

RH DAY 1 – Mirrors and Projections

Last night I spoke about some of the ways in which Jewish prayer and ritual can help us to access God’s Love, and I said that feeling loved is a prerequisite for doing **teshuvah** – the work of repentance, turning, aligning ourselves with God -- that the High Holy Days require of us. Emotional pain may motivate us to take a good look at ourselves and discern ways that we have missed the mark. But without self-love, which gives us faith in ourselves, we won’t get very far in the process of transformation. In addition to the many texts and teachings about God’s love for us and our love for God, our tradition is full of teachings about our obligation to Love one another. The most famous of them is:

***V’ahavta l’rey-eh-cha kamocho...* “LOVE YOUR FELLOW (YOUR NEIGHBOR) AS YOURSELF.”** This mitzvah sits at the very heart of the Torah, both in its literal placement (the middle of the 3rd of the Five Books – Leviticus 19:18), and in the centrality of its message. The Kabbalists in 16th c Tzfat used this verse as a *kavannah* (intention) before the morning service and for the whole day ahead. Our classical rabbinic and medieval commentators understood that this was not an easy mitzvah to fulfill. It wasn’t any easier to love everyone back then than it is now! I am reminded of the Peanuts cartoon where Linus says: “I love humanity. It’s people I can’t stand!” Or, as a wise woman once pointed out to me very matter-of-factly: “People are annoying! We have to accept this basic reality and move on from there.” Whether or not we can muster loving feelings for a particular individual, we can and should **DO** loving things for him. Judaism is mainly a religion of action. Ideally we should perform every mitzvah with wholehearted **kavannah**, but there are mitzvot we are obligated to do even if we don’t feel like it. In fact, many mitzvot were formulated in order to guide us do the right thing in situations where we would be tempted not to. A wonderful example of this is found in Exodus 23:4-5: “When you

encounter your enemy's ox or ass wandering, you must take it back to him. *AND* When you see your enemy's ass lying under its burden and would refrain from helping him you must nevertheless release it (i.e. lift up the burden) with him." (In this second scenario, the person whom you hate, the owner of the animal, is present.) Targum Yonatan, one of the Aramaic translations, interpreted the word **release** to mean not just the physical burden, but also the **psychological** burden: "You shall surely let go of the hate you have in your heart toward him." The act of helping someone whom you don't like has the potential to turn a hostile relationship into a friendly one. A healthy society requires that people treat one another with consideration, but the higher goal of these teachings about loving our fellow is to go beyond a healthy society to a holy one.

It's significant that the Torah, known for its terseness, does not just say "Love your fellow (**period**)."

It adds "as yourself." It surprised me that so many commentators assumed that love of self is a given, and that therefore, if we treat others as we treat ourselves, everyone will be handled with tender loving care. How many of us really do love ourselves, and therefore are in a position to love others as ourselves? For some, it's relatively easy to be considerate and kind toward others, but it doesn't necessarily mean that love is present. Self-love is a pre-requisite to being able to truly love others, and therefore it must be part of the equation. That verse in the Torah, Lev 19:18, ends: "*Love your fellow as yourself, **ANI YHVH** – [for] 'I' am God.*" Why is that reminder tacked on? Again, the Torah is so terse, no word in it is insignificant. I am YHVH – the One who always was, is and will be; therefore, you must love your fellow **and** yourself, for you are both part of Me. It's easier to love ourselves *AND* one other when we get beyond our egos and remember that we are not our personalities – we are not the characters we play. Each one of us

is a soul, a spark of God. I am commanded to love your "Self" in the same way that I love my "Self," because we are both sparks within the one Great Self — God.

That famous verse (“Love your fellow as yourself”) actually begins with another mitzvah – or perhaps it’s part of the same mitzvah – “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your fellow.” As we all know, vengeful actions perpetuate a cycle of revenge. And bearing a grudge harms the bearer of the grudge even more than the one whom she is bearing it toward. Hatred damages our own hearts; it separates us from God as much as from the person we are hating.

The preceding verse (Lev 19:17) instructs us: “You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsfolk (*hocheach tochiach et amitecha*) but incur no guilt because of him.” This could be interpreted in several ways. The Sages (in Sifra, the rabbinic midrash on the book of Leviticus), forbid carrying reproach to the point of embarrassing someone, thus incurring guilt -- since embarrassing someone is forbidden. Also, they make clear that the obligation to rebuke is limited to cases in which one has reason to believe that the reproof will bring about a change in behavior. And it should always be a loving rebuke, as most people naturally become defensive and dig in their heels when criticized, unless that criticism is delivered in a truly loving manner. Just as letting in God’s love helps us to do **teshuvah** – to change destructive behavior and thought patterns – we can each be an instrument of God through our loving, allowing others to experience who they really are, which is a spark of the Divine.

