

Va-y'hi 5771 –Bullying

Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

I remember the moment as though it was yesterday. It was the summer before fourth grade; my family had just moved from Long Island to Teaneck, NJ: new town, new shul, new school, new friends – and new summer camp. Each morning I took a bus ride up to Nyack, NY (a healthy 45 minute ride) to the Ramah Day Camp. I met some other boys and wanted to fit in with them.

One long ride, the fourth grade boys started teasing Jonathan, one of the younger boys and I joined in. One thing led to another and we found ourselves playing “keep away” with his Yankees hat. Suddenly, Michael threw it to Larry and I threw it back and the hat flew around and around the bus; suddenly, the hat sailed over one of our heads and right through the open window behind him. No more hat.

I still remember Jonathan’s tears ... and the phone call to my parents that evening. As I think about growing up, I can remember many times I was bullied, but this was the first time I can recall being the bully-er.

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Over the last year, we have all seen the terrible effects of harsh bullying in Massachusetts and throughout the country. The terrible tragedy of Phoebe Prince - a new girl from Ireland who was bullied to a devastating end – reminds us all that words harm. Most often the victims are those who are most vulnerable, those on the fringes of society, those who do not feel that they are part of the community or group. Often the victims are those who are foreigners, those of a minority race, culture or religion, those who do not fit in as well socially or suffer from physical or mental impairments. Often they are gay, lesbian or transgendered.

The horrible events surrounding Tyler Clemente at Rutgers University this fall and others who are gay who have been bullied have been a shock and a call to action. Public shaming and hateful words marginalize people.

They hurt; they can really hurt.

Over the last few months, a number of gay, lesbian, and transgendered students have committed suicide from experiences like these. This is an unspeakable tragedy, one to which we must respond. Keshet, a local Boston advocacy organization that helps the Jewish gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community has started a pledge that we

as a Jewish community speak out strongly against hateful speech. I have signed on as has our shul.

It is called “Do Not Stand Idly By: A Jewish Community Pledge to Save Lives.”

And states simply, “As members of a tradition that sees each person as created in the divine image, we respond with anguish and outrage at the spate of suicides brought on by homophobic bullying and intolerance.

“We hereby commit to ending homophobic bullying or harassment of any kind in our synagogues, schools, organizations, and communities.

“As a signatory, I pledge to speak out when I witness anyone being demeaned for their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. I commit myself to do whatever I can to ensure that each and every person in my community is treated with dignity and respect.

I will send out the links to their pledge and their video after Shabbat and hope you will sign on as well: www.jewishcommunitypledge.org

http://salsa.wiredforchange.com/o/1285/p/dia/action3/common/public/?action_KEY=2580

See their video here: <http://jewishcommunitypledge.org/video-do-not-stand-idly-by-at-the-ga/>

I was encouraged to learn that a coalition of key young Jewish leaders representing the various Jewish teen youth groups – including BBYO, our own United Synagogue Youth USY, the Reform movement’s NFTY and the Orthodox NCSY, are all standing together and promoting this pledge to put an end to bullying to their teen members.

“By signing this pledge, we have agreed to be a part of a united front against bullying. We stand for inclusion and tolerance ... We have spoken up, and now it is your turn.”

http://bbyo.org/news/releases/stand_up_for_each_other/

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This morning we read *Parashat Va-y’hi*, in which we learn about the end of Jacob’s life. There are a number of powerful moments.

First, Jacob has his son Joseph swear that he will return him to Israel to be buried. This is something that is still practiced thousands of years later as some Jews still choose to be buried in Israel, even if they have lived elsewhere.

Second, as Hannah mentioned in her thoughtful *d'var Torah*, Jacob's final words to his sons and grandsons.

Third, we have one of the most unusual moments in the Torah occurs at the beginning of the parashah when Jacob speaks to Joseph and tells him that the land of Canaan, the land of Israel, will belong to his descendants as an everlasting possession. This is important because they are now in Egypt, where, as we know, their family, the beginning of the Jewish people, will spend much time in Egypt.

As he makes this statement that eventually they will return to the land of Israel, Jacob points to Joseph's two sons. He says, "Now, your two sons, who were born to you before I came to you in Egypt, shall be mine; Ephraim and Manasseh, shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon." (Genesis 48:5)

This is a very strange, but significant statement as Jacob formally adopts his two grandsons through a legal process, but, as our *Etz Hayim Humash* points out, one "which elevates them to full membership in the Israelite tribal society."

