Baseless Hate—Unconditional love

Rosh Hashanah 5771

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Rockdale Temple

(joke about conflicts)

It does seem that we do have a lot of conflict in our community. And it is really nothing new. The rabbis observed this kind of conflict in their times, too. Our Talmud tells this story of shame and intolerance during the last days that the Temple stood in Jerusalem.

There was a certain individual who was friendly with Kamtza, but who was an enemy of Bar-Kamtza. (You see where this is going—its kind of like Shakespeare.) He made a feast and said to his servant, 'Go and bring Kamtza to my feast,' but the servant brought Bar-Kamtza instead."

"The host saw Bar-Kamtza at the party. He said to him, 'Since you are my enemy, what are you doing here? Get up and get out!' Bar-Kamtza said, 'Since I'm here already, let me stay, and I will pay you for what I eat and drink.' "

"The host responded, 'No!' "

" 'I will pay for half the cost of the feast.' "

" 'No!' " the host yelled at him

Bar Kamtza then offered, 'I will pay the **entire cost** of the feast!' " (!—If I were the host of this bar mitzvah party I would take that deal!)

"Again the host responded , “no” And he seized Bar-Kamtza, stood him up, and threw him out of the party!"

Bar Kamtza was hurt and wounded. He knew that many of the rabbis of Jerusalem were there.

"Bar-Kamtza thought, 'Since the **Rabbis were there**, saw the whole thing, and did not protest, obviously they had **no objection to my embarrassment!** I'll go now, and have a little feast-of-slander with the king."

Our rabbis taught that because Bar Kamtza was hurt and embarrassed, the object of hatred, he brought down his own community. He gave advice and counsel to Caesar, telling Caesar that the Jews had rebelled against him. This slander led to the destruction of Jerusalem itself, to the Destruction of Temple.

The Talmud teaches that it was not the Romans, nor Bar Kamtza who destroyed the Holy Temple. Rather, the Romans were the instruments of God's punishment. Because God's people could not get along, God helped Caesar to prevail against Jerusalem. Because God's people hated one another and lacked empathy for each other, they were banished from the Eternal's House.

Comment [W1]: Rephrase so as not to raise thological problems. "Rather, the Romans were the instruments of God's punishment.

The Rabbis considered the time of the Second Temple in trying to understand why it the Temple was destroyed. We read in another passage of Talmud that the rabbis knew that the people of the time studied Torah, observed *mitzvot* and performed good deeds. Their great failure was in *sinat chinam* — baseless hatred. It was internal strife and conflict that ultimately brought about the Temple's destruction. In fact, the story of Bar Kamtza is but one story of many that the rabbis share in showing how much hate and conflict existed in their world at the time of the Second Temple. Some stories are about the shame of one person, others about disrespect for life in general and others are stories of political machinations, all founded in what the Rabbis call *sinat chinam*. The Temple was destroyed on account of baseless hate.

The sages seem to be saying something from the pages of the Talmud. One person's shame can lead to the destruction of God's House. Many incidents of conflict can lead to the destruction of God's City. God can not dwell in a culture of baseless hate. Furthermore, the rabbis are self-critical. They know that they were there, and they did not speak up. They know that they allowed Bar Kamtza to be shamed. They know that they allowed a culture of baseless hatred.

Sinat Chinam destroys the object of that hate—this we have experienced. But we also know that when we hate, baseless hatred can tear us apart as well. We know that *sinat chinam* can be leveled against individuals and we know that it can also be leveled against whole communities.

In our country, we find baseless hate on many street corners. It is bias that is based in fear, a fear that is as old as our nation. Out of fear for own survival, it has been too often American way for some to speak out with prejudice and project baseless hate. Often relatively small groups of citizens take to the streets and airwaves, speaking destructive words, words that bring hate to others and shame on themselves. In many places, God's house is again in danger of destruction.

Since September 11, 2001, some Americans have responded to Muslims with baseless hate, thinking followers of Islam are possible terrorists, forgetting that every religion has its extremists. Muslims in our country are subject to fear and prejudice in a way that should be unimaginable in the land of the free and the home of the brave. We cannot escape the controversy surrounding the building of an Islamic center in lower Manhattan. Many of those opposed to building of Cordoba House there at Park 51 point to the proximity to the site of the World Trade Center, Ground Zero and say it is an affront to the memories of those who perished there—victims too, of baseless hate.

