

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5778
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Reach Out in Love

We have just read from the creation story in the Torah. So let me ask a question - what attribute does the Torah begin with? ... I would like to suggest it is LOVE. The story begins with a gift! The gift of the world. Judaism's perspective is that the world is a generous, loving, offering. This amazing planet with its gifts of breath and life, the miracles of sight and sound and taste are all incredible gifts of love!

On Rosh Hashanah, as we remember the creation of the world, I would like us to focus on this theme of LOVE and generosity. Why should we do so? Because I think there is nothing our world needs more of than TRUE LOVE. We need less defensiveness, less egotism, less self-righteousness, less violence, fewer falsehoods, more care for the environment, more care for each other... and those things stem from more love and deep caring. And on the other hand, greed, narcissism, and anger, which afflict our world, often come from hurt and absence of love. Every day we impact others with the way we act and talk. We create more of a world of want and lack or one of more healing and support by our actions. So love is an urgent need for us and our world. Growing this expansive, gracious quality is a spiritual gift we can give to ourselves and others.

In Hebrew, the word for love 'ahava' has at its root 'hav' – meaning to GIVE. Love is deep care and concern that is freely given. Judaism, particularly in our mystical tradition (p. 32 Ehyeh), teaches that God's care is infused in everything God creates and can be felt in every moment. There is a nice Jewish teaching that

even every blade of grass has its own angel who whispers to it, “grow, grow”! This is a beautiful way to say that God’s love and support can always be witnessed in our world, if we open ourselves to it.

I think some of us, having grown up pretty secular in Reform Judaism, have to work to see the world as infused with God’s love, but I want to encourage us to try because I think it is such an optimistic, positive, life affirming perspective. And I believe that the more one works to frame the world that way, the more that one will truly come to see God’s love in our world.

I mention this cosmic love first because in many great religious traditions, including Judaism, this is the fountain from which all goodness springs. Such thinking is counter cultural to our secular world in which creation is neutral - neither a blessing nor a curse but an unintended event. But if we can we feel God’s love for us, if we can begin each day with gratitude for the gifts given to us, it makes it easier for us to bring a loving approach to ourselves and the world around us. It is so healing!

From there, if we are going to be more loving to others, we have to start with being loving, compassionate, and generous with ourselves. As we have just heard in the Torah, Judaism holds that we are made in God’s image. Each person is infinitely holy, unique, and deserving of affection.

Some might say that it seems selfish to focus attention on ourselves. But as Hillel wisely taught, “if I am not for myself who will be for me,” only then does he go on to say, “if I am only for myself what am I.” We won’t become more truly loving to others, till we can be kind towards ourselves. When we are harsh with ourselves, we tend to be brittle and judgmental of others as well (Makransky). We

cannot give, what we do not have – including a truly loving, generous spirit! How many times have we witnessed that when we are feeling edgy and testy, others can do no right?

Rabbi Art Green in his book *Ehyeh*, which is about spiritual Judaism, writes, “as long as we are dominated by the ego’s endless cycle of pride and insecurity we will not achieve inner peace (p. 64)”...instead we need to work to accept both our limitations and our strengths in love.

John Makransky, a Buddhist who wrote a book titled *Awakening Through Love* and who has focused much of his adult life on this topic, says “most of us have not been taught that to receive love deeply and transmit it wholeheartedly is a real human possibility. That it can be learned, and that to do so is the key to our deepest well-being, our spiritual life, and our capacity to bring more goodness into the world” (p. 18).

Here is one practice that Makransky teaches to nurture a sense of deep love. ...He suggests bringing to mind people who have loved you the most. Why don’t we take a moment to try this? Think of teachers or parents or friends who you really felt had your best interest at heart. People who truly loved you for you! Take a moment to remember the gifts of deep caring they gave you? As you focus on those people – on their words or their touch or maybe it is their look as they speak to you– feel the joy and kindness, generosity and love they give to you..... We can feel how healing that is. How good it is for our soul!..... We can learn to give this to ourselves; nurturing that sense of ourselves as worthy of love and care. ... A good spiritual practice is to start the day with a meditation like this. Or we might begin with the prayer *Modeh Ani* which

expresses gratitude to God for the gift of a new day. A sense of self appreciation and of our gifts from God can set a generous and caring mindset to our day.

