

Yom Kippur: A Love Story

Yom Kippur is a day for confessions, so let me be the first to admit to you that when my daughter Klielle suggested that we go see the Mr. Rogers movie shortly after it opened this summer, I was not exactly eager. My recollections of Mr. Rogers were probably like most of yours: I remembered him as a dorky guy who wore a cardigan sweater and who sang an overly sappy song called “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

But the reviews of the movie had been universally over the top, and so the four G-K’s who happened to be home together went to see the movie. Little did I suspect that I would be one of the many middle-aged folks leaving the theatre needing tissues to wipe away the tears.

What was it about Mr. Rogers and his life that could evoke such strong emotion? In retrospect, it came down to this: Fred Rogers was a man who devoted his life to showing us the importance of random acts of kindness to the most vulnerable group in the world—namely children. Mr. Rogers was an ordained minister and he used his television show as his pulpit to teach about the importance of patience, kindness and empathy. But he had one over-riding message that he emphasized over and over again: “It all comes down to love. Love is at the root of everything, all learning, all relationships, love or the lack of it.”

At a time of deep cynicism, at a time in which most of our societal institutions are not held in particularly high esteem, at a time in which the social fabric is increasingly torn, the message of Mr. Rogers is a lot more than quaint—it is, in fact, essential. Love is at the root of what makes us most fully human. And on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, when our tradition teaches us that we need to focus on what is of ultimate importance; the day that we are asked to strip away all of the facades and to look at what is most essential in how we live, I want to spend the next 20 minutes talking about love. Because imbued within the structure of this day—in its rituals, in its liturgy, in what we spend our time doing and in what we refrain from doing: Yom Kippur is a day to remind us that time is fleeting—that death awaits us all—and because of that, prioritizing what is most valuable in our lives is **not** something that can wait. So let me reflect back what I have learned from so many of you as I have watched you accompany your loved ones on the transition from this world

to the World to Come: when all is said and done, and as we will all prepare to leave this world, there will be one question that will matter above all: How well did we love?

On this Yom Kippur day, I want to share some reflections on the power of love, and why it is so vital. I have four points that I intend to make: 1) We must never under-estimate our capacity to love one another and to bring more love into this world; 2) Jewish tradition understands that God loves us—even though some may think that sounds overly Christian when we hear it. But ours is a loving God and it is God’s love for each and every one of us that is the basis of our Covenantal relationship; 3) The genius of Jewish life is that it provides us with daily structures and practices to concretize our love for one another and to be agents of *hesed* and to be regularly engaged in acts of lovingkindness; and finally 4) There is urgency to this endeavor of loving more widely and more deeply because our legacies will consist primarily of how well we have fulfilled our capacity to love. Let me begin, therefore, with the human capacity to love and start with words from our Torah.

V’ahavta l’rayekha ka’mocha--love your neighbor as you love yourself. The great sage Rabbi Akiva taught that this is the most important teaching in the entire Torah. But the concept seems so big to most of us. Is it actually possible to bring this concept to life? Here is what I think Rabbi Akiva meant when he asked us to love our fellow human beings as much as we love ourselves: see the goodness in another person; give them attention, care, and help. Because when you glimpse the goodness in another person, then your heart opens up and you form a connection. And from that connection—if you are willing to stay with it—you can start to care for that person and to wish him or her well, even wishing for that person’s safety and happiness. If you can get to **this** place in a human interaction, that’s love. And if you were to reflect just a bit longer, you would come to realize that this happens **not** because this other person has earned it, or because you will get something in return, but just because they’re alive. That’s what it means to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

At a time when the social fabric is fraying, the ability to bring this kind of love into the world is all the more urgent. I can imagine you thinking: we’re tearing each other apart as a nation and as a people, and you’re telling me to start loving everyone? How do we go up against the tide of indifference and cruelty that can so easily pervade the world around us?

It starts by being willing to pay attention and to recognize that our lives are, in fact, suffused with love. We would not be alive today if it were not for hundreds—thousands, probably the tens of thousands of moments—of love we’ve received from the time we were born until now. Even if the people around us failed to see us or care for us the way we needed; even if we experienced trauma, there was love from somewhere that sustained us. Love is the ground of our being; without it, we would not be here.

