

A couple of times every week, I meet with B'nei Mitzvah students and parents. We spend an hour together, studying the parasha for the week of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah. One of my goals in these sessions is to convey the idea that the Torah is about mitzvot, actions, and that in our tradition, what we do is more important than what we say.

I play a little game. I ask the young man or woman, "do your parents love you?" Thankfully, every time, the answer has been "yes." Then I ask, "how do you know?" Almost always, the answer is, "because they say so."

Now I close in. "Okay, Rupert, or Bethany, or Rollo. I love you." They look at me, a little uncertain. Then I say, "okay, no, I really don't, though I sure like you a lot."

We, me, kids and parents, move on to a conversation about how, while the words "I love you" are wonderful to hear, we know a parent loves us because of what they do: the care they provide, the support they give, the food and shelter and education and emotional protection. The point becomes clear. Not words. Actions.

Last week we discussed the Torah's perplexing commandment to love the stranger. Part of what makes the commandment perplexing is that it is not accompanied by a commandment to love your fellow Israelite. Yes, we read *v'ahavta l're-echa k'moe-cha*, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. But the implication there is more one of the Golden Rule, as Rabbi Hillel

pointed out, that we should treat others as we would wish to be treated.

The Torah tells us to love the stranger. Nowhere does it tell us to love our own.

Three hundred years ago, as Jews settled in the United States, a pattern emerged. Doesn't matter if we speak of New York or Cincinnati or Buffalo or Denver. Jews begin to move to a particular place. Others follow. They establish a cemetery, a synagogue and a school.

This makes sense. They need a place to bury their dead and to pray and to educate their children. But what happens next that is unexpected. And in city after city we can trace this.

They found a hospital, so every Jew has a place to go when ill. Then an orphanage, so that no Jewish child is on the streets. A nursing home for the elderly, so that the aged and infirm need not worry about what comes next. Free loan societies; funds for dowries for poor brides, vocational services. In every Jewish community of size, once roots were put down, the next step became to provide for all, in what we can only see as an act of profound love for one's fellow Jew.

And this is not a North American phenomenon. This was surely so in any "old country" your family hails from. As a rabbi in Brazil, I visited children at the Lar das Crianças and the elderly at the Lar dos Velhos and the sick at the Hospital Israelita.

Whether it comes in our DNA, or because of the mitzvot we perform from obligation, or a natural sense of family love...our love for one another is a manifest part of Jewish history.

Except, not always.

Three hundred fifty years ago a Lithuanian rabbi wrote that “Worthless and wanton men who call themselves *Hasidim* have deserted the Jews. They worship in a most insane fashion. Their exaggerations and lies are a destructive inferno raging in the midst of our people.”

In the late 1800s Isaac Mayer Wise, the founder American Reform Judaism, wrote that "The Herzl scheme is about as important to Judaism as ‘Christian Science’ is to medicine. It is the duty of every true Jew to take an active part in efforts to destroy Zionism."

Indeed, from the other end of the spectrum a Neturei Karta leader wrote around the same time that “the Zionist desire to force the whole world to the side of sin is great. Heaven forbid that one should tolerate persons in this matter. The danger to the community is far too great for that.”

What a strange people we are. On the one hand, we embrace, we run toward opportunities to show our love for one another. We play one upsmanship with our philanthropy. On the other hand, our words and sentiments to each other can be among the coldest and most menacing imaginable.

In these recent months, that other hand has been woefully present. And to use a word we used a week ago, we have been strangers to one another.

The debate over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the Iran Deal, has been as contentious a moment as there has been within the Jewish family for a long, long time. And I say the Jewish family deliberately. I like the image of us as a family. And the deal has divided actual families.

Rob Eshman and David Suissa are journalists who run the Los Angeles-based Jewish Journal, one of the largest Jewish newspapers in the US. A few days ago, they had an interesting joint column.

“A reporter called us one day last month. He noticed that our columns had been on opposite sides of the Iran debate, yet we were working together running the Jewish Journal. How could that be?”

“Our first reaction. Sadness. When two Jews who disagree actually get along, apparently that’s news.”

They continue: “Some opponents of the deal have accused supporters of being kapos. Several readers accused Rob of only supporting the deal to get invited to the White House Hanukkah party. One angry reader got Rob’s cell phone number and has been repeatedly texting him a vulgar message.

People have accused David of secretly wanting a war with Iran and of being motivated to so strongly oppose the deal only because, deep down, he just rates President Obama...which he doesn't."

I have heard similar comments. You have, too. If you oppose the deal then you obviously reject the two-state solution and envision a totalitarian Israel. If you support the deal, then you clearly favor Israel's destruction. Both are baloney.