From this positive foundation of feeling loved, we can then truly care for others. Here is a wonderful poem about how someone benefitted just from feeling more noticed, more valued.

At the Corner Store

A Poem by Alison Luterman (from John Makransky's *Awakening Through Love*)

It was a new old man behind the counter,
Skinny, brown and eager.
He greeted me like a long lost daughter,
As if we both came from the same world,
Someplace warmer and more gracious than this cold city.

I was thirsty and alone. Sick at heart, grief-soiled
And his face lit up as if I were his prodigal daughter
returning....

I lumbered to the case and bought my precious bottled water
and he returned my change, beaming
as if I were the bright new buds on the just-burst-open cherry trees,
as if I were everything beautiful struggling to grow,
and he was blessing me as he handed me my dime
over the dirty counter and the plastic tub of red licorice whips.

This old man who didn't speak English
beamed out love to me in the iron week after my mother's death
so that I emerged from his store (and)
my whole cockeyed life- ...
glowed gold like a sunset after rain.

Frustrated city dogs were yelping in their yards,
Mad with passion behind their chain-linked fences.
And in the driveway of a peeling paint house
A woman and a girl danced to contagious reggae.

Praise Allah! Jah! The Buddha! Kwan Yin,
Jesus, Mary, Jehovah!
For eyes, hands
Of the divine, everywhere!

This woman felt God's care through this chance encounter. She felt appreciated and cared about. Someone smiled deeply, just because she was there.

The more people there are in the world, the more our culture tilts toward anonymity. We cannot possibly feel deeply for every person we meet. Yet this world needs more sharing of intentional kindness.

We are constantly in situations that give us the opportunity to truly practice being more loving and caring.

Such care, doesn't just mean the sharing of pleasantries, it goes deeper. It is approaching others with true caring and with honesty. It means really listening and offering our best advice and support. It means feeling genuinely joyful when things go well for others. And it means truly being a support to others.

Consider, for example, the following situation.

In the Harvard Divinity bulletin, Reverend Donald Shriver, recently wrote this: **"I AM A HUSBAND**, parent, citizen, scholar, pastor, educator, author, ethicist, ..., among many other things. But I was all but stripped of my identity when I was diagnosed with life-threatening B-cell lymphoma and assigned to a hospital bed...There, I became simply "sick." The 85-year-old author spent 3 months in a hospital bed. He goes on to say, "the experience was one of confinement, loneliness, deprivation, and loss of control."

He then recalls that when he was a newly minted pastor, decades earlier, he used to think that hospital calls were useless. He couldn't cure the person, so of what use was his visit? But then as his ministry continued, he began to see the impact the visits had.

And now, years later, he wrote profoundly about his own experience in the hospital, "Around me, medical professionals were doing what they could to battle my cancer. But somehow, full recognition of my humanity was missing until a friend, family member, seminary colleague, or fellow church member squeezed in alongside my bed and brought news of the life I had left behind." He continues, "today, in my late 80s, my own experience of hospitalization has confirmed unequivocally that the real "use" of visits is in their assurances to the sick that someone knows and cares for them outside the confines of the hospital. Thanks to my visitors, I felt affirmed as a social person with a history and a place in society."

Rav Kook taught, "love in the Jewish tradition is incomplete if it is only a sentiment. It required deeds in order to be actualized ... It is not enough to hold good thoughts for the bride and groom, we need to kick up our heels in dance at the wedding to gladden them. It is not enough to send out comforting vibrations to someone in mourning, we need to bake a kugel and then take it in hand to the house of mourning. If we truly love someone we want the best for them. ...love feeds action and is fed by it."

We each have many opportunities to give truly meaningful support and deep caring. And our families, friends and co-workers need it. This is the kind of “reaching out” and support that our entire world needs more of.

As we begin the new year, let us be intentional about taking time to feel nurtured by the love that comes to us from God and family and friends. May we also cultivate self care and love. And then may we share that generous spirit of love and support with others.

Amen