

RH Day 1: Ahava

Strangely, I fell in love with Deuteronomy this year. I have to admit that is a kind of odd thing to do on any number of levels. Deuteronomy, at first blush, is not a particularly exciting book of the Bible: no creation stories or mythic floods; no crossing the Red Sea or wrestling with angels at night crossings— In fact, Deuteronomy basically has a lot of laws in it. And, of course, I have read this book numerous times. So why this new-found passion?

What makes Deuteronomy different than all the other books of the Torah is that the others were presumably written and narrated by God; Deuteronomy is spoken by Moses in its entirety on the eve of the Israelite's entrance into the land of Israel. In other words, it is the first human Torah — it is the first commentary by a human on the Torah we have, the first Oral Torah, if you will.

So does Moses say anything new or different? A lot actually. But one thing in particular stands out above all the rest— Love — Ahavah. Deuteronomy uses the word love 23x — more than all the rest of the books of the Torah combined. Moses' Torah as expressed in Deuteronomy is a new Torah, a Torah of love, and it is that Torah that ultimately becomes ours.

So what is love? And what is the Torah of love? I'm glad you asked. In America today, I think we tend to understand love as a feeling — that head over heels romantic feeling when you fall in love, the squishy feeling you get when you hold a new baby in your arms, the warm, satisfied feeling you get when you are with someone you have known and loved for a long time.

Those are all very nice feelings indeed, but for the Torah, love isn't just a feeling. It is an active verb. Loving your neighbors is not really how you feel about them — it's what you do or don't do with respect to them. Similarly, to love God is to obey God's commandments, to do the mitzvot.

If that seems weird to you, think about it this way. Imagine a couple very much in love with each other who live on opposite ends of the earth. Once a year they meet in Paris, have the most romantic dinner and evening you can imagine, and then go their separate ways for another year. You might say, that is very nice, even romantic, but it isn't really love. Love is getting up for the baby in the middle of the night when you don't want to. Love is spending hours fixing the printer because you know how stressed out your spouse is about the fact that none of the electronics are working. Love is folding someone's laundry or making dinner. Love is listening attentively to the other. Love is paying attention, knowing who someone is, what they like, all the little things that make them them. It is not just a squishy feeling. In fact, if I had the capacity to feed and clothe my children, and I neglected to do that, I am not sure that you would believe that I love them, no matter how much I told you I love them. Love is an active verb. I would submit that what you do Jewishly matters much more than what you believe or what you feel, just as what you do in love matters much more than what you feel.

So, with God, as with human beings, we show our love through our actions. Every time we do a mitzvah we connect to God's presence; we make God more manifest on this Earth; we make our lives more holy. And these are acts of love.

Second big point about love: many of us have been raised with the notion that Judaism is all about law and Christianity is all about love. If I could accomplish one thing today, I would like to eradicate that notion from your mind forever and ever. I believe, as Deuteronomy argues, that Judaism is fundamentally a religion of love. However, just as we made a distinction between love as a feeling and love as an action, that distinction also obtains, at least to an extent, for Judaism and Christianity. For Christians, God loves the world and gave us His only son; our love for God is expressed in faith in Him. For Jews, because God loves us, God gave us a Torah, a guide to life, a code to live by, commandments through which we could connect to God; when we do mitzvot, we live out our love for God. Mitzvot and Torah are the manifestations of God's love — as we say twice daily, “ You have loved us with infinite love and given us Torah and mitzvot.” Or, I might translate, because you love us with a great and infinite love, you give us a Torah to live by and mitzvot through which we can connect to you and make Your presence more real in this world and in our lives.

So, if Deuteronomy is putting forth a new religion of love, what kind of religion is this exactly? Deuteronomy transforms what came before it in three fundamental ways. First, Deuteronomy deemphasizes the sacrificial cult, making the claim that religion is not ultimately about sacrifices to the gods in order to gain power over them; it is about sharing your bread with the widow, the orphan, the stranger — not propitiating the powerful but caring for the powerless.

Second, Deuteronomy centralizes the Temple and removes it from the narrative. It insists on one central place of worship and replaces all the details of the Tabernacle with one lone verse about a wooden ark.

Deuteronomy then takes it a step farther — God is not even in the Temple, says the Deuteronomist! God, according to the earlier books of the Bible, dwelt in the portable Mishkan in the desert. But now God is not there! The pilgrim who brings his first fruits asks God to look down from God's holy abode and bless him! But He's not there! If God is in the Temple and the Temple ritual is the main thing in Judaism, then you have to worship God there, but you can do what you want elsewhere. If, on the other hand, worship there is less important and God is not there, then mitzvot, how we live, how we treat one another, become central.

Deuteronomy makes one more bold move. Moses enjoins the people to remember what they saw at Sinai and then tells them they saw nothing. You can't see God because God cannot be seen. You can't make a statue of him because you don't know what he looks like!

