

RABBI'S MESSAGE

An Optimist - Even Now

Usually, I am not a fan of labels, though I do find them helpful at times. I find many labels limiting, because often the labeling hints that everyone who shares the same label thinks a certain way, and shares all the same opinions. Labels like Progressive, Liberal, Conservative, Orthodox, Democrat, Republican, Right Wing, Left Wing, Moderate and more tend to pigeon-hole people in the eyes of others. Particularly when those who identify themselves as belonging to one category talk about those in another category. It is often misrepresentation, assuming what another person believes. Even in Judaism, the common labels of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform suggest a belief system and a practice that may not apply to everyone who connects with that category. When people ask me, "What kind of rabbi are you?" expecting to one of those three labels, they are often confused by my answer: "*A Jewish one.*" My learning has been from a variety of sources, and I try to relate to that diversity by not assuming that labels define our identity.

One label that I've tried to wear with pride most of my life, has become more difficult since October 7, the violent day that the war between Hamas and Israel began. The barbaric, surprise attacks by Hamas murdering, injuring and kidnapping innocent civilians was among the most horrific acts we've seen in our lifetime. Israel was forced to respond with military force. Despite the fact that Israel warned the citizens of Gaza to move out of dangerous areas, people have been killed and lives have been disrupted on both sides of Gaza's border with Israel. Real people, on both sides, are living in fear. Hostages were taken by Hamas, and the loved ones of those hostages live with the horrible mystery of not knowing what is happening.

The situation is much too complicated for me to go into point by point. Innocent civilians, just trying to live their lives while praying for the right to live in peace, have their worlds turned upside down by attackers who have denied Israel's right to exist. Israel has been accused of being the aggressor, even though their response to the Hamas attacks was defensive. But make no mistake: this war is not about religious values. It is not Muslims versus Jews. Jewish teaching in the Mishnah states that "*anyone who destroys a life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a life is as if he saved an entire world.*" (Sanhedrin 4:5) Islam teaches the EXACT same thing! (Quran 5:32)

While I do believe there is evil in the world, I believe it is not inherent genetically. Christianity teaches that we are all born with Original Sin, from Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, and baptizing babies helps cleanse them of that sin. Judaism does not teach that we are born sinful. We learn hatred from others, from stereotypes, from misinformation and from bad examples. The source of hatred and mistrust is hard to fathom. There are infinite possible theories about the origin of hatred, but the lyrics from this song performed in the musical South Pacific seem to sum it up:

*You've got to be taught to hate and fear,
You've got to be taught from year to year,
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear,
You've got to be carefully taught.*

You've got to be taught before it's too late,

*Before you are six or seven or eight,
To hate all the people your relatives hate,
You've got to be carefully taught!*

If we can learn to hate, we can learn to love. A few days ago, I had lunch with a group of fourteen community leaders – seven rabbis and seven Muslim religious leaders. We talked about the current crisis and how our roles as both religious leaders and members of a community help form our different perspectives. We talked about blame, and how unhelpful it is to focus our energies there. And we got to know each other as human beings. *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of G-d. Though many of our ideas and practices are different, we share what it means to be human. It is only through human outreach can we prevent hatred and misunderstanding. Then, G-d willing, we can sing a new song:

*You've got to be taught to love and learn
When difficult feelings begin to churn
Get close to the light; it will not burn
You've got to be carefully taught.*

*We all need to learn, while there's still time
Before the kids are seven, or eight or nine
Remember G-d' made us all from the Divine
We have to be carefully taught.*

Some say one random act of kindness can unknowingly provide a ripple affect that can be felt across the globe. As Rabbi Shammai taught: “*Say little and do much; and greet the world with a smile on your face.*” Pirke Avot: 1-16.

As wartime continues to feel discouraging, let's remember that we CAN change the world...one person at a time.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon