

In Memory of Dvir, z"l, and Rina, z"l : The Sermon I Didn't Want to Give

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Kach na et bincha, et yechidcha, asher ahavta, et Yitzchak

Take your son, your only son, the one that you love, Isaac...

With these words, which we read tomorrow, God demands of Abraham the unthinkable. Take your son and sacrifice him upon an altar. And, God does not simply command Abraham to perform the deed. God seems to take some pleasure in emphasizing the cruel nature of the request by referring to Isaac as "his one, only and beloved son", as if Abraham did not know how painful this would be. And Abraham listens to that voice and prepares to sacrifice Isaac.

Abraham, like every parent, knows instinctively that children are our greatest gifts. If, God forbid, a child becomes seriously ill, our world stops turning. If, God forbid, a child is lost, our world crumbles. When a child dies, there are neither words of comfort, nor gestures of kindness which can reduce the pain. The death of a child puts a hole in a parent's heart, a hole that never fully closes. And yet, Abraham does not protest. He remains silent. And it is that silence on which I focus today.

This is a sermon which I did not want to write. I had written a different sermon for this moment. But, as events over the summer unfolded, I knew that the sermon I did not want to write was the sermon that I needed to deliver, because, when a child dies, we need a message of hope and optimism. We need to be reminded that the world is good, even when the forces of evil creep into our purview. We need to be reminded, as we usher in a New Year, that hatred will not prevail, that there is reason to believe that good will triumph over evil, that love will defeat hatred.

Dvir Sorek was a good kid. He grew up in a home of joy, a home of learning, a Jewish home from which Dvir viewed a world larger than the world of Jewish tradition. He was taught to find wisdom in both traditional and non-traditional places:

Dvir had the look of a religious settler, with long *payot*/earlocks a closely cropped haircut and a large *kippa*. His home was located across the Green Line in, what some call, disputed territory. That is where religious settlers, for whom Dvir might have been mistaken, live. Settlers, not Dvir, are those who unilaterally establish hilltop communities, taking the injunction of "settling the Land of Israel" very literally and, at times, establishing settlements that are illegal, provocative and unwanted, not just by Palestinians but by most Israelis, as well.

Looking at Dvir, and judging him on the basis of looks, one might assume an attitude of suspicion and distrust of the outside world, a hard and inflexible political outlook. One might assume that he hated Arabs and harbored feelings of disdain toward Palestinians. These are the mistaken assumptions that many would make.

That evening, the 19-year-old was waiting for a bus to return to his Yeshiva. Dvir was in a special program called "*Hesder*" which enables young men to serve in the army and have time, as well, for study in Yeshiva. He was a brave soldier and a rigorous scholar. But, on that evening, Dvir stood at the bus stop, returning to the Yeshiva, not to study but to meet with his Rabbi and to give him a book.

Dvir thought his Rabbi would better understand him better if he knew more about him. So Dvir was returning to the Yeshiva with a book in his hand, a novel written recently by David Grossman.

David Grossman is a recognized and relentless voice of the left in Israel. Once a strong supporter of the right, Grossman became a strong advocate for political views associated with the left. His politics became even more strident after his son was tragically killed in the war in Lebanon, over a decade ago. Despite his controversial views, to which many in Israel object, Grossman won the *Pras Yisrael*, the Israel Prize for Literature, a few years ago. Dvir's father works in the publishing business, which enabled the father to share all kinds of books with Dvir. Dvir knew of Grossman, therefore, from his father. And Grossman's book had made a deep impression of Dvir. It is, indeed, remarkable that from a community associated with politics on the far right, this young man, Dvir, would be open enough to learn from a voice on the far left.

Ezeh hu chacham? HaLomed mikol adam / Who is wise? One who can learn from any person.

There is something to learn from all people, from every person. Dvir had learned from the books of David Grossman.

Dvir had also become involved with a group that met every other week, a group which was half Jewish and half Palestinian. They would meet for a couple of hours, discuss their different perspectives of the news and get to know each other as people, as teens. Dvir left every stereotype behind and, in doing so, saw the world as wide and deep. He learned much from others and had hoped for the future.