So, in Deuteronomy, you no longer have a God who lives in the Temple who you can control by making the right sacrifices. You don't know what God looks like so you can't have an idol or a voodoo doll that you control. You cannot answer your existential angst by manipulating God through the right rituals, and you cannot feel secure that God will take care of everything. **We** have to do God's work. Magic won't work and God will not take care of us. Our existence is precarious at best.

So, what kind of religion is this anyway? In Deuteronomy, God invites us into a radical new relationship that will be based not on control — God's or ours — but on love. What does this mean? What does this look like?

Here is how we might read the 10 commandments viz Deuteronomy. Anochi Hashem Elohecha. I am the Lord Your God. Hi, it's me! Don't represent me. Don't say my name. You don't know me, you can't call me. But please... live with me. Keep Shabbat. Honor Your Parents. Don't commit Murder. Adultery. Theft. Live with me in love.

Listen to how the poet Yehuda Amichai imagines the 10 commandments as they were taught to him by a loving father:

My father was God and didn't know it. He gave me
the Ten Commandments not in thunder and not in anger,
not in fire and not in a cloud, but gently
and with love. He added caresses and tender words,
"would you" and "please." And chanted "remember" and "keep"
with the same tune, and pleaded and wept quietly
between one commandment and the next: Thou shalt not
take the name of thy Lord in vain, shalt not take, not in vain,
please don't bear false witness against your neighbor.
And he hugged me tight and whispered in my ear,
Thou shalt not steal, shalt not commit adultery, shalt not kill.
And he lay the palms of his wide-open hands on my head
with the Yom Kippur blessing: Honor, love, that thy days
may be long upon this earth. And the voice of my father —
white as his hair. Later, he turned his face to me for the last time,
as on the day he died in my arms, and said, I would like to add two more command-
ments:
the Eleventh Commandment, "Thou shalt not change,"
and the Twelfth Commandment, "Thou shalt change. You will change"
Thus spoke my father, and turned and walked away
and disappeared into his strange distances.

A Torah of love. A Torah in which the affect, the tone, the melody, the hug, the whisper, the palms open in blessing convey as much or more than the words themselves. A father or God who in the same breath says, "Don't change, stay exactly the beautiful person whom I love"; and "Change! Grow, develop, and adapt as you must." A Torah that is not about ritual sacrifice but about how you treat the widow, the orphan, the

stranger. A Torah that is not about visiting God in God's Holy abode but living with God all the time and inviting God into our lives.

But Deuteronomy does not stop with the ten commandments. Deuteronomy envisions a society in which people take responsibility for one another — kol yisrael aravim zeh l'zeh — literally, we are all responsible for each other. In such a world, if you see your neighbor's ox or sheep, gone astray, you can't ignore it. You have to try to find the owner and if you can't, you have to bring the animal home, take care of it, feed it and shelter it, until you find the owner. If your neighbor's ox or ass falls down in the road, you have to help them raise it. Even the onerous and strange ben sorer u'moreh — the rebellious son whose parents bring him to the elders in the town square to have him stoned — is, I would argue, about mutual responsibility. At first blush, it seems horrific! Parents who take their kid to be stoned to death! What kind of love is this? At second blush, the rabbis say this never happened and never will. So why is it here to begin with? It seems to be the Torah's way to surface the difficulties of parenting, the need, sometimes, for the community to help parents, and the mutual influence of families on society and vice versa. If a child has gone this far astray, it's not just the child who has gone astray, the whole community is lost. In other words, "it takes a village..." Parenting in isolation without the support of a community is not the ideal.

Deuteronomy is talking about a much more connected world than the one we live in, one in which neighbors and even strangers take responsibility for one another, help each other out, get involved instead of saying it is not my problem.

We don't do that so much. We say it's not my business. We tell ourselves that we need to be afraid. If I stop my car to help that guy on the side of the road, he might have a gun and kill me. If I find out what is going on with that mom who is whaling on her kids on the subway, she might upbraid me. Our fear keeps us trapped. Is our fear real? Is that how we want to live?

In a new book called, "Small Animals: Parenthood in the Age of Fear," Kim Brooks, a writer, details her arrest for leaving her four year old child in the car while she went into Target on a quick errand. In a sane, connected world, the child would not have been in any danger: it was a cool day, the car windows were open, the car locked and alarmed, and Brooks was gone for a few minutes while her son played on his ipod in the car. A bystander videoed the child in the car and gave the tape to the authorities. Brooks was charged with "contributing to the delinquency of a minor" and ultimately agreed to perform community service and take parenting classes, rather than face trial and risk losing custody of her children.

To my mind, this is absurd. Why would we think that a child alone in a parked car was at greater risk of being abducted — a one in a million chance — than if he were in the car his mother was driving, a far riskier activity? More than that, why would a bystander video the scene instead of calling out to the child, engaging him in conversation, and making sure he was all right until his mother returned? Is this perhaps more about policing mothers than it is about the welfare of children? Why don't we live in a world in

which the Mom could ask someone, even possibly a stranger, to keep an eye on her child for five minutes?