The theologian and educator John Makransky has a loving-kindness meditation that I would like to try with you now: See if you can call to mind right now a moment when you knew you were loved. It could have been a long time ago or more recent. Think of a specific time, a memory, when you felt so loved, when someone radiated a wish of love to you through smiling eyes, or a quality of presence, or words. Picture their kind face sending love to you, the wish that you be safe, happy, well. Imagine that you can absorb that love and fill yourself with it, down to your toes, in every part of your being, in your very bones, in your mind, any place of tension in your body. Saturate yourself with that love. Then, imagine that the love is coming right through you to the people you care for. See their faces in your mind’s eye. And as that love fills them wish for them to be safe and happy. And then you can extend love to a stranger, and eventually to the whole world. Makransky teaches: Doing this every day changes the heart.

My colleague Rabbi Rachel Timoner offers this insight: “Consider how you have been loved by people you don’t even know or people you’ve long forgotten. Think of those who believed in you, teachers, coaches, those who clapped for you, laughed at your jokes, answered your questions, made sure you were safe. The doctor who listened, the store clerk who helped you find what you were looking for, the waitress who filled your water glass.” All of the people you’ll never meet: the person who poured the concrete that created this sanctuary; the person who made the honey that you ate when you celebrated Rosh Hashanah, or who greeted you when you entered the synagogue this morning. How many hearts and hands hold us up every single day?

V'ahavta l'rayekha ka'mocha--loving your neighbor as you love yourself—is not some utopian concept; it speaks to the very reality of our being—and it is what makes us most fully human.

Which leads me to my second point: the origin of our capacity to love. From the standpoint of the psychology of human development, the capacity to love begins with the love—we hope—that we received as infants and as children from our parents and from our caretakers. But from the standpoint of religion—and from the Jewish point of view—our ability to love originates with God's love for each one of us.

You may be thinking to yourselves: sounds like you're talking about a different religion. After all, this is Yom Kippur: the day in which we confess wrongdoing and accept responsibility; the day in which God judges our merit. Yes, this is a day imbued with the acknowledgment of our many imperfections and our shortcomings—the many times we will recite the *Vidui* and the confessions; the many *Al Chet's* and the *Ashamnu's*. So where is this loving God? Here is the answer: the God who **judges** us is also the God who **forgives** us. The entire premise of this day is that we can atone and that we can be forgiven. There is only one attribute that could make that concept possible: God's love for us.

And this is exactly what Judaism claims to be true. In the *Ahava Rabba* prayer we say every morning, we say that we are loved by a great love. In the *Ahavat Olam* prayer we say every evening, we proclaim that we are loved by an eternal love. It is God's great love and God's eternal love that is holding us at each and every moment. When we internalize God's love for us, and when we believe that God wants us to turn away from behaviors that have distanced us from God, then we can feel confidence in our capacity to do *Teshuvah*—in our capacity to grow. On this Yom Kippur day we proclaim that it is **because** of God's love for us that we will be forgiven.

In his book, *The Heart of Torah*, Rabbi Shai Held contends: "For all its insistent focus on the deed, and for all its impassioned commitment to the life of the mind, Judaism is also, profoundly, a religion of the heart...God loves before God commands..."

Which means that God's love for us and our response to God's love is a Covenant. Our entire Jewish tradition is about covenantal love—God **created** the world, so that God would enter into a relationship of love with the Jewish people; God **redeemed** us from Egypt because God loved our ancestors; and then God brought us to Mount Sinai and revealed the Torah—which our Sages say is the *Ketubah*—the wedding contract between God and the Jewish people—so that we could enshrine forever our covenantal contract of love. God's love for us is real, it is transformational, and it is eternal.

Which leads to me to my third point: Jewish tradition was responsible for a remarkable insight into the nature of love when it understood that love is not primarily a **feeling**, but more aptly a spiritual practice that demands daily actions in order to be made manifest in our lives. Love may start as a passion, an emotion, a heightened state, a peak experience. But an emotional state cannot be guaranteed forever. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes: "We wed in poetry, but we stay married in prose."