Sometimes we Jews have trouble understanding a simple principle: people, reasonable people, good people, can disagree based upon honest differences of opinion.

Senator Cory Booker spoke here a few weeks ago about his decision to support the agreement. Those present were a diverse group. I know people who arrived unhappy with his decision and who left unhappy with his decision. But I believe all present agreed it was an honest and sincere decision, based on research, scrutiny and thought. Many in the Jewish community jeered openly that Booker succumbed to pressure from the president. President Obama remains in office for sixteen months. Senator Booker does not run for reelection until 2020. There are no consequences from his party for this vote. He had no reason not to vote his conscience.

Senator Frank Menendez is vehemently against the deal. He was one of the first to announce his opposition and is one of the few Democrats to do so at all. Those familiar with his

record know that the senator's stance is in line with his foreign policy outlook in general. He is being consistent. We know the senator has legal challenges ahead that may affect his career. But on this topic, I spoke to a journalist friend who covers New Jersey politics. He knows this stuff. He was firm. This particular vote, in and of itself, will have no long term impact on the senator's tenure. Much is out there about sinister motivations for Menendez' opposition. But he, too, has no reason not to vote his conscience.

It has perhaps not escaped your notice that I have not shared my own feelings on the agreement. I do not know that I possess any particular wisdom on such matters, but if you are curious, I am ambivalent. I agree the deal is highly problematic. I am hard put to imagine a realistic alternative that would be better.

I am grateful I am not one of those who needs to make a decision.

My own ambivalence reflects the ambivalence of American Jewry. Polls make it clear that roughly half of us are in favor of the deal and half of us are against it. And that ambivalence is also reflective of Israelis. Israeli opinion surveys show the public against the deal by a meaningful margin. On the other hand, Google the long and impressive list of retired Israeli military and intelligence leaders who are for the deal. Former heads of the Mossad and the army; people who a) know what

they are talking about and b) have no particular political ax to grind.

But I am not at all ambivalent about the impact the debate over the deal has had on us. It scares me. Jews charging Jews with being enemies of Israel. Jews charging Jews with being unpatriotic to America. Jews charging Jews with being Nazis. Jews charging Jews with being political prostitutes.

On Rosh Hashanah I noted that the rabbis of the Talmud debated no question more vigorously than why the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. They did not accept that it was simply that they were puny and weak while Rome was enormous and powerful. That's not the way they thought. They had to have done something so awful that this was their punishment.

Their sin, they concluded, was *Sinat hinam*. Hatred without bound and without meaning; jealousy, anger, political rivalry, all sorts of rifts that created the opportunity for Rome to enter, and plunder, and destroy. The Jews did not love each other enough to keep the Romans out.

I say to the Bar Mitzvah student, do your parents love you? How do you know? They care for you, they give you good things, they literally give up themselves so that you might flourish. You know they love you not because of what they say, but because of what they do.

We speak enthusiastically of Jewish unity, of Jewish solidarity, of a community that is united. But those are words. What do we do? We are all Jews but we Jews come in many colors and sizes. We share core ideals and a common heritage and a history of thousands of years. But we are diverse in our politics and in our theology, in our visions of a Jewish state and our visions of Jewish community. True unity, true solidarity, rests upon a foundation of what we have in common, but must also include respect for where we differ. Absent that respect, we have *sinat hinam*; we have Rome.

We Jews have been a family for some four thousand years. In that time we have weathered Egyptians and Inquisitors and Cossacks and Nazis. But we have also weathered sectarian warfare, false-messiahs, excommunications and denunciations. The dangers from without have been real; the dangers from within, every bit as real.

But if we love one another enough, we keep all Romans far, far away.

Twenty-four hours ago, as I was writing these words, a most welcome email arrived. It was a statement from the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, which our member Steve Greenberg chairs. The introduction notes that our "53 national Jewish organizations join in a recommitment to common principles and objectives, as well as to maintaining high standards of civil discourse in addressing those issues.

"Across the spectrum of support or opposition to the deal, it was recognized that our community shares serious concerns for the security of the United States and the world posed by Iran's nuclear program. It is regrettable that, at times, the debate was marked by irresponsible assertions, including *ad hominem* attacks and insinuations of dual loyalty, maligning the intentions of the opposing side. Degrading comments and words of violence are dangerous and contrary to the spirit of mutual respect of our country and the values of our Jewish tradition."

These are good, good words to hear.

The prophets speak of a future time when all shall gather together and celebrate Sukkot. The image is glorious...every Jews in the world crowded into one Sukkah. Some will say it's too hot and some it's too cold. Opinions will abound on what kind of food should be served. Sleeping arrangements and wake up times and what kind of music will be played and whether we should get basic or premium cable....

It will be hard. But the prophets' message is clear. If we love one another enough, there's room for everybody.

