

TO FIND THE HARMONY OF THE MIDDLE

Kol Nidre 5764

Last week one of my kids mentioned at the Shabbat dinner table that 14 people were killed in Israel that day? “Really?” I said. “I hadn’t heard. Are you sure? I don’t remember seeing anything about it on the Internet. But I did see that 14 people died during hurricane Isabel. Israel. Isabel. Maybe you got them confused?”

In some ways the confusion goes deeper than just two words that look alike. It’s gotten to the point that these acts of terrorism, these seemingly random acts of madness occur with such frequency that—perhaps out of some kind of homeostatic emotional survival mechanism—I find it increasingly difficult to react with horror. It’s just more *bad news*, another one of those things that seems completely out of my control. Like some natural disaster, as I have gotten older I seem to have developed a thicker skin to this most recent version of *Jewish jeopardy*. And is this not, after all, the true by-product of terrorism (if not its intent)? Not just carnage and death nor even the spreading of fear but to weaken our sense of humanity, to destroy our instincts for *feeling*?

But several weeks ago there was a bombing that gave many of us pause. While the death toll was not extraordinary—only seven Jews died in this blast—the identities of two of the victims made the issue of *humanity* impossible to ignore. Not that every human being’s life isn’t sacred. Not that each soul isn’t worth the weight of the entire world. It’s just that these two victims in particular demonstrated with unmistakable clarity how much is lost each time a Palestinian chooses to press the button in his hand.

Their names were David and Nava Applebaum. Father and daughter. They had gone out for a snack in Jerusalem’s trendy German quarter. Café Hillel. On *Emek Refaim*. But what made this incident even more upsetting was the identity of the father, an American Jew who had made *aliyah*. A doctor. But not just any doctor. He specialized in trauma medicine. Terrorist attacks. In Jerusalem David Applebaum was often the first physician on the scene. This time he was the scene. As was his daughter. They had gone to the café to celebrate her wedding which was to take place the next day.

This one got to me. As I read the article I found my reactions seeming to be more visceral. I was feeling a deep, almost *hateful* anger. The truth is, when it comes to the Middle East conflict, and particularly the way the world seems to treat Israel, I’ve found it more and more difficult to suppress my anger, particularly as I prepare for the High Holy Days. After all, how shall I communicate to you—in a positive way—a meaningful perspective on the state of our people in the State of Israel? When I give my annual Israel sermon on these Days of Awe—which, of course, is part of the requirement, for how can we enter a New Year and not take to heart the predicament of the Jews of Israel—what can I say that will not fall prey to my emotions of anger? Not that I think I am wrong. Not that my feelings are unfounded or illegitimate or unjustified. But so what? Where does it get me? Even more important, where does it get you? If my words reinforce the anger you also feel, is that good? Maybe it’s comforting. Maybe we all need someone to help us affirm the anguish that tears within, to know that we are not alone. But to what end? Where does it get us? It might satisfy an inner need, it might make us *feel* better, but does it *make* us better?

The truth is, the dynamics which drive the Middle East, the processes which pit Israelis and Palestinians against each other, which embody the conflict that rages between the forces of radical Islamic fundamentalism and Western industrialized nations—particularly the United States, are really no different than those things with which we struggle in our daily lives. When we fight with each other, when we yell or say bad things to each other, when we attack or respond to an attack we’re really no different than nations who war against each other.

The rabbis saw the human condition as a perpetual struggle between forces of animal instincts and sacred potential. Within every human being exists these pulling urges, the *yetzer ha-ra* or the evil inclination and the *yetzer tov* or the good inclination. Like the little ducks on the shoulders of Donald Duck—one with horns and

a pitchfork, the other with a halo—each prodding Donald to follow his path, to do it his way, the *yetzer ha-ra* and the *yetzer tov* are the *id* and the *superego* battling for supremacy of the soul.

The danger, however, is not to confuse this struggle with what some would call the battle between good and evil. Judaism has never been comfortable with the notion that evil is a distinct, separate *force* in the universe. For us, God is the only force—and, of course, our will. One can *do* evil, one can choose to perform evil acts, but to suggest that there is something out there which *makes* us do things against our will is simply un-Jewish. The Devil, contrary to the wisdom of Flip Wilson, does *not* make us do it. We do.

