

Courageous Love

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As a law student at Yale, Senator Cory Booker made a bold decision. He would move into a housing project in a tough neighborhood in Newark. He had grown up in Harrington Park, NJ, a lily-white suburb, where, his father would joke, they were “four raisins in a tub of sweet vanilla ice cream.” They had a good life in Harrington Park, a life of opportunity. But the roots of the Booker family were in the black community of Newark, and Cory was of a mind to make a difference there.

“One of Newark’s nastiest human warehouses.” That’s how Esquire magazine described Brick Towers on Martin Luther King Boulevard. But that’s where Cory Booker made his home while commuting to New Haven. And that is where he met Miss Virginia Jones, a tenant organizer, whose son was murdered in that building.

One day Miss Jones asked Cory to describe their neighborhood. He began to talk about the troubles he saw — the drug dealing, the abandoned buildings, the projects — when she stopped him cold and said: “Boy, you need to understand that the world you see outside of you, is a reflection of what you have inside of you, and if you’re one of those people who only sees darkness [and] despair, that’s all there’s ever gonna be. But if you see hope [and] opportunity; if you’re stubborn enough every time you open your eyes, [to] see love and the face of God, ...then you can make a difference.”

That moment changed Cory Booker. It changed the way he saw the world and his place in it. Ever since, he has been determined to connect to the love within himself, to see and hear and act from a place of love, which, he admits, is not always easy.

And what about us? What do we see? What do we see when we look in the hard places, the grim places of our world? The slums, the refugee camps, the war zones, the mental hospitals — all the places where people suffer and struggle for dignity. What do we see when we look at the people with whom we disagree vehemently? Do we see only darkness? Or do we see light? Do we see love? Do we see the face of God? What do we see “out there?” And what do we see when we look inside ourselves?

We all want to see love and hope and opportunity. But sometimes it is hard to see the light. We harbor hurts, disappointments, pains, struggles and fears. These affect our vision, like seeing the world through a dark lens.

In today's Torah reading, our mother Sarah has difficulty seeing the light. Blinded by her anguish, she sees Ishmael as a threat, a rival to her son, Isaac, and a challenge to her own dignity. He was an innocent child, little Ishmael, just a boy, laughing and playing. Yet all she could see in him was her own pain and suffering. Consumed with rage, she cast him out into the scorching desert, to a near-certain death.

Only God sees the boy *ba'asher hu*, as he really is — a small, fragile human being who did nothing to deserve his fate. Abraham, too, has faulty vision. He fails to see his wife Sarah "*ba'asher hi*," as she is — broken and devastated by her infertility, supplanted by her handmaid. Abraham doesn't see Sarah's desolation. He doesn't hear her cries or understand her silence.

Not long ago I asked a group of students whether they feel that they have been heard — that someone has really heard them, gets them, and understands what hurts and what's hard for them. They all understood what I was asking. Most said, "rarely." Some said, "never."

It's not just teens. Rarely, if ever, do we feel that we are really heard, that we are seen as we want to be seen, and truly understood.

As a child I had one grandparent who totally got me, who made me feel loved and affirmed — with my grandma I always felt safe— to be me. And here's the interesting thing. Because she saw and heard me, I always wanted to be my best in her eyes. She brought out the best in me. And to this day, she still inspires me to be my best. When we see the good in others and affirm it, we help them to see it and to express it more fully.

My other grandparent mostly saw the externals. To him I was the undisciplined chubby kid who didn't clean his room. He didn't see me, and he didn't hear me, as I wanted to be seen and heard. He made me feel judged and that made me angry. I know he loved me, but I didn't really feel it as a kid, and he certainly didn't bring out the best in me. Looking back, I wonder what hurts he carried that caused him to see things as he did. I can't claim to know, because the truth is: I didn't really see him, either.

