How is it possible to be genuinely kind to someone and to hate them at the same time?

Remarkably, this is what the Talmud seems to say regarding the spiritual cause of the destruction of the Second Temple:

“During the Second Temple period, the people occupied themselves with Torah, Mitzvot and lovingkindness. Why was the Temple destroyed? Because they acted with Sinat Chinam – senseless hatred.”

How is this possible?

The Netziv suggests an answer: The people being hated were not the same ones being showered with lovingkindness: “As a result of the senseless hatred in their hearts that one harbored for the other, they suspected all those who did not follow their path as a G-d-fearing Jew of being a Sadducee and a heretic.”

This changes the rules of discourse.

We are no longer debating views or ideas. We are delegitimizing the other as a person. It is no longer about perspectives but about the person – vicious ad hominem attacks. It’s no longer about right and wrong, but about you and me. All who think and act like me are ‘good’ and bring spiritual light and morality to the world and all who disagree are ‘bad’ and immoral, invoking spiritual darkness. When I am absolutely right and you are absolutely wrong; when the other is totally disqualified and seen as part of ‘the dark side,’ we are treading dangerously close to the abyss of senseless hatred.

Thus the hatred and infighting in Jerusalem were so disastrous on the eve of destruction that Josephus describes the society as “a great body torn in pieces.”

How do disagreements deteriorate into such deep hatred?

In the War Scroll, found near the Dead Sea in the caves of Qumran, we can perhaps detect an answer. The text – probably written by the Essenes – describes its followers as “the sons of light” and all others (including fellow Jews) as “the sons of darkness.”

This is particularly true during the prolonged election period in Israel. Respectful democratic discourse often descends into sharp divisiveness, delegitimizing and demonization.

The Torah hints to the cure of this destructive phenomenon when it tells us that Aharon the High Priest passed away on Rosh Chodesh Av, the first day of the month of Av. At the onset of what would become the most tragic time in Jewish history – the first nine days of the month of Av culminating in Tisha B’Av – we are charged to recall Aharon’s life and legacy. More than anyone else in our history, he was the national peacemaker, always doing everything he could to create peace and harmony between fellow Jews, despite salient differences and painful personal disputes.

At this time of year when we reflect on what the Sages tell us is the spiritual cause of the destruction of the Temple – senseless hatred – we should evoke Aharon’s memory and aim to strive for its cure.

1 Yoma 9b.
2 Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, HaEmek Davar, introduction to the book of Genesis.
3 The Jewish War, Book 5:1.
4 Interestingly, this is the only Yahzeit date mentioned explicitly in the Torah - that Aharon died on the first day of the 5th month (Bamidbar 33:38). Remarkably, this appears in Parashat Masei which is read every year around Rosh Chodesh Av.
5 Avot DeRabbi Natan 12.