

The Talmud tells a story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son Rabbi Eleazar. Now Rabbi Yehuda was one day praising what the Roman government had brought to Palestine: “how pleasant are the deeds of these Romans, as they’ve established marketplaces, bridges, and bath houses.” Rabbi Shimon retorted, “those marketplaces are for people selling themselves, the bathhouses for self-indulgence, and the bridges for collecting taxes.” Of course, Rabbi Shimon’s statements made their way to the government, and a call was made for Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Eleazar’s execution. The two fled, finding a cave where miraculously, a carob tree sprouted and a spring of water poured forth. The two men remained there for 12 years, studying Torah and praying, and little else.

When the Roman emperor died, the edict expired, and when word was brought to the scholars, they emerged from their cave. Rabbi Shimon, already judgmental, and now with 12 years of stewing built up, saw people outside plowing and sowing and said “These people abandon eternal life of Torah study and engage in temporal life for their own sustenance,” and everywhere he and his son looked immediately burned up, as though lasers of rage shot forth from his eyes. Seeing the destruction caused by their intolerance, a divine voice rang out, saying, “Did you come out of your cave just to destroy My world? You need a longer time out.” One year later, they emerged again, and this time, everywhere Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Eleazar looked was healed.

What a story for these times. Holed up in our caves, isolated and struggling, many of us are also stewing, a few on Torah, many on COVID, racism, and politics. Already critical of society around us, we’ve grown in fury and disgust, burning what we can, applying labels to those ‘Roman sympathizers,’ whose deeds and words may threaten our existence. In this anger, fomenting for what feels like 12 years, we’re not necessarily wrong. Nor were Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Eleazar. The story cautions us, however. Unbridled anger will not achieve what we want. It will simply cause us to miss the goodness and the humanity in the other side, and it will undoubtedly bring destruction in its wake.

Tomorrow, we read from the book of Jonah, which some read as a satirical jab at the kind of people who only see the world in extremes. Jonah sleeps through a storm when content, but with the smallest of frustrations is ready to die. Called upon by God to tell

the sinning people of Nineveh to repent, and thinking he can avoid this undesirable task, Jonah runs to the ends of the earth, only to be forced to confront those “enemies of God.” And when he confronts them, the people of Nineveh listen! They repent! God forgives! And Jonah starts complaining, saying that he didn’t want to go in the first place because *Adonai Adonai El rachum v’chanun!* God is compassionate and forgiving! Why tell people they’re wrong if they can repent and be forgiven? Jonah would rather die than live through this perversion of justice.

God responds to Jonah’s grievances with a lesson. God gives Jonah a plant for shade in the hot sun, and the next day kills it. When Jonah complains (as he’s very good at doing), and again asks for death, God responds, “you cared about the plant, for which you did not work and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. Should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand human beings who do not yet know their right hand from their left?” Should God not care for God’s creatures, even when they behave destructively? As people asking God for forgiveness this Yom Kippur, should we not be caring and forgiving as well?

Yet, we are so enormously polarized—even when our issues are those for which all thoughtful human beings should be able to come together. Are we so entrenched in our positions, casting Jonah-esque judgement and burning up relational bridges, that we end up behaving exactly like those we have come to despise?

The kabbalists held that evil—that all that is wrong in the world — comes not from an outside source but from a discrete aspect of God that actually has a particularly vital role in the functioning of the cosmos: G’vurah— strength, power, and judgment. There are times where judgment is appropriate and required, but it must be balanced, by kindness and understanding. Evil came, for the kabbalists, when G’vurah was out of balance.

When there is too much strength and not enough empathy, things go badly. It is exactly where we were at the destruction of the Second Temple, which the rabbis teach us was caused by *sinat hinam*—abundant senseless hatred. And this is exactly where we are as a nation, filled with hate and divisiveness and fear.

Judgment is needed, but it cannot be our sole focus on this day of atonement. Our

Love Sweet Love

Kol Nidre 5781 - Rabbi David Z. Vaisberg - Temple B'nai Abraham

tradition tells us, this day, that we cannot fall to the point where G'vurah fills our hearts and minds; compassion and love for our fellow human beings need to have their place, too. It is not the God of judgment we seek this holy day; we seek the God of forgiveness, the God of empathy, the God of love, the God who is ready to forgive, to accept our t'shuvah, and to patiently guide us to a better place.

Rav Avraham Yitzhak Kook taught that the only way to build up from the ruins of senseless hatred is through balancing the scales with abundant love and respect. Instead of seeing in our enemies shards of brokenness, recognize in them their sparks of divine light. Humanizing instead of demonizing is what is required if we are to have any hope for redemption.

Rav Kook writes of every soul, "Each one of you, each individual soul from the aggregation of all of you, is a great spark from the torch of infinite light, which enlightens my existence. You give meaning to life and work, to Torah and prayer, to song and hope. It is through the conduit of your being that I sense everything and love everything."¹

Rav Kook wrote this not because he liked everyone, but because it was his religious obligation to find this light in everyone. Through this process, he was changed. His world filled with light. And this man, decades after his death, still serves as a source of illumination for so many.

We are all in that dark cave and it has been a long time. We need to seek justice and dignity for all. Doing so, however is going to require more than knocking down those with whom we have disputes or who spout ideas we don't like. Doing so requires actively seeking out goodness in others, accepting that goodness, and working to elevate those human beings, even just a little bit, so that we might build a lasting solution together.

We pray for compassion, for forgiveness, and for renewal, these holy days. If we expect that for ourselves, we must we be prepared to offer it to everyone else. We are responsible for one another. For the best and the worst among us, and for all of creation. Let us not fall prey to our base inclinations, so tempting to do in the depths of suffering.

¹ Shemonah Kevatzim, vol. I, sec. 163, in Chanan Morrison's *Silver from the Land of Israel*. New York: Urim, 2010.

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Instead, let us seek that higher, divine ground.

May it be for each of us that this coming year, we are *Rachum V'Chanun, Erekh Apayim v'ra'v Chesed V'emet*— that we are compassionate and gracious, patient, great in lovingkindness, while pursuing truth. May it be said that in the most divisive of times, instead of responding with hatred, vitriol, and by turning away, we turn toward engagement and invitation, with some unexpected warmth. May our circles be opened, by our own words and deeds, so that we can finally begin the process of healing, of repair, and t'shuvah— so that we can all return to life.

Gamar Chatimah Tovah.