

Kol Nidre- 2018/5779

There's a famous Chasidic story of a *pintele yid*, an everyday Jew that has an indestructible core of Jewishness. The scene is a *pintele yid* sitting in the packed third-class section of an overnight train moving through the frozen backdrop of Russia in the days of the Tsar, when anti-Semitism was quite alive and well. This *pintele yid* was deep into reciting the psalms, the *tehelim*, quietly humming a *niggun*, *yai-di-dai yai-di-dai*, swaying back and forth in his fervor. Just then, a Russian police officer, who did not take friendly to Jews, walked up the train car's aisle and confronted the *yid*. "Jew! What are you doing on my train?" Without even looking up, the *pintele yid* continued his humming, *yai-di-dai yai-di-dai*, and continued to gently sway back and forth. "Jew!" the officer continued, "You don't belong on my train!" But the *yid* just kept humming and swaying. Finally, the officer grabbed the suitcase above the *yid*, flung open the window and threw it out into the cold darkness, "Filthy Jew! What do you think about that?" Without looking up, the *yid* hummed, "*dat vas some-one else's bag, dat vas some-one else's...*"

For hundreds of years, Jews have turned suffering and oppression into humor, partly as a defense mechanism but partly to draw attention to irony. We laugh at the momentary triumph of the *pintele yid* over the officer, but in the end, the message of this story for generations of European Jews was that the world is still filled with hate and anti-Semitism.

As you know, I spend a little of my time researching how cancer works. For decades, there was a mantra in the field about "curing cancer". "When are we going to be closer to a cure?" people would ask me. I know that my

answer has always been so dissatisfying, because I tell people that cancer cures will always be rare, but that we have greatly improved our ability to prevent or remit many types of cancer, giving people full, productive lives. I tell them that cures are not available for diabetes, sickle-cell anemia or HIV/AIDS, yet current treatments, when successful, allow people to live well into their 70s and 80s, when they die with the disease, not from it. The same is coming true for many, many cancers; they are becoming 'maintenance diseases'.

The same is true for hate. Throughout the ages, we have witnessed paroxysms, outbreaks of hate, bigotry, anti-Semitism, misogyny that have produced waves of genocides, and in many of our parents' lifetime, the Holocaust by the Nazis. Well-meaning people have responded by forming organizations to combat hate, to teach tolerance, to produce new generations of societal upstanders. Organizations such as the United Nations, the NAACP, the Anti-Defamation League, the Southern Poverty Law Center, our own Holocaust Resource Center. In order to try to heal and produce a better world, countries such as South Africa and Rwanda developed Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, which allow the perpetrators of apartheid and genocide the ability to "come clean", so that they might find some peace among the neighbors they previously looked to exterminate.

But does hate ever get cured, or is it that our best efforts only keep it dormant for the time being? Should we be worried that racism and hate are smoldering like embers under the surface, only to rear up and cause

wholesale conflagrations? According to data collected by the FBI, hate crimes in the US have been on an increase since 2014, yet in the two weeks following 2016 presidential election, hate crimes rose 44%. And in the 10 largest cities in the US, reports of hate crime rose an average of 12% of levels in 2016. Not surprisingly, the largest targets are the black and Jewish communities, with Muslims, Latinos and Asians not far behind. Voices of white supremacists, neo-nazis and the alt-right, long thought to be forced into "remission" like a dormant cancer, have reared their heads with what seems like a renewed impunity, fueled by social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and in notable cases, by our President. What I am sure all of us would consider ugly hate speech and biogted actions are now being defended by these proponents as manifestations of "white" ethnic privilege.

It was only several years ago that many institutions in the US proclaimed that we now live in a post-racist society. The Supreme Court struck down major provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act because, as Chief Justice John Roberts stated, "our country has changed", so that blanket federal protections were no longer needed to stop discrimination. But within days, and in some cases, hours, we were reminded of why the law was first put into place: over 50% of states covered by the 1965 law quickly passed legislation that restricted voter rights, such as cutting voting hours, purging voter rolls, ending same-day registration, actions demonstrated to affect low-income, young and minority voters. Many argued in op-ed pages that the election of person of color, Barak Obama, as President meant that we live in a post-racial society. Though this was an advance towards equality

for all, it was Obama who said in his farewell speech, "Race remains a potent and often divisive force in our society."

So what should we do about hate? I say that it is high time that we treat it the same way we treat cancer nowadays, as a maintenance condition. We will never cure hate, but we can mitigate its effects by continuously teaching our children about tolerance, the need to insure equal rights and equal respect for all. Hate, like cancer, is part of our human condition, and we, as individuals and as a society must prevent its rise by teaching our children and our communities. We must constantly monitor for its rise, and whether or not it hits you or your neighbor, or even someone you don't know in your community, when we see it, we must confront it, head on. Hate will not go away forever, but our silence, our inaction will surely allow it to thrive.

The *Yomim Nora'im*, The High Holidays, are a time to reflect on who we have been, individually and as a community, during this past year, and what we can do to improve ourselves and our communities. Among the behaviors we are admonished to review is what caused us to hate in the past year. Who at work were we jealous of, against whom might we harbor a bias, whom did we hurt by our hateful actions, whom did we consider as "other", as an outsider, not worthy as an equal? This night of our most solemn day *Yom Kippur*, when we seek *kapparah*, salvation from our misdeeds, our first prayer is the *Kol Nidre*, an ancient legal formula written in Aramaic that allows us to nullify unfulfilled personal vows from the last year. For all of us who have allowed our hearts to hate and our mouths to express oppressive thoughts, here is the time for each of us to take pause and disavow those

concepts. Here is a time to say, I will do that no more. This is the simple, yet sometimes most difficult action of *kapparah*. Yet, act we must, because intention alone means we will not improve in the coming year. And we are told after the *Kol Nidre* prayer, that if we ask, G-d will deliver:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' הִיָּהוּ סְלִיחָתִי כְּדַבַּרְךָ And G-d said, I have forgiven, as you have asked.

Let this coming year be the one that each and every one of us does at least one *mitzvah*, one positive deed, that we have put off for so long, one action that helps those in need around us, that builds our communities and that reaches out to our neighbors. Let this be the year that hate cannot survive among us because it has been drowned out by the love that is the City of Good Neighbors. Shana tova and gemar chatima tova; I wish you a meaningful and easy fast.