

Erev RH 2008 –A Path of Love

When it comes to love, Judaism gets a bad rap. Christians are known to claim that Judaism is a religion of Law while Christianity is a religion of Love. Judaism does involve a lot of laws, but our vast legal heritage does not detract from or conflict with the messages of love found in the *Torah*, the *Nevi'im* (Prophets) and *Ketuvim* (Writings) – i.e. the *Tanach* -- Hebrew Bible. In fact, most of the mitzvot were formulated to help us experience God's love, to give us ways to express our love for God, and to help us learn to love one another. The word mitzvah, which we often translate as “good deed,” literally means commandment. It is also linguistically related to the Aramaic word “*be-tsavta*,” meaning “together.” A mitzvah is a vehicle for us to experience love and holiness by connecting our souls to God.

Beyond the Tanach itself, the Rabbinic, Medieval and Modern codes and commentaries add many more laws to our tradition. These layers of text and tradition, especially the Chassidic, also include many teachings about love – both about God's love for us, and our love for God. We are expected to express our love for God by keeping the covenant and passing it on to the next generation, by doing mitzvot, both ethical and ritual, and by loving God's creations, chief among them, our fellow human beings.

Those of you who you have attended any Bar or Bat Mitzvahs here during the past 4 years, have heard me talk about the love sandwich with the SHEMA in the middle. **AHAVAH RABBAH AHAVTANU – SHEMA – V'AHAVTA ET YHVH ELOHECHA...** First, in the blessing of Love (*Ahavah Rabba* --“a Great Love” in the morning service, and *Ahavat Olam* -- “Eternal, Universal Love” in the evening service), we allow ourselves to receive God's unending, unconditional love. God's abounding Love teaches us what to do with our lives -- how to serve God and others. This great Love also allows us to know the Oneness of all Existence that the SHEMA asserts: **SHEMA YISRAEL YHVH ELOHEINU, YHVH ECHAD: Listen Israel** – that's you – i.e. the following is something that each of us must say and hear – i.e. understand -- for ourselves: **Y-H-V-H** – that which always was, is and will be—**is our God** – that which always was, is and will be, is **One**. God is One, and all is One in God. Life and Death are One; Joy and Suffering are One. From this profound realization, we move on to loving God **b'chol levavcha, b'chol**

nafshecha, u'v'chol me'odecha -- with all our heart, with all our being and all our "very-ness." If we have never received love, we cannot love others.

The liturgy takes us through this sequence of affirmations every morning and every evening, every day of the year.

We are loved by God God was, is and will be All is One we love God

This part of the service, which is familiar to most Jews, is not the only place in the daily liturgy which aims to remind us of God's great love for each of us.

As we don the tallis/tallit to begin our daily morning prayers, we recite the following words from Psalm 36:

"MAH YAKAR CHASDECHA ELOHIM..." "HOW PRECIOUS IS YOUR LOVING-KINDNESS O GOD, WE TAKE SHELTER UNDER YOUR

WINGS..." For those of you who did not grow up praying regularly with a tallis/tallit (I venture that this is true for the vast majority of you here this evening; I didn't wear one until I was 29) – it may feel strange to put one on at first. The tallit invites us to physically wrap ourselves in God's Love. The bigger the tallit, the more one can enjoy the experience of being enveloped. On one hand, the tallit is simply the vehicle for the tsitsit which are tied to the 4 corners, representing all the mitzvot. But according to the excerpt from Psalm 36 that our tradition has us say as we put it on, the tallit is a symbol of God's love and protection. This year, a rabbinic colleague taught me to really take time under the tallit to feel enfolded in Love before I jump into the rest of the morning davening. This teaching has been a great gift to me. We have lots of talleysim/tallitot here. If you are curious and adventurous, I encourage you to take one home for the days in between RH and YK, and set aside a few minutes in the mornings to sit quietly with a tallit around your shoulders and imagine that God is holding you in His or Her loving embrace.

Once the tallit is on, we put on the tefillin -- from the word *tefillah*, meaning prayer. (The English term phylacteries does the tefillin a great disservice). As we wrap the leather strap around our finger & hand, we say these words from the prophet Hosea: **"V'EIRASTICH LI..." "I betroth myself to You forever. I betroth myself to You in justice and in law, and in loving-kindness and in**

compassion; I betroth myself to You in faith; and you shall intimately know God.” The tefillin symbolically bind us to God. The arm strap is like a wedding ring – a tangible reminder of the partnership we affirm and renew each day.

As it says in the *V’Ahavta*, “these words shall be a sign upon your hand and between your eyes.”

