hateful ideology were plastered all over the college message board. An intense backlash followed with fellow students posting: "[Derek Black] chooses to be a racist public figure. We choose to call him a racist in public." And, "I just want this guy to die a painful death along with his entire family. Is that too much to ask?"

² Strength to Love, 1963. MLK jr

After that, Derek avoided public spaces, and people in general, until he got a text from a young Jewish student named Matthew Stevenson asking: “What are you doing Friday night?” Matthew had read all of Derek’s message boards that claimed: “Jews are NOT white.” “Jews worm their way into power over our society.” “They must go.”

But Matthew wondered: what if we include Derek instead of revile him? What if we spoke honestly and earnestly instead of throwing stones? What if we met hate with love and acceptance? So Derek accepted the invitation and joined them for Shabbat dinner. And then another. Months went by where Shabbat after Shabbat, Derek had an opportunity to meet the people he had publicly reviled. As he later said: “[T]he “...person-to-person interactions ...[that required]... a lot of honest listening on both sides [changed me]. For me, the conversations that led me to change my views started because I couldn’t understand why anyone would fear me. I thought I was only doing what was right and defending those I loved.”

Derek’s definition of “what was right” changed --not through violence, hate, or yelling, but because he was met with an outstretched hand and words of welcome from a young Jewish college student. His last public words before being disavowed by his father and family, were written to the Southern Poverty Law Center, where he said: “The things I have said as well as my actions have been harmful to people of color, people of Jewish descent, activists striving for opportunity and fairness for all. I am sorry for the damage done.” All that came from his openness to learning from everyone.³

Derek’s family--his godfather David Duke, and his father--continue to make morally repugnant choices every day. I believe that their words and

³ [How A Rising Star Of White Nationalism Broke Free From The Movement : NPR](#)

actions are heinous. They stain our country. But the moment we say that we can learn nothing from our honest interactions with people we are told we should hate, the moment we say such people are irredeemable and damned, in that moment we step away from our Jewish tradition. Our faith teaches that each of us, even those whose behavior is despicable, are made in the divine image. When we demonize the other, we lose our opportunity to stamp out hate. Because we need love to fight hate, not more hate.

Over the past ten years, I have been to Selma Alabama eight times. Each time I arrive, I notice how Selma is falling apart. There is no longer any major industry and the city has fallen on hard times. But there are still people there who inspire, and can tell stories of meeting hate with love. One reason I keep going back to Selma is for Joanne Bland, who at the age of 13, marched over the Edmund Pettus bridge on Bloody Sunday, March 7, 1965. Hate drove the violence on Bloody Sunday. Hate for black people simply because of the color of their skin. The raw hatred on display, as women and children were trampled by horses, as tear gas spread throughout the crowd changed the hearts of America, especially because it wasn't met with more hate. Because Hate cannot drive out Hate, only love can do that. The Civil Rights Movement inspired us, and continues to inspire others because love conquered hate. We are hoping to go to Selma in February as a congregation, to hear Joanne's story, so please let me know if you're interested in helping plan it with me.

This afternoon we will read from the heart of the Torah, Kedoshim, which challenges us: לֹא־תִשָּׂנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. (19:17) We can all come up with so many reasons to hate someone. The challenge for us is to find the divine image within them. To not simply write them off, but to give them opportunity after opportunity.

I have been accused many times of being a pollyanna with this viewpoint. Consider four members of congress, two democrats, and two republicans. Ilhan Omer has perpetuated a whole host of antisemitic tropes, and is openly hostile to the Jewish state. Jim Jordan has continued to peddle the election lie that hurts our democracy. Rashida Talib calls for defunding all support to Israel. Marjorie Taylor Greene has claimed that Jews have space lasers that caused the wildfires out west. Do I wish each of these people were out of political life? Absolutely. But at the same time, I recognize that they are not pure evil and in need of hatred. I know they are doing what they **think** is best for the country, even if I vehemently disagree with them. Hate limits our possibilities and clouds our judgment. In Avot D'Rabi Natan, he asks איזו גבור, who is Strongest of all? Some say One who can turn a hater into a beloved friend.⁴ We all need to develop that level of strength. I am not alone in worrying about the future of our country and our world if we cannot escape this feedback loop of hatred. We can be the change. Each of us has work to do to stop reflexively hating someone because of what they believe in.

Rav Kook, the first chief Rabbi of Israel read the story of Kochba and Bar Kochba, and challenged us all, when he said: "If we were destroyed, and the world with us, due to baseless hatred, then we shall rebuild ourselves, and the world with us, with baseless love — *ahavat chinam*."⁵ Let us build ourselves, and our world into the one we should have. One that doesn't reflexively hate, but reflexively loves.

⁴ Avot d'Rabi Natan: 23:1

איזו גבור ... ויש אומרים מי שעושה שונא אוהבו

Who is the strongest of all? ... And some say: One who can turn a hater into a beloved friend.

⁵ (*Orot HaKodesh* vol. III, p. 324)