Which is why our Jewish tradition created laws, rituals, and habits of **deed** intended to keep love alive. I once officiated at a funeral for a woman who had been married to her husband for close to 70 years. I had gotten to know the couple three years before she passed away. They were among the most beautiful couples I had ever been around: kind, gracious to one another; always holding hands whenever they were together. Over the course of those three years I learned that the husband, with great devotion, had brought his wife coffee in bed **every morning** for more than six decades. Before she passed away, I always saw a twinkle in this woman's eyes and I imagined that there were probably times when she might have preferred tea; where she might not have needed the coffee quite so early. One day when I was sitting with this woman alone, she told me that she knew that the coffee represented the homage her husband wished to pay her and how loved it made her feel to receive it. That coffee was a daily offering. And I could see that throughout their years together, bringing coffee was just one of a myriad of daily actions of devotion that kept this couple's love alive. After almost 70 years together, when you were with this couple, it was like they were still on their honeymoon.

Yes, you can think about all of these *mitzvot* we Jews have as burdensome. But these daily habits of action that inform how we eat, how we pray, how we give *tzedakah*, how we rest and celebrate Shabbat—all of these *mitzvot* are our Jewish tradition's vehicle for **concretizing** our love for God and our love for one another. Because if we just waited for the feelings to move us to action, most of us would act occasionally at best. But *mitzvot* are our tradition's vision of turning our **intention** into **action**; a series of spiritual practices that makes love real. Here is what we Jews seek to do, and again, I quote Rabbi Sacks: "If you seek to make love undying, build around it a structure of rituals—small acts of kindness, little gestures of self-sacrifice for the sake of the beloved—and you will be rewarded with a quiet joy, an inner light, that will last a lifetime."

Which brings me to my fourth and final point. It will all come to an end much too quickly. Yom Kippur indeed is a day suffused with the imagery of death: the fasting; the white robes to evoke the burial shrouds; no entertainment; no sex: all a reminder of our mortality. To be morbid? No. In fact, quite the opposite, we infuse this day with reminders of our mortality to emphasize that it is so easy to get lost in the trivial and the mundane. If we are able to stop all of the activities that normally consume our lives for just one day, we remind ourselves of our own capacities to commit ourselves to what really matters: the daily practice of loving more deeply.

Some of you may know the work of Dr. Raymond Moody, who is considered to be a pioneer in documenting near death experiences. I understand that some of Dr. Moody's research methodologies are not universally acclaimed as rigorous, but he has devoted over 40 years of work to interviews with patients who were close to death and who were subsequently revived. There is an over-arching theme that he has learned from so many of them: They felt drawn to a bright light, which was beautiful and even exhilarating. They saw dead relatives, and a quick replay of their lives flashed before them. This is, by the way, is how the Kabbalists—the Jewish mystics—described their vision of the soul leaving the body several hundred years ago. Afterwards, none were afraid of death. Each said that as they reviewed their lives, there was one aspect they would do over—now that they were given a chance to live again. They would

learn to love more intensely. That's the theme that was universal: If only I could do it again, I would love more intensely.

That's what Mr. Rogers was trying to teach us during all of those decades. So let me end with his words to remind ourselves that nothing is more important than how much we love, and that so much of who we are is simply a result of how much love we have received. I will use Fred Rogers' words both to end my sermon and to serve as a prelude to our *Yizkor* prayers:

"The greatest thing that we can do is to help someone to know that they are loved and that they are capable of loving. From the time you were very little you've had people who have smiled you into smiling, who have talked you into talking, sung you into singing, and loved you into loving. So on this extra special day, let's take some time to think about those extra special people. Some of them may be right here, some of them may be far away. Some may even be in heaven. No matter where they are, deep down, you know that they've always wanted what was best for you. They've always cared about you beyond measure and have encouraged you to be true to the best that's within you. Let's just take a minute in silence to think about them now."

May their memories inspire us to love with all our hearts, with all our soul, and with all our might. *G'mar hatima tova*—May we all merit to be inscribed in the Book of Life and Blessing in the Coming Year...Amen