Ending the Drought of Love and Compassion
Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 5777
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman

Long ago, when there was a drought, the community would pray and fast. The midrash tells us that one time the community fasted for three days, and nothing happened. Rabbi Tanhuma entered the Beit Midrash and said to the community that the fasting was not working and preached to them:

בני החmaalו רחמים אל(series)י על(את)י ויהי רחמים על(את)י

My children! Be filled with compassion for each other, and then the Holy One, blessed be God, will be filled with compassion for you.

There is a drought now. There is a drought of water, and I pray and hope we are all taking some action in saving precious water in our State.

But there is also another drought. A drought of compassion, a drought of generosity, of kindness, a drought of love, a drought of humanity.

היום התרת עולם.

Today the world was created, today the world was born. Today, as the liturgy reminds us several times, we celebrate the birthday of creation (and TBZ style, we will sing happy birthday to the world during the shofar service later).

But based on one interpretation, today is the anniversary of the 6th day of creation rather than the first. According to this idea, what we celebrate today is not the

1 Genesis Rabbah 33:3
creation of the world, but the creation of the first human being, the creation of humankind².

It is perhaps harder to celebrate humankind than to celebrate the earth. It is hard to celebrate our humanity when we walk heartbroken, when we feel an ongoing disappointment with what human beings are capable of, when we worry about where our country is headed, when we see that despite so many kinds of progress, the world continues to unfold as a place of hatred, war, hunger, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and a noticeable lack of compassion toward each other.

If we are to celebrate the creation of humanity, we must ask what it means to be a human being. We ought to challenge ourselves to think about how we live our lives, and what it means to be our best compassionate selves.

The first questions that appear in the Torah can serve as a guide for the questions we should ask ourselves today.

The first question God asked Adam, when Adam was fleeing after eating the fruit of knowledge was:

איכה

Where are you?

This seems like a very simple question, but we can’t take it at face value, because of course God knew where Adam and Eve were…. The question of Ayeka meant then, and means now something more complex:

Where are you?
What are you doing?
Why are you hiding?
What do you stand in relationship to?
In what ways are you lost?

² Pesikta d’Rav Kahana 23:1
³ Genesis 3:9

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Perhaps -- Why are you so far away from me? What happened to you?

The next question asked by God in the Torah is directed at Cain, just after he has killed his brother Abel. God asks Cain, where is your brother? To which Cain responds:

השומר אחי אונכני? 4

Am I my brother’s keeper?

Cain challenges God through this question, not as a real question of trying to understand his responsibilities, but as a way to free himself of his responsibility for his brother. These words serve as a challenge to us about how we understand our place in the world. Do we have responsibilities beyond our own self, our own needs?

Am I my brother’s keeper?

As I ponder these questions on this day of Creation, I am reminded about the midrash in which the Holy One, preparing to create Adam haRishon, the first person, sees the ministering angels break into contending groups and start arguing:

Some said: Let him be created, while others cried, let him not be created. 
The Angel embodying LOVE argues: “Let them be created – they will perform acts of love!” TRUTH responds: “Let them not be created – they will all be liars!” 
JUSTICE says: “Let them be created – they will fight for justice!” 
PEACE shouts: “Let them not be created – they will only make war!” 
God, irritated, thrusts the Angel of Truth to earth, creating a 2 to 1 majority in favor of humanity And so Adam is created. “Now stop fighting!” the Holy One shouts. “The matter is resolved” 5

Truth said - they will be liars and Peace said - they will make war.
Love argued- they will perform acts of love. And Justice said, they will fight for Justice.

4Genesis 4:10
5Genesis Rabbah 8:5
And perhaps God understood that humankind would be imperfect. We will lie and make war, but we will also fight for justice and love.

Perhaps we will be capable to strive for good.

Our practice in our community every shabbat and also in these Holy Days- is to chant the teaching:

וְהָאָבַת לַעֲרֵךְ וָעָמֹר

“Love your neighbor as yourself”

And Rabbi Akiva added to this:

זֶה כָּלָל גָּדוֹל בְּתוֹרוֹת

This is a great principal in the Torah.

Perhaps we should understand from this teaching that if love is the highest goal in Torah, higher than any other mitzvah, that love must have great power. That love is the foundation of all acts of creation -- through love we build, we create, we humanize each other and become humans again. That love overcomes hate -- love trumps hate -- and through love we learn also the principles of justice -- we love others, we are in relationship with others, thus we understand the importance to care for others and be just.