As he stood at the bus stop, holding the book by David Grossman, Dvir was attacked by two Hamas- inspired terrorists. The two were cousins, I believe. Dvir was stabbed multiple times, his lifeless body left in a ditch nearby.

When news of Dvir's death became public, his Palestinian friends from the group he attended, wrote a eulogy for the funeral. They could not attend the funeral, nor could they sign their names to the eulogy, for fear of repercussions. But these are their words:

Over the past two years, he would regularly attend our meetings, the letter read. During each meeting, we talked about our daily lives and the future we wanted to build together. We would meet every other week, we were young and optimistic Palestinians and Israelis...

We send our condolences to his family and to our friends in his yeshiva, they wrote. As a group, we condemn such brutal actions; such violence hurts all of us. We build bridges between the peoples on this land and we hope that this tragedy will be the last.

The assailants were caught. They were interrogated and admitted both their guilt and their rationale. What was their motivation for this horrible crime? What had they hoped to accomplish?

They did not lie in wait specifically for Dvir. They told the police that **any** Jew would have served their purpose. Dvir was not targeted because he was wise beyond his years. He was not chosen for his learning, nor for his interest in books, nor for his involvement in a mixed group, Jews and Palestinians, which met every two weeks. He was a Jew and that was all the motivation that was needed

This was the same motivation which killed Rina Schnerb, z"l, a couple of weeks later. Rina was hiking near her home, with her father and brother, when a remotely controlled bomb was thrown at Rina, her father and brother. Rina, closest to the explosion, absorbed the bulk of the flying shrapnel, saving the lives of her father and brother, who were both seriously injured. They missed the funeral for Rina, as they were still being treated at the hospital.

I could tell you a bit about Rina too. Suffice to say, however, the uniqueness of her story, her outlook, skills and interests, help us to understand the magnitude of the loss.

When the perpetrators were found, they too acknowledged that their goal was not specifically to kill Rina. Their goal was to kill any Jew. Like the murder of Dvir, "which Jew" made no difference.

And to add to this horror was Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas. Haniyeh spoke of the two terrorists who "successfully" killed a 17-year-old girl, in glowing terms, praising what they had done. Both these terrorists and those who killed Dvir, were praised by their leaders. He called the murder of unsuspecting and unarmed teenagers, "heroic". Statements like that reveal how and where hatred enters this world.

Hatred enters when one generalizes about a group of people collectively, without regard for differences between them, without regarding them as individuals. If one speaks of Jews as Monkeys, as does Nation of Islam leader, Louis Farrakan, hate enters there. If one speaks of Mexicans as being criminals and rapists, hate enters. If one sees African Americans as violent people or as a dangerous drug dealers, one succumbs to the inclination of hate, one escorts hate into the world. From these examples and others, I am convinced that we don't need to teach people to hate. From everything I see, one does not need training to know how to hate. **One needs training to learn how not to hate.**

Hating, you see, is easy: When skin tone is different, when accents are different, when a person has physical anomalies, we judge them on the basis of that which makes them different. This is public knowledge and acceptable practice here in Philadelphia (the city of brotherly love), if buying a cheesesteak (which I have never done) in South Philadelphia. There one can see the sign above the window where one orders food: English only. You must speak like me. This is America and we don't speak **that** language in America.

I look the way you **should** look. Your skin color and your clothes are all wrong. You should look like me and talk like me. I can know very quickly, just by looking, whether you are one of us or one of them. And if you possess a disability, there is something wrong with you and others like you. And if you love someone is of same gender, of a different gender or of no gender, if your loving that person makes me uncomfortable, you are wrong to love that person.

There is a story told of the great Rabbi Joshua, purported to be the greatest teacher and scholar of the day. He was revered for his piety, respected for his wisdom and appreciated for his brilliant rhetoric. His fame grew geographically as he went from city to city, teaching and speaking.

Unfortunately, however, Rabbi Joshua was a particularly ugly person, perhaps he had some congenital deformities.

Once, as he was walking from town to town, a man, traveling in a carriage, passed the rabbi. He ordered his driver to stop to give the walker a ride into the city. He was about to invite the poor man who was walking to ride with him, but when the man in the carriage saw him, he shrieked and said: You are the ugliest person I have ever seen. You should not walk by day, lest you frighten others with your appearance. And with that, the carriage went on its way.

When the rabbi reached the town, he was recognized immediately and taken to the inn. He was given the best room and treated to a wonderful meal. At the end of the meal

the visiting rabbi went to teach in the Beit Midrash. The room was packed and, among the crowd, was the man from the carriage who had passed the rabbi along the way.

After the brilliant lecture, the rabbi was ready to retire for the evening when the man from the carriage ran to him and said:

Rabbi, I am so sorry for speaking to you as I did. I didn't know who you were. Can you forgive me? The rabbi said: I cannot.

Rabbi, I beg of you please forgive me. I am sorry but I cannot.

Groveling on the floor, with his head down, the man cried, Rabbi, I shall not move from this spot unless and until you forgive me.

The rabbi turned and went to his room for the evening. When he woke the next morning, he found the man in the same place as he was the night before: Rabbi, I implore you to forgive me.

Rabbi Joshua looked down and said, I cannot forgive you because you did not insult me. I am not responsible for my looks. It is God who made me this way. Ask your forgiveness from God.

This is how hate begins, through judgmentalism, through parochialism, by regarding uniqueness as aberration, personal preference as illegitimate and individuality as threat to the rest.

Rabbi Joshua pushes this point even further. We are who we are. In Hebrew: *כך נבראתי* / this is how God made me. And so, to this story I would add my own question: is it not possible that God made each of us different in order for us to confront and overcome our tendency to hate? We open the door to hate when we judge another person, not by their deeds and their choices but by who or what they are, how they look or what they wear.

Our Sages speak of the cataclysmic event of the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE. That would be the most painful and demoralizing event ever to befall the Jewish Community. These Sages were able to justify the destruction of the First Temple, because of the rampant corruption which permeated the Jewish community and the unwillingness of leaders to accept and follow the rules of God.

But the Destruction of the Second Temple occurred when the community was compliant with Jewish Law, careful in many observances and resistant to the outside forces that threatened Judaism. Why, then, did God allow the Romans to destroy the Temple in 70 CE? *Sinat chinam* / baseless hatred. Baseless hatred / *sinat chinam*, means hating people for no good reason, gratuitous hatred.

Today, many try to explain the hatred which resides in our society and in our world, as being rooted in *sinat chinam*. But the problem has been and remains that *sinat chinam* doesn't really exist! Throughout the history of the world, there have never been any people who would admit their guilt and acknowledge that they had hated for no reason/ *sinat chinam*:

Yes, **others** are guilty of *sinat chinam*, yes, the Temple may have been destroyed because of this terrible sin. But that sin is not applicable to me.

Yes, I hate that person, but my hatred is not baseless. I have some very good reasons that hate!

Other people are guilty of baseless hatred, but my hatred is well-founded. Do you know what he did to me?!

And this is what makes hate particularly insidious. No one who hates thinks that they hate for no reason. No anti-Semite believes that his hatred of Jews is not justified. All hatred is rationalized, legitimized and validated. We are innocent. They are guilty.

One must wonder if those who want to block immigrants from our country because they honestly believe that there is, among them, a preponderance of criminals, thieves, drug dealers and rapists? One cannot help but wonder if the aggressive and restrictive policy toward immigration from Mexico is a reflection of our not wanting **them**, not because they are criminals but because they are Mexican.

With the beginning of the new semester at colleges and universities across this land, the most recent surveys confirm that the start of the academic year coincides with increased levels of anti-Zionism and intimidation of Jewish students on campus. Here is but one example.

Just this week, the Pres. of Malaysia, in NYC for meetings at the UN, was invited to speak at Columbia Univ. In response to a question, he launched into a lengthy anti-Semitic screed in which he proclaimed that the Holocaust never happened. Yes, there were some who were killed, but there is no way that number is anywhere near 6 Million. The Holocaust was invented, he proclaimed, in order for Israel to justify its aggression against Muslims. When one student objected, the President responded by saying that Freedom of Speech protects his right to say what he wants to say, "even if you consider it anti-Semitic". Equally as shocking is the fact that at Columbia there are over 10,000 Jewish students, with the exception of the one comment challenging the President, the comment was allowed to stand unchallenged.

