

## “The Hatred Gift”

This is going to be a tough sermon on all of you. I am going to be asking you to do something very difficult. I have never done this before, but I will be asking you to open your hearts and respond generously. I have not cleared this with the synagogue or our President Eric Persily, but like at many congregations across the country before Yizkor (Memorial Services), I am going to be making an appeal.

Before I tell you what I want, let me talk to you about the Torah portion this morning (Leviticus 16). The text concerns the ritual of Yom Kippur. Aaron, the High Priest is told to enter the “Holy of Holies”, the “Kodesh K’doshim”, after bathing in water and dressing in his sacramental garments. Aaron was then to take two goats to the entrance of the Tabernacle and place “lots” upon them, one marked for G-d, the other for “Azazel” (I’ll speak about Azazel in a moment). The goat designated for the Lord was slaughtered and served as a sin offering. The High Priest was then commanded to lay his hands on the head

of the second live goat. He would confess the sins of Israel over it, “place” them on the head of the goat, and then through a designated person send the goat to “Azazel” to carry off the sins from out of the camp. All those involved in this ceremony from the High Priest to the man in charge of carrying off the goat into the wilderness to Azazel, to any person remotely involved in this ceremony, would wash their clothes and bathe in water.

That was the original ceremony of Yom Kippur.

There was no Kol Nidrei, no Yizkor (those traditions began in Europe centuries later). In fact, most of the things we do on Yom Kippur today are not how Moses and our people commemorated this Day of Atonement.

Nonetheless, let’s go back to this double goat ceremony. What was the goat for Azazel all about? Well, no one is quite sure. Azazel may have been the name of an ancient goat demon – a shepherd’s demon - haunting the wilderness to which the ancient Israelites could have worshipped. Maybe the Torah was attempting to slowly draw the people away from this old demon god and what

we are seeing is a merger of an ancient tribal sacrifice with a more contemporary sacrifice to the G-d of Israel.

And with this ceremony, we are seeing a new purpose. The goat for Azazel, once an offering to an ancient goat demon, became used for the physical and public removal ceremony of sin. It was a symbolic way for the peoples' sins and the evil committed by them to be sent back to Azazel, the wilderness of impurity and ruin. A physical act of cleansing.

Karen Armstrong, the author of numerous books on theology and religion, may be right. Pre-religion can be seen as an early form of psychology, helping people live creatively with realities for which there were no easy solutions. Here, perhaps, the Israelites understood that there was something psychologically therapeutic about symbolically removing the corrosive parts of themselves. Literally, letting go and starting anew.

We could use that today.

And that is kind of appeal I am asking of you today on Yom Kippur. What I want you from you in the next few minutes as I talk, is to take this Yom Kippur ceremony I

just spoke about to heart, and remove from within yourselves the most corrosive part of the human being. Learning to let it go and start anew.

And that corrosive part of us is the sin we refer to constantly in our prayers today as “sinat hinam”, the hatred and anger we carry for others past and present. I want you to take the corrosive sin of hate and, as the Israelities did with the Azazel ceremony, send it away as you begin a New Year.

Hate is a hard sin to let go but today, I appeal to you: let it go and move on with business of life.

One of my favorite Talmudic passages is from the Tractate Yoma. Let me read it to you:

“Why was the first Temple destroyed? Because of three things that were found in its time: idol worship, sexual licentiousness and bloodshed...If so, why was the second Temple destroyed? In that time, the commandments, the study of Torah, and the doing of righteous deeds were observed? Because of baseless hatred (sinat hinam). From this, we learn that baseless

hatred is as bad as idol worship, sexual licentiousness and bloodshed put together.” (Yoma 9a)

Sinat Hinam. Found nowhere in the Torah but *everywhere* in rabbinic literature, emphasized over and over many again during the Yom Kippur service.

Sinat hinam is usually translated as “baseless hatred” but I have difficulty with that translation. I mean hatred is not usually baseless. You tell someone: “Oh, why don’t you just drop it” and they’ll tell you, rightfully so: “you really don’t understand what that person did to me. If you knew, if you were there or it happened to *you*, you would feel the same hatred. Don’t tell me my hatred is baseless.”

And they are right. There is often nothing “baseless” about hatred unless it is based on prejudice or racism. But hatred as a result of a wrong committed against you? Why is that baseless?

Unless that is not the definition of ‘sinat hinam’.

There was an article recently in the *Jewish Forward* newspaper that helped me understand what the rabbis might really have meant when they coined the phrase “sinat hinam”.

As the article pointed out, “Sina” in Hebrew means hatred, but “hinam” comes from the word “hayn” which means “favor” or “grace”. For example, when the Torah speaks about Noah, it says that Noah found “hayn” (grace) in the eyes of G-d. “Hayn” is a gift, a favor.

(<http://www.forward.com/articles/113244/>)

And so, “sinat hinam” is the “gift of hatred”.

The hatred gift.

That’s perfect, because when you continue to hate long after an act has been committed against you, you are, indeed, giving the person who hurt you a gift, a freely given gift. You have made what that person did to you larger and more damaging to you than they thought possible. Sinat hinam is a gift to any person that committed a sin against you. The act should have been under your radar by now but is so under your skin, it is the gift that keeps on giving.

