

Rosh HaShanah 2 Morning 5783: Speaking to Each Other
Kehillath Shalom Synagogue
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A few years ago, the Huntington Anti-Bias Task Force through the Town of Huntington created lawn signs for Town and community institutions that read: Hate has no Home in Huntington. They have a logo with different sorts of folks holding hands. They're lovely. We happily supported the printing and have displayed this lawn sign in front of our building.

But recently, I have had second thoughts.

While we must be aware of the threats in our community, I am not sure whom that message reaches. And when we brand some people as haters, to be excluded, excised, where does that leave us? Does it not further the widening of the gap, with **us** on one side and **them** on the other. Does it not strengthen the walls between us? Does it not focus on the "them" and their hate?

I do not think we should put all our focus on hatred. Now, I'm not suggesting that we stick our heads in the sand and ignore what is happening. There have been some very ugly, and frightening, things that have happened on Long Island in recent months and years, and it is important to be aware. But hatred is, intentionally, destructive. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: "Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys."

What did King seek to build? He called it the Beloved Community.

After all this time, you might say: "this is not possible. It's pie in the sky. We can't just sing kumbaya and expect people to hold hands around the campfire." Especially not the Proud Boys or the Oath Keepers or the Goyim Defense League. But kumbaya is not passive or superficial. Kumbaya is a Black spiritual, grounded in suffering and prayer, asking God to Come by Here. Strengthening themselves through song for resistance and action.

This is our work, as well. To come together in prayer and community and remind ourselves of our faith and our values, and to build our community so that we can live them out.

It's important to know that the vision of the Beloved Community wasn't only for the like-minded. The Civil Rights leaders believed in the possibility of transformation of enemies into allies – or, we might say, of teshuvah.

On Sunday evening, Rosh HaShanah evening, I spoke of teshuvah as a return to our true selves, and of Moses' reminding God of God's own nature and of our work, or opportunity, to remind each other of who we are. John Lewis echoed this when he wrote "you try to appeal to the goodness of every human being and you don't give up. You never give up on anyone." We must, somehow, remind those who are afraid that they will lose their place, that they will be replaced, of the possibilities of community, of connection, of working together.

We know that the times we live in are fearful. There is much hatred and treating of human beings as pawns, props, and things – not as holy images of the divine.

We know that humans have the ability to hurt each other and our earth. We know that we have a lot of power. But Rebbe Nachman taught: if we think we have the power to destroy, then we must also have the power to repair.

We do have that power.

Last year, I shared the story of the transformation of a neo-Nazi through the friendship of a classmate who regularly invited him to Shabbat dinner in his dorm. While extraordinary, this story is *not* unique.

Daryl Davis' is a professional musician in Washington, DC. But his closets hold more than instruments: he has more than 50 Ku Klux Klan robes, made from silk or cotton. The robes come in an array of colors including purple, green or white, and are paired with matching pointed hoods.

Each one represents a man or woman who let go of hate, thanks to Davis' friendship.

Davis believes in the power of human connection to overcome imagined barriers. He has had an influence on the lives of more than 200 people who have left the KKK or other white supremacist groups. His weapon of choice in the fight against racism is friendship. He says: "It all comes down to having civil discourse, and a willingness to listen to one another. There are many different ways to fight. There's no one way solve the whole problem. What I do is not gonna solve all of it, what somebody else does is not gonna solve all of it, but what will solve all of it is different people and groups working together."

There are dozens of stories like this, with many befrienders and many transformed. One man whose life was changed through another's act of friendship said, "Far too many human beings of all backgrounds and political beliefs see kindness as weakness, as if it's capitulation, it's rolling over, when really it is a weapon. And one of the most powerful weapons against hate that we have."

Similarly, I recently heard Loretta Ross, on TED Radio Hour. Her TED Talk is called: Don't Call People Out, Call Them In. What's the difference? She says: calling in is a call out done with love. Instead of using anger, blaming, and shaming as your method of achieving accountability, you use love, grace, and respect.

While "calling in" is a new term, she learned the approach more than 40 years ago. In 1979, 5 anti-Klan protesters were killed in Greensboro, NC and 2 all-white juries acquitted the murderers, even though it was caught on videotape. At the time, she was working for Rev. CT Vivian, who'd been an aide of Dr. King, and he founded the national anti-klan network, to try to prevent this from happening over and over again.

Rev. Vivian always used to say: If you ask people to give up hate, you have to be there for them when they do.