Also, just this week, was the report from Dutch Radio of an 8-minute rant about "money grubbing Jews" who need to be "annihilated". One wonders why the radio station allowed the rant to continue, unless, of course, anti-Semitism is considered a legitimate position. Suffice to say that neither time nor geography have been moderating factors in the hatred of Jews.

Hatred, we know, is proudly displayed in the radical right when neo-Nazis, emboldened by the President, declared that among those in Charlottesville are “some very good people”. It comes, as well, from radicals on the left, who feel safe calling for all good people to rise up against Jews and/or Israel to support boycotts, divest and impose economic sanctions aimed at the eradication of the Jewish State. Whether on the right or the left, it was reported last week recently that **more than half of the hate crimes** perpetrated in NYC were perpetrated against Jews and Jewish property.

My friends, this was not a sermon I wanted to give. Perhaps I avoided it because of the discomfort of speaking of hatred and unkindness on a joyous Holiday. Perhaps I was reluctant to speak because I did not want to give this precious time to such heinous, hateful, murderous acts, as those which took Dvir and Rina, z”l, from this world, acts of desecration and violence against two young teens. But, on this holy day, I felt no choice but to speak of the sanctity of all life, a value which stands in direct opposition to hatred. This is the first and most important message of this world.

Et chatotai ani mazkir hayom / Today I must acknowledge and confess my own sins. I believe that I have been less strident and less vocal than necessary in my opposition to a number of issues which have created stains on the fabric of American society. It isn't any single issue or policy which I should have opposed. It is an atmosphere in this country, an atmosphere I should have protested which provides a comfortable place for hate to reside. Whether speaking of immigration, the environment or partisan politics, all have been places in which hate has now found safe haven. And that must be condemned strongly, because once hate takes root, that hate grows from all sides. I need to do better.

We cannot directly prevent hate from entering this world. But we can be in the forefront of those saying no to hate. We can and must be the ones with the courage to speak up. We must never be silent in the presence of hate. And we must never be afraid to support that which is right, that which is moral and just, and that which reflects the ideals and values of the Jewish People.

In short, if there is anything to be learned from history it is that our expressions and observances of Judaism are not the cause of anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism will be there, no matter what. Moreover, any attempt to hide our Judaism is a form of compliance or cooperation with those who hate us. In this world, given all we have suffered through for thousands of years, those days are over. We must never shy away from our Judaism, we must never be embarrassed to be Jewish and we must never be afraid because we are Jewish. Those days are gone. Been there. Done that. No more.

Today, we are mindful, of the victims and their families of the long string of murderous attacks on schools, at offices, night clubs and warehouses. And we continue to mourn and express

solidarity with Etz Chayyim Congregation in Pittsburgh, which will never shake its association with the 11 who were murdered exactly 11 months ago. (FYI: we will be reciting a special prayer on Yom Kippur, during the Martyrology, dedicated to the memories of the victims on the Pittsburgh massacre). The shadow cast upon all synagogues and upon all Jews is the reminder that there remains in this world, in this country and in this State, those willing to forfeit their own lives for the “higher purpose” of killing Jews. This should be, for us all, an ongoing reminder of the extent to which haters will go in order to express their angry and bigoted and intentions.

When Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham heard God’s voice once again. This time, that voice said, do not hurt the boy, don’t lay a hand on him. At that moment, Abraham understood what each of us must appreciate today: There are lots of voices calling to us to do, to believe, to act and all claim to be God’s voice. The question is not simply: which voice is God’s? The question is: to which voice shall we listen? When we hear more than one voice claiming to be God’s voice, to which do we listen? Are we listening to the voices which promote anger and violence? I hope not. We must listen for a different voice imploring us to replace treachery with truth, hatred with humanity and replace the senseless and hateful killing with acts of kindness. How does one choose? I will tell you: Outside of certain wars, God never commands us to do violence or harm another human being. God does not want us to hate. If you hear a voice urging you toward violence, that is not God’s voice.

May this be a year of less hatred and less killing and more life, a year filled with joy, a year of health and a year filled with love.

May this be a year in which we hear and follow voices which are characterized by compassion, by sensitivity and by kindness. May we hear voices which call upon us to adhere to the path which will lead us and this world to peace.