By now you all know that there is another mosque just a few blocks away from the site of the proposed Center as well as places of worship and institutions and shops of every variety. The neighborhood, like New York City itself, and even our nation as a whole, is a place of multi-culturalism—symbolic of the many communities who have been welcomed to our shores. And by now you all know that people all over our country have been protesting the building of mosques in cities very far from Ground Zero.

Comment [W2]: Do you want to clarify the transition here by noting that the opposition to the mosque at ground zero maybe simply an opportunity to utilize an emotional charged site to show sinat chinam of Islam that has nothing to do with ground zero.?

One such example is The Islamic Center of Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The congregation outgrew its former rented space and received approval to build a new mosque in May. Since then opposition to the building has made international news, with some opponents saying they fear Muslims want to overthrow the U.S. government. Just a few weeks ago, arsonists set fire to the construction equipment at the site where this house of prayer is being built.

The widespread phenomena of hate speech and actions against Muslims is evidence that this is not about Ground Zero. We know that the terrorists who acted on September 11, 2001 were Muslims who believed that their faith taught that kind of hate. And we know that we can not hold all Muslims accountable for the actions of some. Yet there are many who preach baseless hate, playing on symbolic places and real fears.

This wave of baseless hate is not about one Islamic Center or one mosque, but it represents a culture in which a handful of extremists can now feel like they speak for our country. We see this hate in the small church in Gainesville that is planning to burn the Quran this Shabbat- September 11th. The Dove World Outreach Center and its Pastor Terry Jones is advocating International Burn the Koran day. It is their right to exercise free speech. It is their right to speak with baseless hate and to incite more. But it is also our right to speak up against such baseless hate and to stand with understanding knowing that Muslims in Gainesville have been warned to stay inside so that they may be safe.

We remember the Talmud was burned many times over and there are reports that Terry Jones might put a few in the pyre in Gainesville. We remember that baseless hatred engenders more fear, and more violence—our Talmud has taught that for 2000 years.

We live in a country founded by pilgrims, based on the values of religious freedom and we still need to learn tolerance.

Nicholas D. Kristof wrote in his op-ed in this past Sunday's New York Times that the fear of immigrants- of the other-- is not something new for our country. Kristof makes the point that followers of movements against Irish, Germans, Italians, Chinese, Japanese and other immigrants were mostly decent, well-meaning people trying to protect their country. Demagogues have stirred up fear and hysteria against minority communities for centuries. We carry in our collective souls a history of fear and baseless hate. In the 19th century, this took

the form of the Know Nothing movement which warned the American public about the “Catholic menace” and that the pope was plotting to snatch the Mississippi Valley and secretly conspiring to overthrow American democracy. We laugh each time we read on Yom Kippur, in Gates of Repentance, the High Holy Day prayer book, confessing to the sin of xenophobia (you know—that sin that starts with an x- really?), and yet there is real fear of the outsider, our nation has been party to anti-immigrant sentiment nearly since its inception.

The Jewish people understand baseless hate. We know each immigrant community, once settled, turns to torment the next set. We remember Father Coughlin’s anti-semitic radio addresses in the 1930’s stirring up fear, mongering distrust. We remember that Americans have mistrusted, have called **us** a menace to America and have accused us of overthrowing the government. "No mosque in Murfreesboro. I don't want it. I don't want them here," one resident of the town said to the TV reporter. "Go start their own country overseas somewhere. This is a Christian country. It was based on Christianity." Those words echo sentiments we too have heard, we know. On this Day of Remembrance, we remember.

We Jews understand what if feels like to be feared and hated. We understand the shame and embarrassment of being targeted by those who don’t understand us. The very first Jews in America were not allowed by Governor Peter Stuyvesant and his followers to build a synagogue in New Amsterdam for decades. Today it is humorous to imagine New York City without a synagogue.

And it wasn’t only in nascent New York City that Jews were barred from building synagogues. My parents were married in 1958 at Temple Israel in St. Louis. At that time, the congregation was embroiled in a legal battle against the City of Creve Coeur (in the suburbs). Creve Coeur had instituted new zoning laws and was barring the Congregation from building a new temple on land it had bought a few years previous. It is clear from remarks made by some in the community that the neighbors did not want a new synagogue on the block and that perhaps the reason was anti-semitic feeling by some. In many suburban communities around our country, other congregations entered into similar battles. The Temple Israel case went to the Supreme Court of the State of Missouri and ultimately the congregation prevailed in 1959. In 1996 I was privileged to co-officiate at my cousin’s wedding at Temple Israel, still in Creve Coeur.

