

## ***Sinat Chinam: Hatred Without Cause***

*R. Eleazer used to recite three prayers after his recitation of T'filah. What did he say? "May it be your will, Adonai my God, and God of my ancestors, that no person come to hate us, nor that we come to hate any person...."<sup>1</sup>*

In the time of the Bible, Yom Kippur was a drama that took place only at the very center of the Jewish world—the Temple that stood on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. There have been two Temples on that site, each one served the Jewish people for centuries, and each one was eventually destroyed by a conquering enemy. Concerning the First Temple, the Temple built by King Solomon, the Talmud teaches: "Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because of idolatry, licentiousness, and murder." But if that's the case, then why were the Romans allowed to destroy the Second Temple? The Jews of that time studied Torah, followed the commandments, and performed acts of tzedakah. The Talmud explains: "Because baseless hate—*sinat chinam*—was prevalent. This teaches that the offense of baseless hate is equivalent to idolatry, licentiousness, and murder put together."<sup>2</sup>

What did baseless hate look like in the time of the Second Temple? Was it really as bad as idolatry and murder? How did it lead to the destruction of the Temple, one of the greatest disasters in Jewish history? This is the subject of a very famous story:

In Jerusalem there once lived a man who had a friend named Kamza and an enemy named Bar Kamza. One day the man held a banquet, and he sent his servant to invite his friend Kamza. But the servant became confused and brought Bar Kamza instead.

"Get out of my house!" shouted the host when he saw his enemy seated among his guests.

Bar Kamza's face turned bright red. "If you will only let me stay," he said, "I will gladly pay for all the food and drink I consume."

"No!" said the host.

"I will pay for the entire banquet!"

Without another word, the host stormed over to his uninvited guest, picked him up by the scruff of the neck, and toosed him into the street.

Bar Kamza thought to himself, "Not even the rabbis who were there tried to prevent my humiliation! I will teach them all a lesson!"

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<sup>1</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, Berachot 33a.

<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 9b.

So he went to the Romans to inform on his countrymen. “The Jews are rebelling against Rome,” he said.

“Prove it,” said the Roman governor.

“Send them a sacrifice,” said Bar Kamza, “and see if they will offer it on the Temple altar.”

So the Roman governor selected a calf without blemish and sent it with Bar Kamza. But on the way, Bar Kamza made a small mark on the white of its eye, which made it unfit for Jewish sacrifice although still acceptable to the Romans.

The Rabbis wanted to offer it anyway, so as not to offend Rome, but Zechariah ben Avkulus objected and said, “People will say that it is now fine to offer animals with blemishes. It sets a bad precedent!”

So they decided not to sacrifice it.

But then they began to worry about Bar Kamza. When he reported their actions to the Roman governor, would not the governor’s wrath come down upon their heads?

“Let us kill Bar Kamza so that he doesn’t inform on us,” they said.

But Zechariah ben Avkulus again objected and asked, “Do we now kill people simply because they blemish a sacrifice?”

Again they bent to his will.

And the wrath of Rome did indeed come down upon their heads. Jerusalem was destroyed, the Temple burned, and the Jews exiled from their land.<sup>3</sup>

Such was the result of baseless hatred — *sinat chinam* — among the Jewish people.

This year we have witnessed a whirlwind of hatred. Perhaps most vividly, I still picture those who marched with Tiki torches in Charlottesville, chanting “Jews will not replace us” and “Blood and Soil.” “Blood and soil!” — literally the slogan of the Nazis.<sup>4</sup> Around the country and right here in our towns, we have seen a resurgence in antisemitism — graffiti swastikas and slurs.<sup>5</sup> *Sinat chinam* — baseless hatred.

Less than a week ago, a man brought a gun to a church in Tennessee. He shot seven people, killing a woman named Melanie Crow. *Sinat chinam*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 55b, as told by Ellen Frankel in *The Classic Tales: 4,00 Years of Jewish Lore* (1989), pp. 286-287.

<sup>4</sup> Emma Green, “Why the Charlottesville Marchers Were Obsessed with Jews,” *The Atlantic* (Aug 15, 2017). <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/nazis-racism-charlottesville/536928/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Anti-Semitism in the US,” Anti-Defamation League. <https://www.adl.org/what-we-do/anti-semitism/anti-semitism-in-the-us>.

