

Rabbi Bloom's Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon
September 29, 2019

Someone I know commented to me about a column I wrote recently about my visit to Auschwitz. She said, "Rabbi you write about hate too much. You focus too much on the negative. Maybe you should talk about love and goodness instead. It might do you some good."

I thought about those comments for quite some time. For what I write about in my newspaper column follows a basic principle in Judaism, namely that calling out hateful speech and or hateful actions can never be overdone. There can't be a world of love at the price of ignoring human suffering. God told us to be holy and that means embracing love and calling out hate. It is, in fact, a mitzvah to do both and when it comes to the worship experience. The liturgy affirms both mandates to love humanity and to call out hate.

There is a Talmudic story about a student who approached the great sage Shammai and asked him, "Convert me while I'm standing on one foot and tell me what Judaism is all about?" Shammai immediately rejected the student's request as frivolous and pushed him aside. Then the same student approached his rival and colleague Hillel. He asked the same question, "Rabbi Hillel convert me to Judaism while I'm standing on one foot and tell me its core message." Hillel said, "Do not do to others what is hateful to you. All the rest is commentary. Now go learn it."

Should we ignore the world's problems when we are inside the world of a synagogue in worship? Should we only focus on eternal or so-called spiritual matters away from the world we live in? Is there not a balance between acknowledging timely moral issues and timeless spiritual ones of the soul?

Of course we want to create a society where love and goodness guide everything we do in our treatment of people. The Days of Awe start us on the journey about searching for the truth on many different levels in our lives. The challenge is taking stock of ourselves before we say something hurtful or do something from hate against another person. To put it simply, because people are too often self centered, they do not often think first before they speak.

Taking stock on issues of a personal nature as well as those which involve or impact a community or a nation is what we are supposed to address on the High Holy Days. The truth is that our prayers already covered this balance going back to ancient times. Do we have a responsibility to address personal matters of the soul and moral issues at this hour in our worship experience? Those that are timely issues and those which are timeless? Aren't issues like hate and love two sides of the same coin?

I *do* comment often about hate in the world today. How do we escape the hate we see in our society today? How do we cover our eyes and become blind to blatant self hatred that exists in our society when we refuse to embrace our fellow citizens and those who work here and live side by side with us and who by virtue of skin color, religion, ethnic origin or

any number of other categories that are different from us? How do we refuse to call out anti-Semitism in all of its ugly nuances and rhetoric especially when it occurs through the words of elected officials? The High Holy Days are all about facing uncomfortable truths in the sphere of the personal and in the realm of the public.

People have differing opinions about what we should focus our spiritual energy upon. Yes, there are some who feel that the synagogue's purpose is a spiritual place divorced from the concerns of the outside world. People understandably and justifiably want to come here and escape from the hardships of the world. People derive inspiration from the idea that worship is shielded from problems in the world around them.

Others believe, on the contrary, that the synagogue is the exact place to work thorough or speak out to those thorny moral issues in the realm of communal worship like hate speech and other social issues which test Judaism's sacred teaching that human beings are created in the divine image. On Yom Kippur morning we will read from Isaiah chapter 58. He says in referring to the fast day of the Jewish people, "Is this not the fast day I ordered? To break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke. To let the oppressed go free and release all those enslaved? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to take the homeless poor into your home and never to neglect your own flesh and blood? Then shall your light burst forth like the dawn and your wounds shall quickly heal, your Righteous One leading the way before You and the Presence of Adonai guarding you from behind."

Clearly we have two different visions about the boundaries of appropriate issues to address in our worship life: Personal spirituality and social justice. Is one right and the other wrong? Is it possible that there is validity in both perspectives which deserve our attention on the High Holy Days? We need to know what love is and how important is the value of ahavat briut -- the love of humanity. Can we pray on our inner world without ignoring the call to make for a better society? Must we sanitize the worship experience in our personal lives to the point where we ignore Isaiah's call to us to make a difference in the world?

I believe that we need to balance both perspectives. The synagogue needs the worship experience to provide a conscience for fighting against hate as well as a safe space and a haven devoid of outside distractions to worship unfettered by the pressures of the hour. Some prayers give us hope to embrace the goodness in our personal lives while others allow us to face down injustice and cruelty we see in our world. They are both necessary for a complete worship experience. The truth is that our prayers have been doing this for two thousand years.

I ask whether we have taken the actual time to review the prayers we recite and see that they cover both public and private issues that concerned generations of Jews? The prayers have been doing their job for two millennium. Have we lost sight of those prayers which cover both the eternal issues from our relationship with God and also focus on the wicked in the world?

Just as there is goodness in the world, so too do we all know that the world is unfair. The world has demonstrated its persistence at fomenting cruelty. At the same time the Bible teaches reconciliation and forgiveness. Joseph forgiving his brothers is an excellent example where hate turned to love and forgiveness.

My point is that we need enough flexibility and leeway to acknowledge the importance of eternal matters devoid of current controversial issues and respect the legitimacy of current events which are moral issues for the Jewish people in our world today. If we forbade the latter where do we draw the line between what is acceptable and what is not? Should we annul the high holy days because they make us focus on chronic and embarrassing personal conduct? Should we suspend the high holy days because of overwhelmingly difficult social issues in our society that challenge Jewish values?

Mandating love is not the same as opposing hate. Silence in response to hate is a form of assent to those emotions. Judaism, especially the tradition of the prophets, has always validated our duty to pray on and act on issues that impact the wellbeing of the community. If I had to choose between a just world and a world of love, I would choose the former. For if there is no justice and if we are surrounded by unbridled hate and we do not call it out, then there cannot be peace. And without peace there is no authentic love.

As for me, I am guilty as charged. My sabbatical provided me the opportunity to witness in towns and cities the last fragments of genocidal hate against the Jewish people. We send our kids to the March of the Living program to see the landscape of hate that once ravaged our people and the world. Should we refrain from participating in this program because it is too negative and too oriented on taking social action for the Jewish people?

“Whatever is hateful to you do not do to another. All the rest is commentary and now go learn it.” If what we see is the beauty of how people do good for each other then let us shout it out. If what we witness is the hate that too often defiles the human soul, starting from the story of Cain and Abel down to this very day, then that too is our mitzvah to call it out. Our congregation is probably like many congregations in American Jewry which seek that delicate balance. If we could succeed then not only our community but our country would be a stronger nation as well. Our world would make us all proud to be called citizens of the world if we did a better job of remembering the sacred and fighting against the pain of human suffering.

If we lived in a world where people believed and practiced the ideal of “Whatever is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor” just think what this world be like for our grandchildren.

Each of us will figure out for ourselves that delicate balance between the services that touch on eternal spirituality of a private nature and those of a moral societal basis. We need to perform the work on the soul and the work on the soul of the world. Can these two missions co-exist? Communal worship and prayer should be a platform for both private personal prayers of the individual and those prayers and aspirations which stir the moral conscience of every person about the state of the world at this hour.

L'shana Tova Tikatevu v'Tikatemu