Another way to interpret the mitzvah of **tochachah** (rebuke), especially because it is paired with not hating any one in your heart, is that lovingly delivered rebuke is a way to prevent hatred. If you are angry at someone for something they did or neglected to do, which hurt you or another person (or an animal or the environment), you have an obligation to let them know, rather than holding the anger in and letting it become a grudge. Communication – including letting someone know when they’ve

said or done something hurtful -- is generally a good thing, **IF** it's done with love.

The following famous story in the Talmud (Shabbat 31 a) illustrates two different ways to deliver rebuke. "A gentile came before Shammai the Elder and requested, 'Convert me on condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.' Shammai pushed him out with the ruler in his hand. The gentile then came before Hillel and requested the same. Hillel responded with the following variation on Love your fellow as yourself: **'That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and learn.'**" Although the potential convert showed disrespect toward both the rabbis and the Jewish religion by approaching them with this flippant request, through his brilliant response, Hillel modeled Love.

Another central Jewish teaching attributed to Hillel is recorded in *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of our Fathers. Hillel says...**"Do not judge another until you stand in his place (Avot 2:4)."** In the previous story, Shammai interpreted the gentile's behavior as impudence and disdain for the Torah, and reacted accordingly. Hillel may have tried to put himself in the potential convert's shoes. Perhaps the man was so ignorant about Torah, he might actually have thought that it could be summarized on one foot! As it turns out, that gentile did us all a favor, because his outrageous request elicited Hillel's beautiful, potent response -- a statement that we have been quoting and working to integrate into our lives ever since!

Not judging another until we stand in his place is extremely helpful in relating to people with compassion. Each of us is unique. We each have strengths and successes, and we each have weaknesses and failures. Each of our souls must travel a unique path through life. We have a tendency to think that because something comes easily to us, it should be easy for others. For example, it's easy for me to look people in the eye. So if someone doesn't look me in the eye, I might be annoyed or even insulted. OR, I can instead pause and consider that there may be some past experience in this person's life that makes it

especially difficult for them to look people in the eye. I'll be happier if I am able to be compassionate toward them and not take it personally. Let's take a more challenging example. Someone may be pretentious and pompous. I may choose to steer clear of people who strike me as pompous, but I should not judge them either. If I pause to consider that this person was probably treated in certain ways growing up that caused them to develop a pompous attitude, I will be less affected by that behavior and less judgmental of it. Of course, not judging another until you stand in his place does not mean that people should not be punished for crimes, or lovingly rebuked for hurtful behavior. But the teaching "Do not judge another until you stand in his place" reminds me that the person whose behavior is destructive or even criminal, is coming from a different place than I am, and has different lessons to learn in this life.

On Erev Yom Kippur, right before the Kol Nidre prayer is chanted, we declare that it is permissible to pray with **avaryanim** – transgressors. Who are these transgressors? **We are all avaryanim.** We all have moral failings. We can choose to be compassionate with ourselves and not compare ourselves to others, neither in ways that make us feel "better than," nor in ways that make us feel "less than." ESPECIALLY when we look at the issues that are the hardest for us – the painful patterns that keep repeating themselves in our lives. We can choose to be loving with ourselves and not judge ourselves more harshly than others who don't have the same patterns. Again, we are each on our own path with our own challenges. It won't help us to make excuses for ourselves, but growth is only possible when we accept ourselves where we are right now, and move forward with patience and determination from this point.

To take this theme of and loving others as ourselves one step further, consider the radical possibility that what we perceive in others may not even be there! We all look through the particular lenses of our personalities, our family histories, our own psychological issues. This colors what we see. It's unavoidable. In a way, the world is a Rorschach ink blot. We each interpret it in our own way. In his book Mindful Loving, Henry Grayson has a

chapter called, “Choosing Love, Not Fear: Making the Perceptual Shift – Seeing Others as Mirrors.” He begins with a quote from the Talmud: “**WE DO NOT SEE THINGS AS THEY ARE; WE SEE THINGS AS WE ARE.**” This is a very challenging concept to integrate and live by. Rather than take it as an absolute truth, which might cause us shut down and deny its validity entirely, we might ask ourselves: “Is there *any* relationship, any situation in my life, in which this might be the case? It’s common knowledge that we tend to react most negatively to behaviors and characteristics in others that we reject in ourselves. Sometimes we are aware of these qualities in ourselves, and sometimes we are not. When we find ourselves reacting in a habitual way to a certain situation or a certain person, it means that we have not yet learned some important spiritual lesson that that situation or relationship is offering us.

On Kol Nidrei two years ago I quoted the Baal Shem Tov, who said: “If you see another person doing something ugly, meditate on the presence of that same ugliness in yourself. And know that it is one of God’s mercies that God brought this sight before your eyes to remind you of that fault in you, so as to bring you back in repentance.”

May we recognize that our perceptions are just that – our perceptions. May we be inspired by those perceptions, whether pleasant and beautiful, or painful and ugly, to grow beyond fear and judgment into greater, stronger, deeper, more all-encompassing Love.

L’Shanah Tovah