As in the case for an Islamic Center in Lower Manhattan, Temple Israel had the Constitution of the United States on their side. But the rabbi of the congregation, Ferdinand Isserman, also wrote that there were others who preached tolerance and supported the congregation in court. Rabbi Isserman said this in a 1957 sermon, “while we were concerned with providing our own members with suitable facilities for worship, we also knew that at stake were also the needs of other religious denominations. Both the Archbishop, representing the large Catholic community, and the Metropolitan Church Federation, representing perhaps a thousand churches, instructed their attorneys to file briefs with the

Judge as friends of the court. Newspaper headlines proclaimed this unusual phenomenon in the United States when the official representatives of a Catholic Archbishop and of a Church Federation appeared in court to sustain the petition of a Jewish congregation seeking to build a house of God where Jewish worship, Jewish ideals, and Jewish teachings would be carried on. This gracious act of inter-faith cooperation met with hearty community response. The Archbishop and the Church Federation were the conscience of the community. They represent our city as its best. They spoke as one voice."

Temple Israel had built good interfaith relationships. Other religious communities came to their aid, ready to build bridges rather than get mired in the fear and hate that might have been brewing. The congregation taught and learned tolerance. Their community spoke out with love, not hate.

Temple Israel in St. Louis might have learned what Rav Kook, the First Chief Rabbi of Israel, taught. How do we rectify this sin of *sinat chinam*? Rav Kook wrote, "If we were destroyed, and the world with us, due to baseless hatred, then we shall rebuild ourselves, and the world with us, with baseless love (*ahavat chinam*)." We might translate this as unconditional love. *Ahavat chinam* is not a temporary remedy, but an ideal, the result of our perception of the world's underlying unity and goodness.

We share a history with those who seek to build the Cordoba House in New York and the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro, Tennessee. We share a present with those who will see their holy book burned, who fear violence because of their faith. Because of our history, we know what intolerance can breed. Because of our past, we know that tolerance isn't enough. We know that *ahavat chinam*, unconditional love, starts with understanding.

Three years ago, we saw that empathy first hand in the St. Louis area. That was when St. Louis County Council refused the Islamic Community Center's request to rezone a parcel of land it had bought to build a mosque to be in proximity with the Bosnian immigrants who might pray there. Rick Isserman, grandson of Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman found out about the case from his friend, Khalid Shah.

Shah and Isserman belong to a monthly study group they started, in which about a dozen area Muslims and a dozen members of Temple Israel read and discuss the Koran and the Torah. Through this group, and with the support of Rabbi Mark Shook, the current rabbi of Temple Israel, Rick Isserman mobilized support for the new mosque. "I'm fighting the same battle as my grandfather 50 years ago," Isserman said. "It's a different community and a different place, but it's the same issue."

Kristof doesn't put the blame only on those who preach hate but wrote this weekend that assaults against immigrants and minorities in the past were only "possible because so many middle-of-the-road Americans were ambivalent." We can not be ambivalent about issues of religious freedom. We can speak up not

only for tolerance, but for understanding. We will build bridges rather than bring on the destruction that comes from fear and hate. And so Kristof ends his piece, "Americans have called on moderates in Muslim countries to speak out against extremists, to stand up for the tolerance they say they believe in. We should all have the guts do the same at home.

In our Torah portion this morning, we find an individual with the guts to be present. We find a lesson that has aspects of real relationship, genuine empathy, true understanding. We find the Akeidah—the binding of Isaac. It is a story of relationships, of finding the other and in so doing, finding the self. The Akeidah—a story of reaching out, of trying to listen, of trying to be present. Abraham hears God's call, he listens and he responds with the word "*Hineini*"—"Here I am".

Comment [W3]: something missing here

God merely calls out to Abraham who immediately indicates his readiness to act. Rabbi Norman Cohen writes, "This is what *hineini* is all about—the initial willingness to respond to the other, the readiness to act on the other's behalf no matter what is being asked. When trust has been built up and we have lived in a committed relationship over time, then each of us has to be ready to respond and act when the other, to whom we are committed, calls.