<sup>6</sup> Devlin Barrett, “Tennessee church-shooting suspect had note referencing Dylann Roof attack,” *The Washington Post* (Sep 29, 2017). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/tennessee->

In Israel, tensions between the Ultra-Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews like us have never been greater. The Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, a paid employee of the Jewish state, called Reform Jews worse than Holocaust deniers. An Ultra-Orthodox member of Israel's parliament said that we are "enemies of the Jewish religion," trying to start a civil war in Israel.<sup>7</sup> *Sinat chinam*.

Here at home, our civic culture and political discourse is polarized and angry. We do not merely disagree on policy or values—we deride and decry those who do not share our beliefs. This, too, is *sinat chinam*.

Any one of these is worthy of a sermon. And so as I approached Yom Kippur this year, I admit that I felt lost. There is so much broken in our world, so much that demands our moral notice as Jews. I do believe it is the responsibility of a rabbi to relate to what's happening in the world—even when it gets us into trouble—just as it is the responsibility of a Reform synagogue to be a catalyst for putting Jewish values into action. So what hot-button issue should I address? What social ill or political outrage? How do we choose?

It reminds me of a story:

When Hayyim of Zanz was a young man, he set about trying to reform his country from its evil ways. But when he reached the age of thirty, he looked around and saw that evil remained in the world. So he said, "Perhaps I was too ambitious. I will begin with my province." But at the age of forty his province too remained mired in evil. So he said, "I was still too ambitious. From now on I will only try to lift up my community." But at fifty he saw that his community had still not changed. So he decided only to reform his own family. But when he looked around, he saw that his family had grown and moved away, and that he now remained alone.

"Now I understand that I needed to begin with myself."  
So he spent the rest of his life perfecting his own soul.<sup>8</sup>

I admit, there is much to criticize in Chaim's solution. If we wait until our own souls are perfected before we attempt to repair our world, our world will never be repaired. But there is also wisdom here. Before we seek to right the wrongs of the whole world, or our nation, or our state, or even our families—we might truly examine ourselves. We see hatred overflowing in the world, and we are called to fight it. But before we set off against the hatred around the globe, or in Charlottesville, or at the local high school, let us start with our own hatred.

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church-shooting-suspect-had-note-referencing-dylann-roof-attack/2017/09/29/fe808bd2-a54d-11e7-8cfe-d5b912fab99\_story.html?utm\_term=.6442ce6d00fa.

<sup>7</sup> Sue Surkes, "Reform Jews 'worse than Holocaust deniers' — former chief rabbi," *The Times of Israel* (Sep 6, 2017). <https://www.timesofisrael.com/reform-jews-worse-than-holocaust-deniers-former-chief-rabbi/>

<sup>8</sup> As told by Ellen Frankel in *The Classic Tales: 4,000 Years of Jewish Lore* (1989), p. 554.

We are guilty of *sinat chinam*. We have hated without cause. Hate is a powerful emotion, and difficult to describe. Psychologists have claimed that “hatred feeds on despair that originates in a person’s inability to change the behavior of the hated object.”<sup>9</sup> Despair at not being able to make someone else change... How well does that describe the political hatreds we see today?! Another researcher writes, “Hatred is an extreme and continuous emotion which rejects a person or a group in a generalized and totalistic fashion.”<sup>10</sup> That would be antisemitism, racism, homophobia, and all the group hatreds that so often manifest themselves in violence.

Our hatred has not led to violence, God forbid. But we are guilty nonetheless. It is not merely a sin to act out of hatred. In the Torah portion we will read this afternoon, God commands, “You shall not hate your fellow in your heart.”<sup>11</sup>

A Hebrew proverb says, “Hatred makes the straight crooked.” Hatred warps our view of the world; we are not able to engage with the ideas of others; we misinterpret their actions and motivations. For this reason according to Jewish law, one who hates is ineligible to serve as a judge or witness.<sup>12</sup>

But aren’t some people worthy of hatred? We read in Deuteronomy, “Do not despise an Edomite, because he is your brother. Do not despise the Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land.”<sup>13</sup> The Edomites are some of Israel’s most bitter enemies in the Torah, and yet we are cautioned not to hate them. Not even the Egyptians! The Egyptians, who enslaved Israel, who set them to cruel labor building cities for Pharaoh. Even the Egyptians, the Torah tells us not to hate. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains:

If the people continued to hate their erstwhile oppressors, Moses would have taken the Israelites out of Egypt but would have failed to take Egypt out of the Israelites. They would still be slaves, not physically but psychologically. They would be slaves to the past, held captive by the chains of resentment, unable to build the future. *To be free, you have to let go of hate.* That is a difficult truth but a necessary one.<sup>14</sup>

Hatred holds us back; it *is* holding us back.