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Halevi Ashlag, also known as the Ba’al Hasulam, (d. 1954 in Israel) teaches that “the world “k’lal” (translated as a principle, collective, rule), indicates the sum of details, that, when put together, form the totality. so when Rabbi Akiva says about this mitzvah- Love your neighbor as yourself- that is a great “k’lal” in the Torah, we must understand that the rest of the 612 mitzvot in the Torah, with all their interpretations, are no more and no less than the sum of the

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4 Leuiticus 19:18
7 Sifra, Kedoshim 4:12
details inserted and contained in that single mitzvah- love your neighbor as
yourself.”

Quoting my teacher Rabbi Roly Matalon, who introduced me to this text: Based on
this teaching “The ultimate goal of the Torah is that you achieve the giving of
yourself fully and selflessly, without any expectation of gratification or reward”.

The word LOVE, as Rabbi Matalon reminded me, אָהֵב, comes from the root
ב.ה. -- which means לְתַת -- to give. The essence of love is a giving act, it is the
giving of oneself, not as an exchange, not as a trade, not as a transaction. Just as a
selfless gift.

We live in a time when time is our most precious commodity. There is no time to
love, to give, to be compassionate, to be generous. We are so focused on our
individual lives, on ourselves, on our own success. On what is in it FOR ME. We
rush from task to task. Too often, we have reduced love to a button we click on
social media. We have forgotten how to practice love, how to be generous in our
heart without expecting anything back. I don’t know if we remember what it means
to give ourselves selflessly and fully. Fear and cynicism -- not love -- are at the
center of what defines our society.

What would it look like if we approached life not from a perspective of scarcity --
not enough time, not enough resources -- but from a perspective of love? What
could we generate together, from small acts of compassion and generosity, from
actually loving your neighbor? What if we stopped thinking that our busy-ness and
stress are badges of pride and proof that we are accomplished and useful members
of society? What if instead, we counted our worth in the relationships we nurture,
the kindness we show, the love we create in the world? What if we could listen to
Rabbi Tanchuma who said, Be filled with compassion for each other when there is a
drought, because only by doing so we will be blessed.

8 Rabbi Yehudah Leib Halevi Ashlag- Matan Torah
9 Rabbi Rolando Matalon, Dvar Torah Second Day Rosh Hashanah, 5776, BJ.

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My hevrutah and teacher Rabbi Sharon Cohen-Anisfeld, often shares the following at a wedding when explaining the meaning of the huppah, the wedding canopy:

"Notice that the huppah under which you stand has no walls. This, our tradition tells us, is the architecture of love. This is what it means to build a home, to be at home. Not to close yourselves off, but to open yourselves -- to what is around you, what is within you, what is between you, and what is beyond you."

What if we could live our lives under a huppah with no walls - no walls needed - not closing ourselves, but opening to each other.

Rabbi Heschel reminds us that we who live in modernity live in a time of urgency. Though he lived decades ago, his words are even more true today. He writes: “One of the lessons we have derived from the events of our time is that we cannot dwell at ease under the sun of our civilization, that man is the least harmless of all beings. We feel how every minute in our civilization is packed with tension like the interlude between lightning and thunder (...) How are we going to keep the demonic forces under control? This is the decision which we have to make: whether our life is to be a pursuit of pleasure or an engagement of service. The world cannot remain a vacuum. Unless we make it an altar to God, it is invaded by demons. This is no time for neutrality”\(^\text{10}\)

This is no time for neutrality and we are in a drought.

A drought of compassion, a drought of generosity, and kindness, a drought of love, a drought of humanity. And we come together in prayer and next week in fasting. But that is not enough. And I repeat again the words of Rabbi Tanchuma: 'My children! Be filled with compassion for each other, and then the Holy One, blessed be God, will be filled with compassion for you\(^\text{11}\).

\(^{10}\) Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity A. J. Heschel, page 75  
\(^{11}\) Genesis Rabbah 33:3

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The whole Torah is love, Torah teaches love. How can our lives be more loving, how can we be more compassionate this year?

Today is the birthday of the world. Hassidic masters remind us that “the act of Creation was not a onetime event but it is a continuous process”12 Humans weren't just created as is. We are always changing, which means we can always do better!

Today is the birthday of the world, and as a gift, let’s open our heart and commit ourselves to the practice of Torah, which IS the practice of Love and let’s end the drought of humanity in our midst. Only by doing that, can we fully participate in the ongoing act of creating the world that we celebrate today. Only then can we truly honor that we were created to live and love along with the rest of God’s creation.

Shana Tova!

12 Speaking Torah, Volume 1, Page 81 (Rabbi Art Green)