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Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon
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It was a miserable time for the Jews. The Babylonians had just conquered Jerusalem. They tore down the walls of the city and destroyed the holy Temple. They humiliated and tortured the Jews who hadn't been killed, and they sent most of them into bitter exile. There were some, though, the poorest of the Jews, who remained.

The Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, designated a Jewish governor, Gedalyah ben Achikam, to rule over the Jews who stayed. Gedalyah encouraged his people to accept this new life and to carry on as best they could.

Most Jews supported Gedalyah, but he infuriated a small group of them. They called him a collaborator, even a traitor. They accused him of selling out, and granting legitimacy to the Babylonians.

There was one Jew in particular, Yishmael ben Netaniah, who was not only angry about how Gedalyah was exercising his leadership over the Jews. He was also deeply jealous of him. Yishmael was of royal descent and resented that Gedalyah had been made governor instead of him. His hatred of Gedalyah blinded him to the point of obsession.

At this point, King Balis, of the neighboring kingdom of Ammon, approached Yishmael with a plan. Now King Balis was no friend of the Jews, and he wished to see them wiped out entirely. Yishmael, overcome with jealousy, agreed to his plan.

Gedalyah's friends tried to warn him about Yishmael's dangerous plans, but he refused to believe them saying that it was all just malicious gossip.

And then, on the day after Rosh Hashanah – and some say it was on the holiday itself – Yishmael, along with ten of his men, came to visit Gedalyah. Gedalyah received them cordially. He invited them in and they sat down together for a meal. But in the middle of the meal Yishmael and his men sprang up and killed Gedalyah, along with all the other Jews and Babylonians who were with him. Chaos and bloodshed ensued. The remaining Jews in the land, fearing vengeance from King Nebuchadnezzar, fled to Egypt.

The Rabbis designated the third of Tishrei, the day after Rosh Hashanah, as a fast day known as Tzom Gedalyah – the Fast of Gedalyah. It commemorates not only the death of Gedalyah – killed by one of his own – but death and exile for the remaining Jews in the land of Israel. This is why the Rabbis likened the death of just one righteous person to the destruction of the House of God, the Holy Temple.

The Fast of Gedalyah is the only Jewish day of mourning that marks the death of an individual. I would be surprised if anyone in our community observes this fast, wedged right between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, this year falling on Sunday because a fast day of this sort cannot fall on Shabbat. It seems strange to fast right after Rosh Hashanah when we have just finished marking the new year and are trying to focus on doing *teshuvah*, on making amends and seeking forgiveness for the ways we have hurt others or not lived up to our highest ideals.

But maybe we should observe this day – to mark the assassination of Gedalyah by another Jew, to remember that our hatred for each other led to bitter exile, to reflect on the Rabbis' teaching that the death of just one righteous person is the equivalent of the destruction of the Holy Temple. We could do it through fasting, or perhaps in a different way – through meditation, discussion, or political action.

I've been thinking about the Fast of Gedalyah this year because it falls less than two weeks after the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Dr. King and Gedalyah had different political agendas and lived in very different times. They didn't have much in common, but they were both righteous leaders, both assassinated as they were trying to improve the lives of their people and chart a new path for their nation.

So this year, on the Fast of Gedalyah, I think it's fitting to spend some time remembering Dr. King and reflecting on his life, his dreams, and his legacy, thinking specifically about the ideas he raised in the speech he gave fifty years ago.

Dr. King's, "I Have a Dream Speech," given at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom called for civil and economic rights for African-Americans. He used the speech to imagine, articulate, and fight for a world where justice really prevailed. This was not a time to merely tinker with unjust laws. "We will not be satisfied," he proclaimed, "until 'justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.'"

His speech didn't just talk about creating equality between black boys and girls and white boys and girls. He reminded us that we needed to end injustice in all its forms. He spoke of economic injustice, of African-Americans living in the "lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity." He spoke of the "shameful conditions" of his people, of an America that had failed them. He spoke of the "unspeakable horrors of police brutality."

On the Fast of Gedalyah we mourn what was lost. We mourn for what could have been. We mourn the death of Gedalyah, a righteous leader, murdered as he tried to help his people cope with the devastation of war and the destruction of Jerusalem and the holy Temple. We mourn the death of Dr. King, a righteous leader, murdered as he tried to help his people confront racial injustice.

We remember the painful way that history unfolded.

We remember that so many dreams were left unfulfilled, so many deep scars of racism remain unhealed. We witness the re-birth of Jim Crow laws now taking the form of voter suppression. We continue to witness the mass incarceration of people of color. The racism in our generation now wears a thin disguise that manifests itself in the form of “stand your ground” and “stop and frisk,” laws which clearly and disproportionately target people of color. The racism in our generation has continued to plague African-American communities with tremendous unemployment, homelessness, and gun violence.