The affirmation that we recite as we lay on the tefillin demonstrates the high value that our tradition places on both justice **and LOVE**. By engaging in this physical action – putting on the tefillin as we say these words -- we have the opportunity to internalize their meaning and feel connected to God through justice and love and faith more deeply than if we just said the words without the ritual action.

Once the tallit is wrapped around us and the tefillin are in place, one of the first things we say is **“ELOHAI NESHAMAH SHENATATA BEE TEHORAH HEE. MY GOD, THE SOUL THAT YOU PLANTED IN ME IS PURE.”** Our liturgy gives us an opportunity to remember this essential truth about ourselves -- to feel our innate purity and goodness when we wake up every morning.

It’s a beautiful way to begin each day. It’s also the starting point for being able to do the work of *teshuvah* -- repentance, realignment, return -- that our tradition asks us to do at this time of year. Understanding that our souls are pure and not tainted, gives us the perspective that we are **not** our mistakes, we are **not** our worst qualities, we are **not** our bad behaviors. Rather, being loving and doing good is simply a return to our true nature. To take this one step further, rather than thinking “my soul is pure,” it is even more powerful to realize: I AM a pure soul. I *have* a personality, but I *AM* a soul. I am a spark of God—the Source of All.

If we seek intimate connection with God and allow ourselves to feel God’s love, then we must love and accept ourselves. Who are we to question God’s Love? Everyone who has been in love knows the happiness that love brings with it. Joy is a state of being that Judaism strongly affirms and aims to facilitate. This truth about Judaism may run counter to impressions that many people have of Judaism as a religion of guilt, oppression and fear.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught that **JOY (SIMCHAH) IS NOT MERELY**

INCIDENTAL TO YOUR SPIRITUAL QUEST. IT IS VITAL. A Chassidic Rabbi who lived from 1772-1810, Nachman himself suffered from depression. He considered depression to be the root of all illness. Sadly, he died of tuberculosis at the age of 38. He is a striking example of the teacher teaching what he or she needs to learn, and a reminder to all teachers and spiritual leaders that one does not have to be enlightened to bring wisdom and light to others.

Knowing from his own experience that being happy is not easy for all of us all of the time, Nachman had much to say on this topic.

“If despite your desire to be happy you feel down, draw strength from happier times gone by. Eventually, joy will return.” He had other practical suggestions: **“Get into the habit of singing a tune. It will give you new life and fill you with joy.”** He recommended dancing for the same reason. I have definitely found that singing and dancing lift me up when I am down. For others, walking in the woods, going for a run, playing a game of tennis or watching a comedy on TV are ways to combat depression. Each of us knows what works for us.

We also know that when we feel good about ourselves we are able to give to others, and when we are depressed and despairing, we are no good to anyone – unless we are open to receiving their love and to being lifted out of our depressed state. While there is certainly a place for solemnity and discipline in the spiritual life, joy must underly that solemnity. The Dalai Llama, Desmond Tutu, and Thich Nhat Hahn, 3 of the world’s most beloved and respected contemporary spiritual leaders, all radiate joy. They always have a twinkle in their eyes.

In the Jewish world, Shlomo Carlebach (*zichrono l’brachah* – may his memory be for a blessing) and Zalman Schachter Shalomi, are two rabbis who brought thousands of Jews back into the Jewish fold through the power of their joy as well as their faith and deep knowledge of our texts and traditions. Psalm 100 teaches: **“*Ivdu et HaShem b’simchah, bo’u lefanav birnana...Serve God in Joy. Come into God’s Presence with joyous singing.*”** Judaism teaches that God does not want us to serve Him and the world through asceticism or misery. When we feel that pull, we must follow Rabbi Nachman’s advice and find ways to get in touch with the joy that is our birthright.

Accessing our lovable-ness, our purity, and the joy that resides deep within us

regardless of circumstance, will help us each to do the challenging work of reflection, turning (repentance) and forgiveness that our tradition requires of us during these 10 days of Awe.

Perhaps more people would be drawn to participate in High Holy Day services if we renamed this period the *Yamim Ahuvim v'Noraim* – the Days of Love and Awe, for this is what they truly are. We pray in the *Ahavah Rabbah* blessing immediately before the Shema, for God to *Yached l'vaveinu l'ahava u'lirah et sh'mechah* – “Unite our hearts to Love and Be in Awe of You.”

For all of us and for all Israel, may these 10 days be a time of awe-inspiring realizations, transformation, profound joy, and great Love.

May our sincere turning toward God with Love and Awe spread Love and Reverence for Life to *kol yoshvei tevel* – to all who dwell on earth.

L'Shanah Tovah