It seems clear that Jacob knows who these grandsons are since he names them. But then suddenly, a few verses later, Jacob is confused. The text doesn't use his name, Jacob, but Israel, as it states, "Noticing Joseph's sons, Israel asked, 'Who are these?' and Joseph said to his father 'They are my sons, whom God has given me here.' 'Bring them up to me,' he said, 'that I may bless them.'" (Genesis 48:8-9)

What?!?

Jacob has just spoken so movingly about his grandsons, formally adopting them, strengthening his connection to them and showing that he feels close to them, but suddenly he doesn't recognize them??

Rabbi Howard Kushner in our *Etz Hayim Humash* asks, "Is he losing his vision, similar to what happened to his father, Isaac? Perhaps he simply doesn't recognize his grandsons, since they look like Egyptian princes and do not look as if they had been raised in the land of Israel."

Rashbam, a French commentator of the 12th century (and Rashi's grandson) makes a fascinating comment here. The Torah states that Jacob looked at Joseph's sons who were right before him, but he did not know who they were; he not see them. And Rashbam adds, one can see someone without seeing his or her face. Not really seeing them.

Rashbam suggests that Jacob knows that he has these grandsons, but he doesn't really know them. He doesn't really see their faces. He doesn't really see them as individuals.

When Jacob formally adopts them a few verses earlier, he knows them as an idea, not a reality. This change in legal status is more about his theoretical relationship with these grandsons and his connection with Joseph than about actually knowing Ephraim and Menasseh.

There is seeing someone, and then there is *really* seeing someone. Rashbam points out a deep understanding about how we often look at people or the world. We often look at the world – situations, moments, and people – and make assumptions.

Given how fast-paced the world is, sometimes we do not truly see the moment or even see the person fully. We see an idea of what we think we should be seeing.

We know this from science. Our eyes don't actually see everything in our field of vision. The way that we actually see things is by seeing part of things, especially our lateral – side vision, and then our brain sort of fills in the details based on assumptions and experience. Often when we are looking at something quickly, our brain makes a whole series of hypotheses about what it is. Thankfully, most of the time, our brain gets it right, but sometimes those assumptions are wrong.

Our tradition asks us to stop to really see people, not simply our assumptions about who they are.

This is not easy. It is time-consuming and challenging, but it is our responsibility.

Returning to Jacob, according to the Midrash, when Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Menassah, realized that their grandfather is having trouble recognizing them, they affirm who they are by reciting *Sh'ma*: "*Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad* – Saba, Grandpa, Listen Adonai is also our God, Adonai is one.

I interpret the grandsons saying something like this in the Midrash: "We may dress differently from you living here in Egypt, and you may not have recognized us in this moment, but we are your grandsons, we believe in the same Eternal One, in the same God as you do, as your father did, and as your grandfather, Abraham, did. We are your grandsons."

The Midrash has Ephraim and Menasseh state that they want to be seen and that they are part of the same legacy.

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Where does bullying come from?

Often from not seeing a person, from not really understanding him or her or where she or he is coming from.

We have all experienced this. Sitting with someone in a meeting or a conversation and suddenly it feels like their words do not take us and our faces into account. Sometimes we might not really see someone, but simply react to their words because it triggers something in us.

The rabbis teach us that when one insults another person and causes *halvanat panim*, literally the whitening of the face, causing someone to become pale or blush, embarrassing them so much that their skin color changes, that is akin to murder.

Our words are not only words, they can be destructive and have an impact on how someone understands him or herself and experiences the world.

Harmful, negative words can be internalized, marginalizing, and even, God forbid, leading a person to take their life, as we have seen this year.

How do we as a community combat this type of bullying and behavior?

Judaism teaches us that words have significance; they are not just words. Words do harm.

As the book of Proverbs states, “*Hamavet v’haḥayyim b’yad halashon* – death and life are the hand of the tongue.” (Proverbs 18:21)

We need to be *rodfei shalom*, pursuers of peace. We need to go out of our way for the sake of peace. “If we see an act of bullying, then we must stand up and even speak out against it, even if that comes at some personal risk. To victims of such words, we must be willing to *somekh noflim*, to lift up the fallen and comfort them and reach out to those in need.” (Rabbi Joel Grishaver)

We need to be sure that our homes, our schools, our shuls, our communities are filled with positive behavior. We need to be sure that people who speak hatefully and especially those who bully others cannot gain an audience, which is often what they are seeking.

To stop these words, sometimes it means standing up in a more public way against hurtful words, against destructive language that can sometimes take place in front of others.

We must try to create communities where we truly see each others’ faces as the Rashbam teaches us. As a people, Jews have often been the victims of bullying and ostracizing. It is our responsibility to protest this type of behavior whether its victims are groups or individuals.

Then, and only then, will we truly build a world where we can see each other’s faces.

Shabbat Shalom.