We witness the terrible echoes of Mississippi with the unpunished murder of Trayvon Martin in Florida. But we are hardly exempt from these issues here in Dane County. Nearly 75% of all African-American children in Dane County live in poverty. African American children are more than 13 times as likely as whites to be in foster care. They are only half as likely to graduate from high school on time.¹ Dane County has also been found to have the highest racial disparities for men in the criminal justice system in the nation. Nearly 50 percent of African-American men between 25 and 29 are in prison, jail, or some form of state supervision.²

Tributes to great leaders like Dr. King ring hollow unless we heed their teachings and work to implement their ideals. To truly honor Dr. King’s legacy we need to reject the hatred spewed against African-Americans while we also try to understand the challenges faced by their community. It’s a time to learn, to take in their pain deeply, to reach across the gulf between us, to understand our own racism and acknowledge the invisible privilege granted to those of us with white skin. We must work together as allies on issues that are important to them, and ultimately to all of us.

This communal work is important. It is also important, in this season of deep introspection, to ask what we can learn from Dr. King’s teachings to transform our personal lives, to help in our process of teshuvah. I’m most struck by his teachings on rejecting the urge to hate our enemies. From his “I Have a Dream Speech”: “Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.”

I imagine that most of us would agree with that but might be challenged by his teaching to love our enemies, a concept that comes from the Christian tradition. He writes, in “Loving Your Enemies,” a Christmas sermon from 1957:

Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction.³

These teachings serve us well, as a society and as individuals. When we have hatred in our hearts it only leads to more hatred and pushes us into a descending spiral of destruction, full of war, bloodshed, and animosity towards our enemies.

And even in our personal relationships – how often do we get stuck hating other people for what they have done to us – for betraying us, lying to us, cheating us? The question here is not so much about whether we should forgive them. It is perhaps more about the idea of not getting stuck in our own descending spiral of self-destruction by holding onto so much hatred.

I think we sometimes write off all this “love your enemy” talk as too Christian or not realistic. But we forget that Judaism has a parallel tradition. So while we don’t have a “love your enemy,” ideology, we have many texts that bring us pretty close.

We have Leviticus: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”⁴ True, a neighbor might not be an enemy, but then consider Exodus: “If you see your enemy’s donkey lying under its load, you shall not pass by. You shall raise the load with your enemy.”⁵ So maybe in this case we really can hate our enemy, but we’re not free to ignore him if he needs our help.

There’s more. What do we do if we see both an enemy and a friend at the same time, and they each need our help with their animals? The Talmud tells us to help our enemy first. Why? To suppress our evil inclination.⁶ When we see our enemy suffering, our first response is to pass by, or even to kick up dirt in our enemy’s face. But the Talmud cautions against this, and tells us to curb this impulse. There’s too much at stake when an enemy is involved. Our friends will understand; they can wait a few moments. It’s much harder to help an enemy, so we need to do it right away, to prevent ourselves from letting that anger consume us so much that we turn away.

Ideally this would lead to a change in relationship with our enemy. Our hatred would lessen and we would let go of some of the pain we hold. Sure, it’s idealistic. It doesn’t mean there isn’t wisdom in the teaching. And as it says in Avot de-Rabbi Natan, “Who is a hero? One who turns an enemy into a friend.”⁷

Even if we don’t become friends with our enemies, or love our enemies, we can work to let go of our hatred towards them. Otherwise this hatred will just grow inside of us, leading us to do foolish things. Imagine what Yishmael ben Netaniah, Gedalyah’s assassin, had been feeling before he agreed to King Balis’ plan. He was jealous of Gedalyah, hurt that he hadn’t been appointed governor, passed up for some other guy, his royal credentials ignored. But instead of dealing with his feelings and finding a way to get over the hatred in his heart, he let it swell up. He let it get out of control. He let it blind him to what was really at stake. Yishmael let an enemy king use him to assassinate a fellow Jew, and the consequences of his uncontrolled hatred were devastating to his people.

If we don’t want to love our enemies – I’m okay with that. But I think we need to stop hating our enemies. We need to stop “drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.” Hatred is corrosive; it destroys everything in its path, perhaps starting with our own souls. It leads us to do things that we would never do, had we seen the world with our eyes wide open.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let's acknowledge the deep hatred in our society that has led to bitter racism towards African-Americans. And let's acknowledge the grudges and bitterness that we hold in our own hearts to others in our society, and to those who have wronged us personally.

Let's remember the lessons of the Fast of Gedalyah – that destroying a righteous person is like destroying the House of God. Let's remember the lessons of Dr. King – that hatred leads us into a descending spiral of destruction.

And let's hold onto the idealism of our tradition, that we have the potential to turn an enemy into a friend.

L'shanah tovah u'metukah – May it be a sweet, happy new year.

1. Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, The Project to Reduce Racial Disparities in Dane County (December 2012).
2. "As simple as black and white? Black and Busted in Dane County, Part 3" Wisconsin State Journal, July 24, 2011
3. Sermon delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, on November 17, 1957.
4. Lev. 19:18
5. Ex. 23:5
6. Baba Metzia 32b
7. Avot de-Rabbi Natan, 23