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The history of oppressed peoples often begins with a story being told about them or imposed upon them. Invariably cruel and filled with lies, such stories turn people

into caricatures to justify mistreating them. Jews are greedy. Africans are savages. Mexicans are drug smugglers, rapists and murderers. Muslims are terrorists. By imposing such labels on others, we define them in ways that strip them of their humanity.

Consider those people with whom we disagree — those who have a different political or world view. How often can we honestly claim to know and understand what's going on inside of them, what's in their hearts, what pains them in their gut? It is so easy, so tempting, to impose our own narratives on others. Oh, they're a redneck. They're a liberal. They're a settler. They're a Palestinian. As if these labels really tell us who they are, what burdens they may carry, or what love and goodness they may have in their souls. To pin a label on another is to rob them of their story and replace it with one of our own making. It is a form of tyranny that turns people into objects and denies them their dignity.

Consider the NFL players who refuse to stand for the national anthem. We can slap a label on them as defiant, disloyal, un-American, or we can see their protest for what I believe it really is: a cry to be seen and heard as part of a community that is in pain — a community that has never overcome the gravest of indignities, of being treated as objects, literally bought and sold.

Black lives do matter, just as much as any other life. And if some of us don't like the form of this protest, which is understandably hard for some to see, we should ask the players why they have resorted to this measure and be prepared to listen. And we should ask ourselves, "Has our society done enough to make people of color feel seen and heard?" Have we done enough to live up to the truth we declared to be "self-evident... that all men [and women] are created equal... endowed by their creator with... inalienable rights?"

These players, these men, deserve to be heard, *ba'asher heim*, respectfully and fully, and encouraged to express the pain that's in their hearts. If we view them from a place of love, we will see their love, their love for their people, their love for the promise of this nation that they yearn to see fully realized. If we look at them with loving eyes we will see this, and then anger can give way to understanding and even healing.

This summer I met a Palestinian man who has learned to see the face of God in all people. His name is Ziad Sabatin and he is from the West Bank town of Hussan. Ziad was imprisoned at age 15 for throwing stones at Israeli soldiers. While behind bars, he and a circle of fellow inmates began to take a hard look at themselves—to ask themselves, "who are we, and what do we want to be?" Together, they decided

to turn from violence and pursue the path of peace. Upon release they found like-minded Israelis and formed an organization called “Combatants for Peace.”

One day Ziad was protesting the construction of a fence that would completely encircle the Palestinian village of Walaja, when to his surprise he saw a group of Jewish settlers who had come to join the demonstration. Among them was Nachum Pachenik, a student of Rabbi Menachem Froman, the rabbi of the nearby settlement of Tekoa.

Rabbi Froman, of blessed memory, believed: “the heart of the problem is the heart of the solution,” that faith in God would bring the two peoples together as brothers and sisters. He said, “You have to love your neighbor” — it’s a mitzvah — “and the Palestinians are my neighbors. So, the love of the Palestinians is the essence of my religion.”

Menachem Froman was an eccentric figure who did some pretty controversial things, like befriending Yasser Arafat. But even his detractors will grant him this: His love of God moved him to love people, all people, and to see the image of God in every human being. Ziad was so inspired by this love that he, a devout Muslim, became Rabbi Froman’s student and disciple. To this day he wells up with emotion when he describes how his rabbi made him feel seen, and heard, and loved — and every day Ziad strives to honor that love by the spreading his rabbi’s teaching.

But this story doesn’t end there. When word got out that Ziad had befriended Jewish settlers his partners in Combatants for Peace were enraged, especially the Jewish ones, and they asked him to leave the group. As principled, well-meaning, and dovish as they were, for them Nachum Pachenik and Rabbi Froman were “settlers,” and nothing more. I understand their reaction. The label “settler,” didn’t come out of thin air. Ziad’s friends had seen unspeakable atrocities committed by “settlers,” just as Israelis have witnessed heinous acts of terror perpetrated by “Palestinians.” The pain on both sides is real.

