

Rabbi David Ingber's Kabbalat Shabbat Sermon

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I'm a man who's been profoundly influenced by my father in so many ways. My father, blessed, of blessed strengths, continued to live and be well. Yibadel Chaim, Yamim Arukim, 92 years old, was the one who taught me what it was to give God all of the credit for the blessings in my life.

What was regularly heard in my father's voice was the Ebershtehelfen, God has helped. My father's the one who taught me how to put on a talit and how to put on tefillin and what it was to sing on Friday night and Saturday mornings. And my father also taught me something that I used to hate with every fiber of my being.

And now find myself realizing at this ripe old age that I owe him a big thank you. It would happen every time we went to any sporting event, whatever it was. If it was the Mets or the Rangers or the Islanders, didn't matter what the team was, we would regularly sit in a section in which everyone in the section was wearing a clear indicator of the team that they supported.

And it would be into that section that we would sit, my father, my brother, and myself. My brother and I prepared to go along with whatever it was that was being chanted at any given moment, but not my father. Whomever the home team was playing, that's who my father rooted for.

And my brother and I would sit there incredulously looking at each other going, what's going on? We don't have any security. What are we doing in the middle of this section rooting for the Minnesota North Stars? Like, what's going on here? Not to mention the fact that my brother and I also loved the New York Islanders growing up. We grew up on Long Island, so it was always a bit of an odd thing that we gave my father a lot of grief for, but he taught us something.

My father was a deeply tribal person, but also knew that tribalism can be extremely dangerous. My father liked to teach us that to be a Yid, to be a Jew, was to be both inside and outside all the time. That were we to be too deeply subsumed in the mentality or the fervor of our particular team, that would somehow be dangerous to our mental, spiritual health.

I have to admit that as somebody who loved and cried for the New York Islanders in my youth, I found it blasphemous. But it came back in full force this past week as we watched the United States play against Canada in the gold medal game of the Olympics. I was taken back to 1980, the height of the Cold War, and that miracle on ice, can you believe in miracles? A proud American I am, but I played hockey, and some of my best friends are Canadians.

Of course, when the Americans won, it thrilled me, not to mention the fact that a nice Jewish boy got the game winner. But this strange feeling that I've been carrying this whole week, where everywhere I look, I'm being asked to choose a side that doesn't fully fit me. It

all depends on what circle I'm in, and it's a feeling that I've carried with me for many years, and many others have confided in me, too many to mention, that they feel like they don't belong in any of the camps by the way that we divide camps, or the teams, and that more and more they feel homeless, more and more feeling like they don't have a place spiritually.

If you're critical of ice, you're expected to chant that all law enforcement is evil. If you defend Jewish safety, you're expected to then defend every policy of the Israeli government. If you love Torah, you're also expected to think that Jews are superior.

If you teach mysticism, you're expected to dissolve your Jewish particularity altogether. And what if you don't fit into all of these boxes? I'm not this, and I'm not that. I'm not someone who thinks Jews are better than anyone else, but I love Judaism fiercely and deeply.

I'm not someone who believes Torah is the best because it's ours, but because it's ours. I turn to Torah for wisdom, beauty, and meaning. I'm also a mystic, and I'm also embodied.

I'm a man, and I'm a Jew. And all of those pieces have at one point or another over the last couple of years put me outside of some team that I'm supposed to be rooting for. And this week, I have the honor and the privilege to stand outside of City Hall and testify at City Hall in support of the Buffer Bill, a modest piece of legislation that was put forth, it was introduced by Speaker Julie Menon, to create a protective frozen zone around houses of worship so people can pray without intimidation and harassment.

And I felt this tension yet again in my bones. I'm standing online with another rabbi. I'm just there because I believe that the bill is not only about houses of synagogues and shuls, but about all houses of worship, a church, a mosque, anything that we deserve to have to go to these places without fear that someone will spit at us or harass us or intimidate us.

Those things have happened to me and my family. And so I'm standing there. It's not an extreme position in my opinion.

It's just about human dignity, basic dignity. And there was a nice Jewish guy with a guitar playing songs in the snow. And right next to him, a protester with a keffiyeh on, banging a drum.

It seemed to me that the guy beating the drum was actually beating to the rhythm of the Jewish guy. He was almost accompanying him. It was strangely in rhythm with the Jewish melody.

And there were uniforms and pretty soon, symbols and teams. And there I was sitting in the gallery. And right next to me, somebody that without that uniform on, I would have just, hey, New Yorker, person, human.

But dressed in the uniform as he was. I was sitting shoulder to shoulder with people who embody an anti-Semitism that is so palpable and so real and so scary. And some of them were Jewish.

A lot of them. And in my mind, I kept thinking about the Hasidic Torah that I had taught the day before, the 92nd Street Y, where there's a Hasidic review that says that we should look at every human being as if the letter Aleph is the two eyes and the nose creates an Aleph in

their face. And I'm looking over at these Alephs and I can't see them because they have masks on.