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Ortony, Gerald L. Clore, and Allan Collins, *The Cognitive Structure of Emotion* (Cambridge UP, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> A. Ben-Zeev. “Anger and Hate.” *Journal of Social Philosophy* (1992, 2), 85-110.

<sup>11</sup> Leviticus 19:17.

<sup>12</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 27b.

<sup>13</sup> Deuteronomy 23:8.

<sup>14</sup> “Judaism Does Not Allow Us to Hate,” *The Algemeiner* (Sep 3, 2014).

<https://www.algemeiner.com/2014/09/03/judaism-does-not-allow-us-to-hate/>

What about the wicked? Surely there are evil people in the world whom it is justified to hate. Consider the story of Rabbi Meir and his wife Beruriah, the greatest female sage whose wisdom is recorded in the Talmud.

Once there were robbers in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood, and they caused him a lot of trouble. Rabbi Meir prayed that they should die. His wife Beruriah said to him, "How do you figure that praying for someone to die is permitted?" Rabbi Meir responded, "Because it is written in the Psalms: 'Let there be no more sins.'" She said, "Does it say, 'Let there be no more sinners?' No, it says *sins*! And the end of the verse says, 'and let wicked people be no more.' Since there will be no more sins, there will be no more wicked people! Therefore, you should pray that sinners repent, and then there will be no more wicked people. He did pray for them, and they repented."<sup>15</sup>

Could we do this? Could we consider the people for whom we harbor some hate and consider what bad action or characteristic has triggered our hate? And then we are allowed to wish for that action or characteristic to change, without hating the person or group. **Our personal hatreds are always *sinat chinam*—all hatred of people is baseless. Because people are not the proper object of hate.** The prophet Ezekiel says, "As I live, says Adonai, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live."<sup>16</sup>

This simple change in perspective, from hating a person to hating some behavior or attitude, is enormously powerful. It allows us to once again recognize the inherent value and dignity of all people. It clears our minds to see the virtues in an enemy as well as their faults.

This Yom Kippur, we can observe the mitzvah, "You shall not hate your fellow in your heart?" It begins with introspection. We are called to seriously consider what hate, what powerful rejection, we harbor for others.

We might then work to redirect that hate. We must not hate a person, but we can reject their beliefs. We must not hate a person, but we can abhor their actions. But we must not hate a person. For that is *sinat chinam*.

We can uproot hate from our community by teaching our children. We can talk to them about antisemitism, racism, homophobia, and hatred of immigrants. We can explain clearly that our Jewish values demand that we speak out against hate. That when someone makes a hateful joke or comment in our presence, we are the ones to object. That we protest the expressions of hate that have emerged in our national life.

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<sup>15</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 10a.

<sup>16</sup> Ezekiel 33:11.

And we can pray. Prayer has the power to extinguish *sinat chinam*. Today we stand before God and say “forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.” But we know that pardon cannot be granted until the sin has ceased. And so we pray, “Purify our hearts that we may serve You in truth.”<sup>17</sup>

It seems like a small response, I know. Every day we are bombarded with images and experiences of hatred. But remember Chaim of Zanz. We *will* change the world, and we will fight hate in our country and close to home. And we’ll start with our own hearts.

Pirkei Avot teaches that hate removes a person from the world.<sup>18</sup> We refuse to be separated from the world.

The story of Kamza and Bar Kamza is our tradition’s most famous example of *sinat chinam*. And I want to point out, it doesn’t even say why the host and Bar Kamza are enemies! It doesn’t matter. *Sinat chinam* isn’t about reasons—it’s just the wrong way to relate to other human beings.

On this Day of Atonement, forgive us God for the hate we have held in our hearts. Give us the strength to do *teshuvah*, to truly move ourselves, from today, to a more righteous path. May the voices of hate no longer be heard in our land. May the symbols of hate be erased from our sight. May we recognize the *tzelem Elohim*, the divine image, within all people. And with that recognition replace *sinat chinam* with *ahavat chinam*, baseless love, a love of people simply for their own sake.

May your prayers and honest intentions on this Yom Kippur help you achieve atonement. May this Sabbath of Sabbaths leave you with a lighter, more loving heart. And may we all be sealed for a year of blessing in the Book of Life.

*G’mar chatimah tovah.*

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<sup>17</sup> Reform liturgy, originally from the *Union Prayer Book* (1892).

<sup>18</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:11.