At the time, she didn't quite agree. She felt: If the Klan was okay hating me, I was ok hating them back! And said: I don't even have the time,

energy, or resources, to help the victims of hate, now you want me to help the perpetrators!

But she went to work and found herself teaching anti-racism to wives of Klan members. They didn't want their children raised up in the hate environment. The women disguised themselves as a quilting club so their husbands wouldn't know what they were up to. She said: They were not expecting to be respected, or listened to, or helped. They were so used to using hatred as their currency, that they expected that in return.

Through being treated with respect, they transformed. And she found that once she got to know them, she couldn't hate them anymore. She thought she was going to change them, and they wound up changing her. She said: I had to find another motivation. That motivation was love and respect.

Now she teaches her approach. How does it work? When Loretta Ross's uncle came to a family reunion, he started talking about Mexican Americans stealing jobs. And everybody had been chatting and eating quite happily till his racism silenced the room. Most people buried their faces in their plate, because this was Uncle Frank. This is what he does. But she decided to respond, but not with anger. She organized her thoughts and asked him a question. "Uncle Frank, I know you. I love you. I respect you. And what I know about you is that you'd run into a burning building and save somebody if you could. And you wouldn't care what race that person is, you wouldn't care whether they were gay or an immigrant. So, Uncle Frank, that's the man I love and respect. So tell me: How can I reconcile that good Uncle Frank that I know you are with the words that just came out of your mouth?"

She says, with this approach, you haven't called him in. You haven't called him out. You called on him to decide how he's going to be. And with this approach, he's less likely to become defensive, because you haven't actually attacked him. And while he's organizing what to say, you've affirmed that he has options about how he wants to be...But most importantly, the third thing you've achieved is that you did not let bigotry go unchallenged, and that was witnessed by the entire family: how you

stand up to bigotry at a family reunion without hate, argument and throwing over the table.

She says: If you use respect and radical empathy as a way to invite people into a conversation instead of a fight, you're more likely to achieve your goal. chances are they're going to give your words a fair hearing than if they feel they're being attacked and have to go on the defensive.

Most people are *not* neo-Nazis, Klansmen, Proud Boys or Oath Keepers, not even most people we disagree with. The examples of those who reached out in courage and kindness to the most virulent promoters of hate and violence serve for us a beacon of possibility and example. If they could befriend Klansman and neo-Nazis, perhaps we might reach out our hands to our neighbors with lawn signs that differ from our own.

Our prayers at this time of year include the plea: Shema Koleinu: Hear our voices, Adonai our God. Be kind and have compassion upon us. This prayer is also a challenge: How can we ask God to listen to us if we're not willing to listen to each other?

When I was 18, I left Long Island – shaking the dust off my feet, never to return. I left the segregation, the inequality, the valuing of wealth and status over all else. And I lived in progressive cities with lots of activists for 25 years. Until love brought me back. I returned, with no small amount of trepidation. But faith means not giving in to despair, to the inevitability of change and possibility.

Love brought me back, and I found love here. My retreat from the reality I abhor helped no one. Only engaging can effect transformation. I have been inspired and uplifted by the good work that so many people do, every day, and have been doing, to repair our corner of this broken world. The passion and dedication and love that exists right here in our community energizes me and gives me hope.

Since my first year with Kehillath Shalom, I have worked with Abraham's Table, which brings people together across religious backgrounds to know

each other and connect. But it's not just talking. Our vision rests on the twin beliefs that people can bring about constructive change and progress and that all people should be treated with dignity and therefore all deserve basic human rights.

Together, we are already organizing for MLK Weekend 2023 with the theme: "Becoming a Beloved Community ... A Long Island Interfaith Response to Hate." This weekend will bring people together through education, conversations, trainings, volunteering, shared religious services, meals, and music.

And a month ago, on a smaller scale, my back deck was the site of a gathering of Kehillath Shalom members with members of Masjid Noor and other Muslim congregations in our area. It was the beginning of, what we all hope will be a fruitful connection of our communities.

We can begin to build the Beloved Community right here. We can believe in the power and possibility of the teshuvah of this season, for ourselves, for each other, for our community, and for our country.

The political theorist and moral philosopher Michael Walzer wrote: "We still believe, or many of us do, what the Exodus first taught....: First; that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt; second; that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land; and third, that the way to the land is through the wilderness. There is no way to get from here to there except by joining **together** and marching."

Let us, as have so many before us, reach out our hands and march together. Onward. Shanah tovah.