We hope to be present with God, but we also hope that we have that readiness to be present for other people: we are there for individuals but we also feel empathy as a community, as a people, for other peoples. We prepare for that readiness, by understanding and learning about those who are different from us in genuine and significant ways. Rick Isserman was ready to say *Hineini* to Khalid Shah because they had studied together, knew each other. Temple Israel was ready to say *Hineini* to the Bosnian Muslim community of St. Louis because they shared a past and a present.

Saying *Hineini* means trying to understand those who are different from ourselves so that we can reach out with love. It means studying together. We are proud that this year the children of our Jewish community Day school Rockwern Academy will be reading the book Three Cups of Tea with the children of the Academy at the Islamic Society of Cincinnati. The book chronicles Greg Mortenson's quest to build schools in the poorest parts of the Islamic world, in the hopes that education might engender tolerance and moderation--- a loving gesture in an often hateful world. We are also proud that our Sisterhood has formed a relationship with the Muslim Mothers Against Violence and that members of our congregation have been part of a trialogue between Muslim, Christian and Jewish couples. We are reaching out with love and understanding.

Saying *Hineini* means that we ought to educate ourselves about other communities—Muslims and those of all faiths with who we share our world, knowing that ignorance breeds *sinat chinam*. Reaching out with unconditional love means speaking for tolerance in intolerant places. And so the Muslim community of Gainesville asked for love for Terry Jones and his church when

Comment [W4]: Good point--maybe clarify that ignorance often the cause of baseless hatred

they asked all people to stop any plan for any sort of violence against the Dove World Church in Gainesville, Florida. Their statement yesterday included a verse from the Koran, "React to your enemy with what is better so that your enemy may become your good friend."

Reform Judaism began with a message of understanding and love. 200 years ago (this past July), the first Reform Congregation was dedicated in Seesen Germany. The founder of this synagogue, indeed our movement, Israel Jacobson said these words at the dedication ceremony, "... Let us never despair of the good cause of religion and mankind... Above all, O God, make us vividly conscious that we are brothers with all the adherents of other divine teachings; that We are descendants of one humanity which adores Thee as their common Father; that we are brothers who must learn love and gentle tolerance. And we are brothers [it was after all the 19th century!], finally, who under Thy guidance walk toward a common goal and who, in the end, when the mist will have been dispelled from before our eyes and all the errors gone from our spirit and all doubts removed from our reason, will meet each other on one and the same road. Amen.'

Israel Jacobson spoke of being present in community, for community and to build bridges with compassion.

Love does not mean that we always agree. I am sure a few of you might know this. Sometimes, out of love, we ask our partners to speak with us or even for us. We ask for their understanding as well. With unconditional love we will continue to ask our Muslim counterparts to speak out against violence and hatred, extremism and intolerance. In writing in support of the Cordoba House in Lower Manhattan, the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York included this sentiment to further mutual understanding, "To help heal the pain exacerbated by the fact that the hijackers and their sponsors were acting in the name of a perverted, evil mutation of Islam, and in sensitivity to the families of the victims, we call on the sponsors of the Muslim Community Center to memorialize the victims by squarely repudiating the twisted ideology of the terrorists. Further, just as settlement houses acculturated new Jewish immigrants a century ago, the Center should dedicate itself to teaching new Muslim immigrants about our abiding principles of religious pluralism and tolerance." We hope to truly know each other and to learn from a shared past and a shared present to build a shared future in a world that might be more about understanding and love. A world where differences in religion and culture can remain so and yet not cause hatred and conflict.

We pray that building a future prevails during peace talks as well—as we hope that each party can tell the other's story, know it and reach out as enemies turned friends, ready to say *Hineini*.

We say, we are here and we speak for tolerance and reach out with love. If a small group of people can stoke a fire of hate, couldn't we, speaking from

understanding change this culture of hate? We learn from Rick Isserman (and his grandfather, Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman) to fight against baseless hate and we hope to engender tolerance. Rather than be witness to destruction, we could build together. We know that the present culture of hate, now directed at Muslims might at times be directed to others. We hope to be able to say *hineini* then, too—to always fight against hateful destruction and pray for building with love.

Let us pray as we begin this New Year to be present in our world. We promise to reach out in tolerance and compassion. We promise to build bridges with our understanding. We promise to speak and to fight the destructive forces of baseless hate. We pray to find a way to say *hineini* within our community and in our home. We have been witnesses to baseless hate and destruction. Let us now build for a future preaching in many voices the value of *ahavat chinam*—unconditional love. May we continue to dwell in love in this house of God.