

Only love can drive out hatred - D'var Torah - Shabbat Pesach - April 18, 2014 - for everyone back home on the tragic events of April 13

It was Sunday afternoon.

A woman visited her mother at a retirement home.

A grandfather took his grandson to audition at a local talent competition.

These were both acts of support and of love.

Love should have conquered all on that day.

However, there is hatred in people's hearts, hard-hearted prejudice worthy of the Pharaoh of the Exodus.

One man was also out on that Sunday afternoon. He has harbored notions against Jews for decades that have become deeply ingrained in his being. He was well known for his anti-Semitism and for denying humanity to other specific groups of people in America. He was also known for turning on his fellow purveyors of hate in order to receive a reduced sentence for his own incarceration. Perhaps he hated his compatriots as well. On this day, he sought to turn his views into violent acts at two Jewish sites in the Kansas City area.

The Jewish Community Center of Overland Park is familiar territory for my family. We attended many events there. I was on stage to perform at three of their bi-annual Jewish Arts Festivals. I have family members who frequent the facility. A high school classmate of mine serves as its Jewish Life and Learning director. Village Shalom, the senior care and residential facility, was where my aunt, who died 7 weeks ago, had been living for a number of years.

Those are the places that Frazier Cross chose as his targets on that day before the beginning of Passover earlier this week. He was reported to have asked, "Are you Jewish?" to some of the people he encountered in the parking lot at the JCC. Ultimately, his hatred of the Jewish people spread to the greater human family in two instants. The grandfather and grandson whom he murdered attended a large United Methodist "Megachurch." The woman visiting her mother was a devout Catholic.

Many individual Jews and Jewish leaders have tried for ages to tell people that prejudice against one group could easily lead to dire consequences for all of society. Hatred knows no bounds, a phenomenon proven day after day by the picketers of the Westboro Baptist Church.

This event happened in Kansas, but it touched us here in Las Cruces. A cousin of mine was involved with the talent competition at the JCC on Sunday. One of our congregants had a granddaughter at the JCC at the time of the shooting.

In the aftermath, we have learned much about Frazier Cross and his extremism and how pervasive the network of hate remains across our country. One map showed that there are several Ku Klux Klan groups in our state.

The greater lesson we can learn is in the nature of community. Frazier Cross and those like him don't like a world where cooperation and love cross religious and ethnic lines. They can't stand it when people join one another in programming that is enriching and fulfilling. The service held at the Overland Park JCC yesterday was visually moving. I read the words that my Religious School and Rabbinic school classmate, Rabbi Arthur Nemitoff, who is now my "home rabbi," delivered at that gathering. One of the comments he made was about love, quoting next week's Torah reading: "Love your neighbor as yourself. How do we do that? It is not a narcissistic approach to life, where we give and do for others only that which you yourself would want. Rather, it is just the opposite: when we put ourselves in another's shoes, and imagine what he or she needs...and we then are able to provide it...that is true love. That is when we love our neighbors as ourselves."

On this Shabbat during Pesach, I will chant a section from the Song of Songs. Yes, it is unabashedly a book of love poetry. But the rabbis included this book in the Bible because they saw it as an expression of the love between God and the Jewish people, which I would extend to all of humanity. We need to love our neighbors as ourselves with the commitment and depth reflected in the Song of Songs. We need to see that loving our neighbors is a small part of the love that envelops the world through all creation, and through life. Our very lives are a loving gift from the Creator to each of us.

In the Torah reading for this week, Moses demonstrated his love for his people despite their flirtation with idolatry in the Golden Calf episode. Through that love of community, Moses convinced God to show mercy to the Israelites and to allow them to gradually learn and grow into their love for the Eternal One. Then Moses, in a loving request, asked to see God. The Divine replied that Moses could only see God's back while standing in the cleft of a rock as the Divine presence passed by. Moses took up to the summit of Mt Sinai, a second time, two tablets of stone that he had carved this time. While stationed in the position God had set for him, Moses heard a declaration of the attributes of God's essence. He was reassured that the Divine is Eternal, causing everything to come into being, gracious, merciful, patient, kind, truthful, trustworthy, forgiving, and just. He realized that these were qualities that he needed to practice as a leader, and that his people needed to internalize these values in their treatment of one another. We could say that all of those attributes, together, create a strong foundation for love within a family or a community.

That is a love that can combat hatred. That is a love that can give us the wisdom and the determination to stand with each other because we are part of one human family. That is a love that can help us through difficult times and enable us to work together to engender understanding, cooperation and respect in a world that presents us with too much division and violence and war.

Our hearts go out to the families of those three community members, Reat Griffin Underwood, William Lewis Corporon, and Terri LaManno, murdered in Overland Park, to my home Jewish community and their neighbors, and to people all over the world who are victims of senseless violence and oppression.

May this holiday of Pesach inspire us to work for the redemption of our world through love, commitment, mercy and hope.

Rabbi Larry Karol