And when members of the city council asked, do you believe, can you define intimidation and harassment is yelling things at people trying to enter synagogues that have to do with Hamas. Will you on record say that that's intimidation and harassment and people in the gallery who were on the other team started hissing, supporting Hamas. And all of it was so amazing to see up front.

It wasn't on some social media feed. I wasn't hearing it secondhand. I was literally sitting next to somebody with a tree of life tattooed all over his arm with all of the spirit of the mystical system of Kabbalah wearing a keffiyeh and saying hateful things to another person that was sitting in front of me.

And I was asking myself, dad, which team, right? I know which team I'm on, but is it okay to be really on this team? Is it really okay? Because my tribe, my body, my people, it was so, and I want to know, and all of us here to know that I don't believe that we fully understand the way that this is mutating. I don't believe that we understand it completely and totally. It appears in very different ideologies.

It survives assimilation. It survives achievement. It survives self-critique.

But that hatred is real. And so there I was wrestling with this on exactly the week in which the Torah will tell us that we have to remember Amalek. This week's Torah portion is Zachor.

Remember Amalek. And then it tells us, erase the memory of Amalek. Remember and erase.

But which one is it? Which one is it? Both Amalek and the Torah attack the weak and the stragglers and the vulnerable. Amalek becomes the symbol of ideological hatred of cruelty that preys on vulnerability. And for us to pretend tonight that Amalek is only an internal metaphor would be dishonest.

There are ideologies that seek Jewish erasure and that is real. And so we are commanded to remember. But we're also commanded to blot out the memory of Amalek.

And so why? Because remembering that is too insistent will become permanent rage. Because remembering that becomes a way of protecting ourselves can turn into seeing every other human being as a uniform first and a sole second. And then Amalek has entered us.

And so we are always in and also reminded to be out. The great Rav Kook wrote, the great Rav Kook. He wrote that the Torah tells us, zachor et asher asadacha Amalek.

Remember what Amalek did to you. And then it says, tinchay et zeicher Amalek. Erase the memory of Amalek mitachat ha-shamayim from underneath the heavens, lo tishkach.

Never forget. And says Rav Kook, why does he have to tell us to erase the memory of Amalek under the heavens? Is there above the heavens where we're not supposed to erase them? You hear what he's saying? Is it possible, Rav Kook is asking for us to erase but not

erase meaning. That in our act of tribal defense, in our act of important identification with who we are and where we come from, we have to be remembering at all moments that there is a place above this dimension.

A place that Purim comes to remind us of once a year. How else do we make sense of a holiday where everybody on a certain level is just happy that we're going out and we have a revenge fantasy, it's all great. But the rabbis say the most important part of Purim is to blur the distinctions, the rabbis say, between Haman and Mordecai.

Right now in the world, it's clear to us. And 364 days of the year, maybe it has to be clear to us. And on that day this week, it was clear to me.

But it's dangerous when that clarity is too rigid. On Purim, we say, *Adalo yodah*, until one can't distinguish between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordecai. It doesn't mean that good and evil are the same.

It means that reality is much more complicated than our slogans. And Purim is a holiday that blurs those lines. Purim refuses in its rabbinic construction, not in the Megillah, but in the rabbinic construction, the way that the rabbis for the last 2,000 years have demanded that we celebrate Purim is to, yes, tell the story, the simple story.

But then the rabbis make it a little bit more complicated. Because if we lived in a world of Purim story without that deeper structure, we'd be lost. We'd get lost.

And so Purim comes to slightly destabilize our certainty. Maybe a little bit. And that helps us stay human.

It helps us stay humble. It helps us to keep looking, to keep trying. So that when you stand close enough to another human being, those categories might tremble ever so slightly, a little bit.

I refuse to dissolve Jewish particularity in order to prove that I'm an enlightened being. I refuse to reduce another human being also to a symbol. I refuse to say that we Jews are better.

And I refuse to say Jewish identity must dissolve. I also refuse to worship tribe. And I refuse also to be erased.

This is the tension that I'm feeling at this moment. It's a tension that I'm bringing to almost every interaction, not just within my Jewish identity, but as an American, as a human, as a citizen of this world, we must find a way to be morally clear without becoming morally arrogant. We must find a way to be morally distinct without becoming morally lazy.

We must be able to name what we're seeing while also leaving open the opportunity to see what we don't see. That's what it is to remember Amalek and erase them at the same time, to blot them out and yet also refuse to let any hatred colonize our soul. It will allow the ego its need for simple binaries and also soften that need.

So I am not this, I am not that. And yet I'm still here. I'm still here.

A Jew, a seeker, a lover of Torah, and somebody who can name courage when I see it. For those who are willing to enter the fray and to hear the voice of Mordecai saying, it is for this moment that we need your complex understanding. It is for this moment that we need your sane centrism, able to see truth in many places and call out lies when you see them.

For those who are called to hear nuance, to hear that this is the moment that you were made for and that you will make a difference and you will show the way. We need more leadership like that. More leaders in the Jewish community and in the broader community that have the courage to say not this, no, I'm not that, and I'm not this, and I'm not that, I'm this.

May God give us the strength to remember to blot out and to erase that blotting out. Holding those two things together, yeah? Let's rise.

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