Sinat Hinam destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem because the constant hatred of fellow Jews toward each other was a gift to the Romans. Hatred among fellow Jews, no matter how slight, spread throughout the Jewish

nation like a raging cancer that consumed Israel. The Israelites couldn't unite because of this constant hatred against each other. And while they gave each other this gift, they 'gift wrapped' their homeland to the Romans. The hardest thing in the world is to be able to let go of hate.

You all know the hatred I'm talking about: the hatred you feel for the person who insulted a family member, for the "friend" who spoke behind your back or for the person who said or did something that was absolutely asinine. Any reasonable individual who knows the cause of your anger would say that is not baseless hatred and that guy was a "jerk" for doing or saying that to you.

There are two ways to react to these hurts. Some will say: Just love the person, forgive him and move on. The other approach is: Absolutely not! If he or she did wrong, and especially if they did not apologize, you are well within your right to continue to hate and hold a grudge. You should never have to love that person.

Here is a third way, my approach: hate that person, confront that person if you want, *but only within 48 hours*,

*and then drop it **completely** from your mind.* Two days and move on forever.

Why two days? Because the Torah allows us to be angry for two days; it gives us that window of hatred. The Torah talks about hatred and actually gives us a time limit for reasonable people to hold a grudge and be angry (See Deuteronomy 19:6). Just two days. Any less would be unrealistic because one should be mad when hatred is not baseless. But more than two days and the anger becomes dangerous; it becomes corrosive to the person and to society. Two days. The Torah could not conceive of brethren being mad for any longer.

So for 48 hours, stew all you want and wallow in your hatred. That's your emotions kicking in and it is okay to hate. But after two days, you need the intellect to kick in and realize that it makes no sense to hate beyond that. Hatred produces nothing positive for you or society and the only person who will benefit after two days from that anger is the other person. He or she has still "gotcha" because you keep giving him the gift of hatred.



And I ask you to commit to giving that up today, because while it is a gift to the person who started it all, it poisons your soul and destroys communities.

I have talked to ministers, rabbis, imams and I have asked them: what is the biggest problem you have in your community? You would think they would say: lack of funds or volunteers, a leaking roof, a broken A.C. system, congregational boards (and by the way, those are all the same issues everywhere you go!) You know what they tell me is their biggest problem? Congregants who are not *talking* to each other (and for something that happened years ago), parishioners who won't serve on a committee because of a verbal slight they received from a board member, a priest or a president, people who won't join or participate in a program because "that person" is chair. "Sinat hinam" creates more problems for congregations and communities than anything else.

I can see from the heads that are nodding right now that you know what I am talking about. You all have seen it! Someone said something boneheaded, stupid, or mean

to someone in this congregation. It was bad, it was awful and that person was an idiot for saying it.

And guess what? The community suffered because no matter how we tried to avoid it, sides were taken, factions developed, and nothing got accomplished! This person wouldn't work with that person, not as long as she still was on speaking terms with that person. This guy wouldn't serve if that person was asked to be on the committee, that family refused to give money because that person was leading the campaign.

And on and on and on.

And for what? Sinat Hinam.

The hatred "gift" that keeps on giving.

We cannot be the community we want, a family cannot be the unified bond it strives for and you can't be the person you really are capable of being as long as you hold on to "sinat hinam".

Dear G-d! Every day, every day someone does or says something to me that upsets me. I am sorry, but I happen to be very thin skinned. Do you know how long I stay mad? I actually don't follow the Torah. I do not keep

hatred for *two* days. Call me a reform Jew, but I only keep *one* day! That's all I will allow for my hatred. I don't have the time or patience to be mad any longer than that and I don't want to give the person who hurt me a gift. I have a life to live. I've got too much to do.

And so do you.

Hatred prevents me, you, a community and a society to get down to the business of life.

Let me share with you the wisdom of one of my former students. He didn't study for his Bar Mitzvah lesson that week (again!) and I told him that I was going to tell his parents. But I gave him the choice: do I call mom or dad? He said without hesitation: Oh definitely, dad! I asked him why. He said: "Well, dad will be angry, yell, scream and be real upset with me about it but I'll get the message and he'll never bring it up again. Mom will give me her 'look', not say a word, but will throw it back at me all year long. I'd rather have it done with, get the message, and move on."

Learn to move on.

I end with something that I am fairly certain is a stretch on the Hebrew language but the message is so worthy that I share it with you despite the linguistic inaccuracy. The Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis of the Jewish organization Hineni quotes a Hassidic rebbe who says that the Hebrew word for joy (simcha) can also be read without vowels to spell the words “to erase” (shemachah). The rebbe used that play on words to teach the following lesson: the key to finding joy in life is to learn to be able “to erase”, erase the pain, the mistakes and the hatred we bear. If we ever want to experience life as G-d wants us to, we have to be willing to erase, move on and let go of anger and hatred.

As we conclude these days of reflection, I ask you, therefore, to give up the “hatred gift” and give it up generously. Take the hatred you continue to bear for a family member or friend long gone and include them in your Yizkor (Memorial prayer) today. Remember all the anger you feel for people who have made your life miserable, hurt you, or embarrassed you in any way, and

let it go. Let it go to Azazel, into the wilderness of erased memory.

It is time to stop the hatred gift from being enjoyed for even one more day.

Amen