Kol Nidre 5775

Nature boy

There was a boy
A very strange enchanted boy
They say he wandered very far
Very far, over land and sea

A little shy and sad of eye
But very wise was he

And then one day, a magic day
He passed my way,

and while we spoke
Of many things, fools and kings
This he said to me

"The greatest thing you'll ever learn
Is just to love and be loved in return"

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Is just to love and be loved in return"

written by Eden Ahbez

This song always chokes me up. The Nat King Cole version which introduced it to us in late 1940’s was especially beautiful. You can find it on youtube. This song’s simple message is as in the case of all simple things- it is simple, basic fundamental and we are all aware that it isn’t easy.

In this hate-filled world these simple words remain a deep desire within all of us.

The well-known first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, the mystic Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Kook, who died in 1935, asked:
Why do we hate others? We may think of many reasons why, but these explanations are not the real source for our hatred of other people. They are merely signs and indications of our hatred. It is a lack of clarity of thought that misleads us into believing that these are the true causes of hatred.

The true source of hate comes from our otzar hachaim, our inner resource of life. This fundamental life-force pushes us to live and thrive, and opposes all that it views as different and threatening. Ultimately, our hate is rooted in sinat chinam - groundless and irrational animosity, just because something is different.

Yet even in hatred lies a hidden measure of love. Baseless love and baseless hatred share a common source, a love of life and the world. This common source hates that which is evil and destructive, and loves that which is good and productive.

How can we overcome our hatred? If we can uncover the depth of good in what we perceive as negative, we will be able to see how good will result even from actions and ideas that we oppose. We will then recognize that our reasons for hatred are unfounded, and transform our hatred into love and appreciation.

Rabbi Kook, although an extraordinary optimist – he had the good fortune of dying before the Shoah – conceded that:

Loving others does not mean indifference to baseness and moral decline. Our goal is to awaken knowledge and morality, integrity, and refinement; to clearly mark the purpose of life, its purity and holiness. Even our acts of loving-kindness should be based on a hidden Gevurah, an inner outrage at the world's — and thus our own — spiritual failures.

What are we striving for, particularly on this Yom Kippur night and day.

In Shir haShirim – the Song of Songs 8:6 we read:

Set me as a chotam (seal) upon thine lev, as a chotam upon thine zero’a (arm); for ahavah is strong as mavet (death); kinah (jealousy) as unyielding as Sheol; the flames thereof are flames of eish, the flame of Hashem.
For love is stronger than death – keep that in mind as we die to ourselves this Yom Kippur, wrapped in our shrouds, refraining from eating and drinking and other earthly pleasures we ascend to a new conscious of self and we will be brought back to life with love.

For love is stronger than death will be brought to the center of our consciousness as we recite the Yizkor – love is stronger than death.

On Rosh Hashanah I mentioned that one of the questions we will be asked on the Day of Judgment is if we were yirei hashem – in awe of the Creation and Creator. To be a God-feare or God-reverer is to be in a state of infatuation with the beauty of the physical world. It is truly, as we still say, awe-inspiring. Love of nature is changing as well into ahavat hashem, a love that makes demands upon us as we tackle the effects of climate change. Environmental and ecological concerns have become a strong commanding and voice that demands our response. It too is part of an evolving sense of what we call, Ahavat HaShem.

There are many kinds of love — the neighbor, the stranger, a life partner, a parent for a child, and the love of God, Ahavat HaShem.

All of these loves are encompassed by what is called Ahavat HaShem—This love of God is a response to the gift of Torah as an act of mature love. This love is articulated in having expectations, high expectations of the other in whom you love. To love is to demand something of the other — of keeping up the highest expectations of the Other, and our expectations of ourselves.

Early 20th century German-Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig described the Hebrew Bible as a "grammar of love" in which God can communicate "I love you" only by demanding "You must love me," and Israel can communicate "I love you" only by confessing "I have sinned." Therefore, this confession does not lead God to offer an unnecessary absolution; it merely expresses Israel's love for God. "What then is God's answer to this 'I am thine' by which the beloved soul acknowledges him" if it is not "absolution?" Rosenzweig's answer is: revelation: "He cannot make himself known to the soul before the soul has acknowledged him. But now he must do so. For this it is by which revelation first reaches completion. In its
groundless presentness, revelation must now permanently touch the
ground." Revelation, epitomized by Sinai, is God's response to Israel's love.
Contrary to Paul, who argued that "through the law comes knowledge of
sin", Rosenzweig argues that it is because of and after a confession of sin
that God reveals to Israel knowledge of the law.

Judah Leon Abravanel a great Spanish commentator and statesman wrote:
"Love links all things together in the cosmos, but while love in the natural
world is sensual and selfish, divine love is unselfish and uplifting. God's
love created the world and brings about the perfection of all things,
especially of man, who, when good, is God-loving as well as God-beloved,
and whose love of God leads him to eternal bliss, which is identical with
divine love."