The Bible tells us to “hate evil and love the good.” (Amos 5:15) We must not be silent or indifferent to evil. But standing against it does not require that we become hateful people. It must not blind us to the good that is deserving of our love. To be fully vindicated and effective the struggle against evil must come from a place of love and be conducted in the name of love.

Senator John McCain, of blessed memory, was a role model and exemplar of this spirit. He was a fierce warrior and a man of love. He loved people and, as we have seen from the outpouring of affection from people of diverse backgrounds, he was

deeply loved. Given the torture he endured in Vietnam, he might have turned out differently. He might have been soured on humanity, embittered and angry, bent on vengeance. Instead, he turned his suffering into steely resolve that no human being should be mistreated or debased. He didn't let his captors rob him of his humanity, and so he never lost his ability to see and feel the humanity of others.

According to the Talmud, the 2nd Temple was destroyed because of *sinat chinam*, baseless, gratuitous hatred. But it doesn't lay the blame at the feet of any particular party. The whole community is implicated in a cycle of hateful and callous acts that generated angry and vindictive responses. It is hard to find the precise beginning, but we all know the tragic ending. One Jewish faction opened the gates of Jerusalem to the Roman legion in order to vanquish a rival Jewish group. The message of our tradition is clear. Hatred brings destruction.

That kind of reckless contempt is rampant in America today. Vulgarly flows from the highest places, threatening to engulf our precious democracy with a tidal wave of hate. Between 2016 and 2017 anti-Semitic hate crimes increased 57 percent—the largest jump recorded in any single year, according to the Anti-Defamation League.

It's not that there is actually more anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia, misogyny and xenophobia. It's that those who should be role models of decency have debased themselves and our society by speaking, tweeting and blogging vile obscenities and hate speech that would once have gotten your mouth washed out with soap.

It is time, past-time, to break the cycle of hate. Proverbs 26:4 says, "Don't respond to a fool, lest you become like him." And in the very next verse it says, "Respond to a fool, lest he be righteous in his own eyes." The rabbis wrestle with the seeming contradiction: "Don't respond... do respond..." Eventually they come to the following conclusion: we must not descend to the level of the fool. And yet, there are lies and obscenities that must not be left unchecked. The challenge is to know when and how to respond.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of pre-State Israel, taught that the best and most powerful response to hate is love. The antidote to baseless hate, to *sinat chinam*, is *ahavat chinam*, generous, bold, courageous love.

Courageous love is a love that is willing to take risks, to suspend judgment, to give the benefit of the doubt, and to listen, to really listen. It takes courage, because listening with empathy means opening ourselves up to feel the pain of others, to feel it in our hearts, and that makes demands upon us. It obligates us. Just as we would

act to alleviate our own pain, we are compelled to ease the suffering of our sisters and brothers, and to protect them from harm to their body or their dignity.

Real love, true love, obligates, but it also liberates. It takes us out of the prison of the self and binds us to others in real relationship, which is the essence of life.

We are born to such love, and it is as vital to our souls as oxygen is to our bodies.

The bold reclamation of real love must be our guiding light if we are to overcome the discord and division of our time. But its demands will bring great challenges. There is so much healing to be done because there is so much suffering and deprivation, and true love cannot tolerate such grave injustice. But in honoring love we will find joy and uplift, wholeness and peace.

Last Wednesday, while driving through Newark, I saw God. Just by chance, I found myself on the corner of Martin Luther King Boulevard — and, there, I saw the face of God. I saw God in the faces of the people on the street — and I thank Cory Booker and Miss Virginia Jones for opening our eyes to the truth that God is there in that place — and not just in that place, but in the faces of God's children in every place. Joy welled up within me, I felt love flowing from my heart, and I knew that I am blessed — that we are blessed.

Blessed are You, God, for having made us in Your image. Blessed are we, God, when we see You in ourselves and in each other. In this coming year, may we all dedicate ourselves to love one another with a generous, bold and courageous love.

V'chein yehi ratzon! Amen!