I am particularly troubled by those who see the world in such stark contrasts. When we Americans intone phrases like *Axis of Evil*, we might be correct in identifying other nation-states and/or their leaders as guilty of reprehensible behavior, but the expression implies more. To my thinking, it is—when all is said and done—no different than those who identify America as the *big* and Israel as the *little* “Satan”. It’s polarized thinking. They’re bad, we’re good. And, of course, with such mentality, the problem is always *them*.

Last month, during the week of September 11, Public Television aired *The Center of the World*, the newly added episode to Ric Burns’ documentary history of New York City. Near the end of the program, former New York Governor Mario Cuomo made what I thought was a truly insightful observation. Commenting on the dramatic contrasts of the good and evil deeds that were so evident in lower Manhattan two years ago, he said, “There were people that day who were so driven by hate that they were willing to give up their lives to *take* another’s, and there were people that day who were so driven by love that they were willing to give up their lives to *save* others.”

To me, this cuts to the core of the malaise that afflicts the human spirit. Not a battle between good and evil, not a struggle between forces that exist outside of us, nor a disease that infects only *others* but a world of individual struggles—regardless of who we are—where people make simple decisions that can change the nature of our universe. This is perhaps the most fundamental if not preeminent concept of Judaism: Each person has the ability to change the world. Like the Israeli pop song says, *Ani v’ata n’shaneh et ha-olam*—You and I can change the world. And as Rabbi Tarfon reminds us, No one expects you to be able to do it all by yourself, but that doesn’t give you the liberty to walk away from it either. And as the Hasidim have taught, before you can fix the world out there, you must start with yourself.

To what extent are we prepared to conquer our anger and prevail over our instincts to hate? To what extent are we prepared to temper our darker passions with compassion? Do we really think that the conflicts which daily fill the front pages of our newspapers are distinct from the anguish we impose upon ourselves and each other in our own, individual microcosms? Do we really believe that political reality has nothing to do with people like you and me? While compromises orchestrated by diplomats might pave the way for peace, the decision to suspend hate—which, of course, is at the core of evil deeds—rests exclusively with the individual.

At the earliest stages of the Oslo peace process, it was Shimon Peres—in responding to his critics—who pointed out, “You do not make peace with your friends.” That is to say, the path toward peace will—by obvious necessity—require the forging of a relationship between enemies. But I will go farther. If we are to have any hope not merely for a cessation of hostilities but a true and lasting peace, Palestinians and Israelis will have to find a way to put away their hate. This is not a battle between good and evil. It’s not about good guys and bad guys, even if that *yetzer* inside tells us otherwise. It’s about two peoples who both feel they have legitimate claims to a land. And their struggle for that land which has lasted for well more than a century has bred a contempt and hatred that is like a cancer—it destroys from within. Indeed, more than their claims to land are at stake—it is their very souls.

And then there is another terrorist attack. Just when I’m beginning to make sense of the madness, just when it seems that all we need is a good dose of high-end systems therapy, another misguided youth, another passionate combatant driven by his overactive *yetzer ha-ra*, blows himself up and takes the lives of another dozen and a half innocents. And it’s then that you are forced to admit, this is not simply family dynamics. This is more than just a struggle between competing needs and perspectives. Terrorism is to the world what pathological abuse is to the family.

And herein lies our quandary: How can we allow our *yetzer tov*—our inner drives of goodness and decency—to prevail in the face of those who are not merely driven but possessed by their evil inclinations? How shall we respond to those who are beyond rational discourse, who are unwilling to entertain the concept of compromise? How do you make peace with someone who values death? His own death?

I have never made a secret of my left-of-center stand on Israeli politics. I have always been in favor of relinquishing the West Bank territories of what used to be Jordan and the Gaza Strip which used to be Egypt. I have and remain opposed to the building of Israeli settlements in those territories. And I believe that Jerusalem can be divided—for the sake of peace. As we all know, these are concessions Israel was already prepared to make. I believe Israel must still be willing to offer—as it has done successfully in the past—land for peace. Put another way, I do not believe that Israel will ever know peace as long as Palestinians do not have a land of their own.

