

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

SHO-F'TIM 5785

Recently, psychologists have alarmingly pointed to a different and more virulent type of social aggression which they have termed, "nihilistic violence". Its meaning: a randomized act of physical harm with no apparent motive - senseless, destruction for its own sake. The unbalanced individual who erratically shoots and kills students on campus; the unprovoked "sucker punch" thrown at a total stranger for no reason whatsoever.

Of course, there is always a reason for everything. Dig deep enough and you may find moods of depression, frustration, anger, jealousy, passion, to name the most well-known of the culprits usually invoked to excuse such errant behavior. And if the offender is simply too embarrassed to admit to any of these feelings, he may choose any of the more popular scapegoats to whitewash the delinquent and often criminal act. In our Jewish world, the disingenuous and obscene use of the Palestinian cause to mask antisemitic hatred has today become an all-too-common trope, often accompanied by physical violence.

There are many mitzvot in our Parsha which legislate appropriate laws addressing man's relationship with

his fellow. In the Torah's discussion of the laws of homicide and manslaughter, we find the following verses (19:11-13): "But if a man hates his fellow, lies in wait for him, rises up against him, and strikes him mortally... you shall not pity him, but you shall abolish [the shedding of] the blood from Israel and it will be good for you." The Midrash (Sifrei 186:2), quoted by Rashi (ibid, 19:11), states: "It is through his hatred that he comes to such a point as to 'lie in wait for him'. From here they [Chazal] derived their statement: 'If a man transgresses a light command, he will in the end violate a weighty command; - because he transgressed the command (Vayikra 19:17) "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in your heart", he will in the end come to such a point of bloodshed. It is for this reason that it is stated here, apparently redundantly, 'but if a man hates his fellow [and lies in wait for him],' for it ought to have written only: 'But if a man rises up and lies in wait for his fellow and strikes him mortally.'"

There are two important take-a-ways from this Midrash. The first: that if a crime is motivated by hate - regardless whether the hate was justified or not - the crime must be punished. No matter the reason - abusive upbringing, poverty, neglect - there can never be any defense to condone inflicting harm upon another. The

ennui, the sheer boredom that psychologists speak of, or the anomie, the breakdown of social norms and values that sociologists have identified - the reason is irrelevant, neither can excuse any form of delinquency. And the second: that when a person is assaulted by feelings of hate towards another - again, justified or not - the Jew was expected - nay, commanded - to transcend the hateful feelings, neuter their negativity, and actually transform them into something positive.

You ask: Is such a thing possible - to hem-in and discipline one's emotions? And the answer is a resounding yes! From the mitzva "Not to hate your brother in your heart" (Vayikra 19:17) to the tenth of the Ten Commandments "Not to covet" (Sh'mot 20:14), to the famous, "Love thy neighbor" and "To love the stranger" (D'varim 10:19). When Rabbainu Bechaya speaks of CHOVOT HAL'VAVOT, in his famous ethical treatise, the operative word is CHOVOT, the obligations of the heart. How often does the Torah - in such celebrated passages in the Sh'ma liturgy - speak of "serving Him (HaShem) with all your heart" (D'varim 10:12), and "not straying after your heart" (Bamidbar 10:6) - all of which underscore the critical importance of dealing with the heart, that classic metaphor for the seat of all emotions and tempers.

Rav Soloveitchik was particularly emphatic about this point and has written and spoken extensively on the subject. In his essay, Catharsis, the Rav put it this way: "the Halacha thinks there is an ethic, not only of action, but of feeling, as well. Man is master over his emotional world, capable of disowning feelings or emotions, however compulsive or powerful, if they seem to be disruptive; and, conversely, of assimilating redemptive emotion into his personality."

The Rav tells the story that as a pre-teen in cheder, he felt terribly jealous of a fellow classmate who possessed a brilliant photographic mind. When his father, Rav Moshe, became aware of his son's envy, he gently told him that such a feeling was inappropriate - past nisht. The Rav remembers taking his father's reprimand to heart and testified that he worked on himself for years until he proudly claimed that he had conquered this dishonorable character trait. He would likewise remind us that his illustrious grandfather, Rav Chaim Brisker, renowned for his extraordinary acts of chesed and compassion, once told him that in his younger years, he was quite the opposite - intemperate, unforgiving and less than kind. Rav Chaim confessed that he also spent many years refashioning his character to

ultimately reflect the virtuous attributes for which he was so admired. As Rav Yitzchak Hutner once sharply put it: Rav Yisrael Meir Kagan was not born the famous Chafetz Chayim!

But this conscious effort to refine one's character from its ethical crudity and brutishness was even exemplified by none other than Moshe Rabbeinu. In an astonishing Midrash quoted by R. Yisrael Lipschutz, in his masterful commentary on the Mishna, Tiferet Yisrael, (Kiddushin 4:14), we read the following legend: After Moshe redeemed the Jewish people from Egypt, an Arabian King sent an artist to paint Moshe's portrait. When the Arabian King received the portrait, he asked one of his advisors, who was an expert in analyzing an individual's characteristics based upon the facial patterns (physiognomy), to look at the portrait of Moshe. The report of this expert was very unflattering. Moshe, the expert claimed, possessed terrible personal traits - he was greedy, arrogant, and unkind. The Arabian King was shocked. He thought something must have been wrong with the portrait, so he set out to see the great leader himself. When they met, the Arab sheik saw that the portrait was undeniably correct. How could this be? Moshe himself then explained that he did indeed possess these unseemly natural character-

istics, but through his sheer self-discipline and self-development, he managed to overcome them.

When Rambam delineates the behavioral aspects of repentance (Hilchot T'shuva 2:2), after insisting that the sinner abandon his sinful ways, he adds that he must also "remove the sins from his thoughts". Rambam quotes in support the verse: (Yishayahu 55:7), "Let the wicked one forsake his way and the iniquitous man his thoughts. In Radak's commentary on that verse, he explains that the phrase, "his thoughts" refers to matters of the heart. In other words, it is insufficient to desist from immoral, unethical behavior; one must also extirpate such impious and morally disgraceful sentiments from one's heart, the seat of all emotion.

That Rambam concurs completely with Radak's understanding of the above verse from the prophet is borne out by many of his statements in Hilchot T'shuva (see 4:5, 5:4). But, in particular is this unequivocal exhortation in 7:3 - "A person should not think that repentance is only necessary for those sins that involve deed such as promiscuity, robbery, or theft. Rather, just as a person is obligated to repent from these, similarly, he must search after the evil character traits he has. He must repent from anger, hatred, envy, frivolity, the pursuit of money

and honor, the pursuit of gluttony, and the like. He must repent for all [of the above]. These sins are more difficult than those that involve deed. If a person is attached to these, it is more difficult for him to separate himself. In this context, [Yishayahu 55:7] exhorts: "May the wicked abandon his path and the sinful man, his designs."

Among our many Elul preparations, as we ready ourselves to pray for a New Year, let us resolve to address our emotional world and set it aright so that our actions follow upon our now penitent and righteous "thoughts". 🙏