Maimonides, in his Mishneh Torah, devotes the whole tenth chapter of
Hilkot Teshuvah, with reference to Abot i. 3, to love of God as the motive
which gives all human action its true ethical and religious value.
Maimonides wrote that it should only be out of love for God, rather than
fear of punishment or hope for reward, that Jews should obey the law:
"When man loves God with a love that is fitting he automatically carries out
all the precepts of love."

The 20th-century Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler is frequently quoted as
defining love from the Jewish point of view as "giving without expecting to
take" (from his Michtav me-Eliyahu, Vol. 1). “

Does love bring a person to give or does giving give rise to love? Contrary to
popular belief, one can only love a person if one gives. A person can come
to the level of nedivut, of being content with himself and trusting Hashem,
by becoming a giver. A person should drive himself to help others in all
situations. He should work on being grateful. Gratitude is a prerequisite to
giving which brings to love. Give of yourself and don’t look for recompense.
It will come. And if it doesn’t, you will have become a greater, giving,
person.

This values centered love is espounded upon by Gila Manelson, in her book
Head to Heart,( pp. 73-75 –)

Love comes from appreciating others’ innate goodness.

Rabbi Moshe Waldoks, Temple Beth Zion – Yom Kippur 5775
Love is the attachment that results from deeply appreciating another’s goodness.
The word “goodness” may surprise you. After all, most love stories don’t feature a couple enraptured with each other’s ethics. (“I’m captivated by your values!” he told her passionately. “And I’ve never met a man with such morals!” she cooed.) But in her study of real-life successful marriages (“The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts”), Judith Wallerstein reports that “the value these couples placed on the partner’s moral qualities was an unexpected finding.”

To the Jewish mind, it isn’t unexpected at all. What we value most in ourselves, we value most in others. God created us to see ourselves as good (hence our need to either rationalize or regret our wrongdoings). So, too, we seek goodness in others. Nice looks, an engaging personality, intelligence, and talent (all of which count for something) may attract you, but goodness is what moves you to love.

If love comes from appreciating goodness, it needn’t just happen – you can make it happen. Love is active. You can create it. Just focus on the good in another person (and everyone has some). If you can do this easily, you’ll love easily.

Love is blind to selfishness. When we love another person, we put their needs and desires before our own. Asking ourselves what motivates us about our relationship will help to clarify whether we are committed to investing love in this person or not. When people are truly in love with each other, they identify themselves with their loved one. This feeling exists naturally between parents and children but can be even deeper between soul mates.

**Maimonides again**

Maimonides thinks that love of God can be developed by contemplating Divine deeds or witnessing the marvels of nature (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesoday HaTorah, Chapter 2).

*Commentary of the Rambam, Pirkei avot 5:16 –
ואתה יודע שאלו הסיבות הגשמיות כלן – יכshall*
Rabbi Gershon Winkler reminds us:

Love is defined in Hebrew as ahavah, which is rooted in the Aramaic word havand literally translates as “give.” Creation originated in the Creator’s will to give. We refer to the nature of this gifting as love because it involves not only giving of oneself, but also stepping back to enable the existence and flourishing of the other. God thus models what love entails: selfless gifting accompanied by withdrawal to enable the other to emerge. Therefore, the ancient rabbis defined authentic love as not contingent on any factor because if it is, and then that factor is gone, so is love. But romantic love does have contingencies. It requires compatibility and trust because it involves intimacy.

The Sinai event provides us not only with Law but it offers a glimpse of power if intimacy. The descent onto Mt. Sinai to establish a covenantal relationship to the Divine models all of our different kinds of love.

Our understanding of God informs how we love ourselves and another. We must uphold the Jewish value of b’tzelem elohim, that we are created in the image of God. In so doing, we continuously strive to see that holy essence in ourselves and in others. With holiness as that measure for how we treat, care for and love each other, we can build truly loving relationships. Says Rabbi Laura Novak Winer
Paolo Coelho, the well-known author of the “Alchemist” in a recent interview with Oprah Winfrey says the only question you will be asked on the Day of Judgment is not 'Did you sin a lot? Did you do this? Did you do that?" Coelho says. "God is going to ask you only one question: Did you love enough?"

How you answer this question, Coelho continues, will determine your place in the afterlife. "If you say yes, welcome to heaven," he says. "If you say no, you're in the limbo."

Oprah finds the question fascinating. "It doesn't just mean, obviously, romantic love," she says. "It means, did you open your heart to fully embrace every single moment and, as you describe in the Alchemist, every 'grain of sand'? Did you love fully everybody and everything?"

"Absolutely," Coelho says.

Of in the words of Jean Valjean in Les Miserables singing, “To love another person is to see the face of God.

This is the essence of the Yom Kippur experience. This is the joy and reinvigoration we feel as we complete the Neila service to end Yom Kippur. A service that will begin tomorrow at 6:00, get there earlier. If you haven’t yet experienced Neila in the TBZ it please join us an outpouring of love and the deep feeling of our being loved in return. More on Neila tomorrow.

My friends, family, brothers and sisters:

"The greatest thing you'll ever learn
Is just to love and be loved in return"