In Israel small children are free to walk the streets of the city. Parents assume that the kids are safe and that there are plenty of adults around if a child is in trouble. There are lots of eyes on a kid because, at some level, that child is all of our children. Although this can be invasive — when I traveled alone with Noa in Israel when she was not quite 2 years old, people kept telling me that she needed a hat, that she would fall out of the backpack (she was strapped in), or that she was eating sand. Still, I knew that if we were in any real trouble, there were people there, ready and willing to help us.

I think this is the Torah of Love Deuteronomy points us toward — where our sense of mutual responsibility leads us not to police one another but to help one another. Where we overcome our fear of strangers, at least some of the time, and act like human beings who share a fate and a destiny. When we stop trying to figure out how to protect ourselves behind alarm systems and locked doors and gated communities, and figure out how to embrace one another. Loving God means loving one another. That is Deuteronomy's claim. We don't love our neighbors by having mushy feelings about them or even an annual block party; we love them by overcoming fear and getting real in each other's lives.

Imagine if we actually knew our neighbors well enough that we knew when someone was sick and needed a meal delivered or we could ask a neighbor to watch a child while we ran an errand. I think we do a great job as a community helping one another with shivas and illnesses. What would it mean to take our interconnectedness up a notch? That is what I want to invite us to think about today. What would it mean to take our interconnectedness up a notch.

Here are some things I can imagine: What if we invited “strangers” from the synagogue to our Shabbos or holiday tables? or we went to shivas of people we did not know? What if we mounted a hesed brigade that not only sent meals to shivas — as we do — but also was trained to visit sick congregants in the hospital or who gave rides to elderly congregants or helped them with household tasks? I know you all do those things for people you know and love— what if we extended the circle another ring?

Joan Blades, founder of MoveON.org, and John Gable, a former adviser to Republican leaders, including Mitch McConnell, lead an organization called Living Room Conversations to encourage people to host small conversations in their living rooms with diverse participants in order to learn to talk across difference. This is a neighbor to neighbor project with simple guidelines built on the theory that certain social rules govern a person's living room that don't obtain on the internet. People sitting in each other's living rooms tend to be kind and civil to each other, even when talking about things they disagree about. When the conversations are done well, people walk away deeply moved, more connected, and with more common ground. What if some of us took on having some “LivingRoom Conversations” in our own neighborhoods?

On Yom Kippur, I will talk to you about the social action projects we are taking on as a community and how you can help. You can bring back your bags overflowing with food for Isaiah's Fast. You can feed the homeless at our Sukkah on the Green. There are many ways our community can extend our boundaries and help folks who have less. **They** are part of **us**. On a national level, we could work to elect candidates who support a just health care system or a just immigration policy, however you understand those. Because loving your neighbor means knowing him, helping him, and taking some responsibility for him.

Our synagogue is not that big — 400 families; our town is also small — 9000 people. And our world gets smaller all the time. We could know each other better. We could let down our fears and show up in each other's lives a little more. These are not huge earth-shaking things. They are not universal solutions to war, healthcare, and poverty. They are just about dropping our fear a little and loving each other a little more. They're within our reach and if we did them, we could change the world.

Anne Lamott, a wonderful writer, writes about the spiritual challenge of all the bad stuff in the world — the Newtowns, the Syrias, the Hurricane Marias. She sees it all as an opportunity for religious activism — in other words, accepting the fact that God is not the big Daddy who will take care of everything, and instead knowing that we are called to love each other and manifest God's presence in the world through our actions. She writes that it is tempting, "as cute little believers sometimes do, to say, 'it will all make sense someday.'" But, she writes, the thing is, it may not. It may never make any sense. But still we get to sit with people who are scared, people who are dying. We get up and get the thirsty drinks of water. That's the Torah of love.

She quotes one of my favorite theologians, Frederick Buechner, "It is absolutely crucial, therefore, to keep in constant touch with what is going on in your own life's story and to pay close attention to what is going on in the stories of other's lives. If God is present anywhere, it is in those stories that God is present. If God is not present in those stories, then they are scarcely worth telling."

In other words, God is not present in the Temple, in the sacrifices, in the rituals of control. God is not present when we say we will understand some day or that this person's death was for the best. God is present in the love we share with each other, in how we care for each other, when we share our bread, in the stories of our lives. If we are living a different story, we had better change it now. "Live stories worth telling! Stop hitting the snooze button. Try not to squander your life on meaningless, multitasking nonsense." (Lamott)

Let's live lives that matter. Let's live lives that manifest God's presence. Let's live lives filled with love. Because love is love is love is love is love. That is what Deuteronomy is preaching; it is the essence of religion, of Judaism; it is the only truth worth living.

Sing ahava...