Yet sadly, there are those among the Palestinians who will not be satisfied with sovereignty, even with Jerusalem as its capital. Sadly, there are those among the Palestinians who seek not merely a land of their own but the destruction of Israel. For all our clamoring and working for peace, Israel cannot be asked to forever turn its cheek. Israel cannot be expected to stand idly by as its children are murdered by those who seek not peace but annihilation. Sadly, the resolution to this conflict will take more than good will.

It's not a coincidence that Freud saw the human psyche as a battleground between the forces of these two instincts. Freud's Jewish influences can be found throughout his writings (even if he hadn't intended it that way). But he added something to the equation that is not found in the battle between the *yetzer tov* and the *yetzer ha-ra*. Between his *id* and *superego* Freud saw the *ego*, a moderating influence of the middle, something to help negotiate the tension between the two extremes. A well-balanced psyche is one where the *ego* is in control.

Even as I call myself a liberal, even as I invariably come down politically on the left, I have always felt—along with Moses Maimonides—that the *derekh ha-emet*, the “middle path” is the solution to the choices before us. As Hegel would put it, the resolution between thesis and antithesis requires *synthesis*. Somewhere in between. But where is the middle today? Where are the voices of moderation?

To be an Israeli is to get it from both sides. The politically radical right, particularly within the Arab world, is driven to drive Israel into the sea. And on the far left Israel is forced to contend with the politics of perception, where the exercise of military might, regardless of the provocation, is wrong. By the same token, within Israel itself are those on the far right who only exacerbate a bad situation with their talk of building walls and population relocation while those on the far left naively think the solution can be resolved by the changing of Israeli policies. This is not to compare the two extremes as being equally wrong. It is merely to say that extremes are never the solution.

If Israelis and Palestinians are to have any hope for peace, the middle must prevail. Israelis must rediscover what used to be the centrist majority. Palestinians must figure out a way to create a voice of moderation and empower it to prevail in the face of extremism. And the world—particularly the United Nations which convenes under the guise of fairness and justice—must find a way to allow reason to overpower bias. The world must nurture the middle.

This is the 30th anniversary of my first High Holy Days as a rabbi. It was 30 years ago that I had to prepare my first High Holy Day sermons. And it was 30 years ago that I learned the lesson about being overly prepared; that is, things change. You see, this is also the 30th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. For the entirety of my career I have had to perennially reflect on the tenuous state of the State of Israel. For the entirety of my career I have had to focus on Israel being in a constant state of danger. For each of my 30 years of High Holy Day preparation I have had to wonder, “What will happen next?” And I confess, I am tired of giving this sermon. I am tired of addressing how it is we are to respond to those who hate Israel, of those who continually seek Israel's destruction. I don't know what I can say that is new, how I can give us a different and fresh perspective on what has become a perpetual state of being.

Still, I continually find hope in Israel's resilience, in Israel's stubborn refusal to lose hope. After all, *Ha-Tikvah*—The Hope—is Israel's national anthem. Because, when all is said and done, Israel—like all Jews—is driven by hope. A hope for true and lasting peace. A hope grounded in our tradition, where lions and lambs dwell together in peace, where opposing forces find the harmony of the middle.

But until that dream becomes a reality, we have no choice but to stay the course. We cannot ask Israel to break this cycle all by itself. We cannot presume nor have we morally the right to expect Israel to unilaterally make peace. We must remain vigilant for our people in Israel. We must offer them our unequivocal support. Yet even as we do, we must equally try to fend off the understandable urge to hate, for hate only destroys. On the contrary, we must demonstrate ourselves to be like those who save rather than destroy, who are driven not by contempt but compassion.

If, indeed, the goal of terrorism is not merely to take life but to spread fear, to dehumanize, then our greatest form of resistance is to be human. As our sages have taught, "*B'makom she-ein anashim—histadel lihiyot ish*, in a place where no one behaves like a human being, you must strive to be human." As God said to Cain, "Sin couches at the door. Its urge is toward you, yet you can be its master." In the end, just as we believe that all conflicts can be resolved, we cannot afford to lose faith that the goodness within humanity will prevail. Our *yetzer tov*, our desire to do good, will overcome. It must. Because for us it is not a choice. It is *mitzvah*.