

“God is (so much more than) Love”

Rosh Hashanah, Day 2

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One of the downsides of being the rabbi of a congregation is that I almost never attend services anywhere else. Don't get me wrong, I really love coming to shul here...*have you seen the rabbi's family, they're so cute!* I'm here almost every Shabbat and every Jewish holiday, and so I don't often get a chance to just be a congregant somewhere else. Rarely do I have the opportunity to hear someone else give a sermon besides me. Now if you feel bad for me, just think about my poor wife Sari. She has to listen to me pontificate at home, pontificate at shul, during the week and on the weekends! I don't think she fully realized what she signed up for 21 years ago! But every once in a while, I get to go to a family simcha in some other synagogue, where the rabbi is merciful enough NOT to ask me to do anything, or even better, some famous preacher gives a sermon at a high profile event that's picked up by the media, and I get to watch someone else on the pulpit. Well there was just such a sermon this year; it will probably go down as being one of the most watched or listened to sermons in history. Of course I'm referring to the sermon of the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Michael Curry, who preached at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, now the Duchess of Sussex. I know a lot of people who set their alarms for 4:00 in the morning or some other cockamamie time to watch the royal wedding...I was *not* one of them! But I did watch the sermon on-line, and I thought it was remarkable. King George's Chapel in Windsor Palace has to be one of the most austere and imposing places to try to preach, with its 14th Century Gothic architecture, its vaulted ceilings and heraldic banners hanging from the upper stalls of the choir loft. Not to mention the fact that the Queen, and the entire royal family were sitting in the front row, along with hundreds of other dignitaries, celebrities, and clergy. Bishop Curry is no Archbishop of Canterbury. He dispensed with every conceivable formality, and gave a rather *heimish d'var Torah*, if you will, about the power of love. At first I was a bit taken aback by his folksy, conversational style. Clearly, the royals themselves were in a bit of shock, some seemed to be containing laughter at certain points that really weren't meant to be funny. And all the while I'm looking at the podium itself...did he not have any notes up there? Is that an i-pad in front of him on that medieval wooden podium? Bishop Curry began with a quote from *Shir Ha'shirim*, the very same words Sari said to me when she presented me my wedding band under the

chuppah...*simeini ka'chotam al libecha, cha'chotam al zero'echa*...place me as a seal upon your heart as a seal upon your arm. (Curry didn't say the Hebrew part). But he departed quickly from quoting scripture, riffing on the power of love, and imagining a world where love is the way. "Two young people fell in love, and we all showed up," he quipped. [Yeah, the Queen showed up in a Bentley, Meghan Markle in a Rolls Royce Phantom IV, Princess Kate and the bridesmaids in a vintage Daimler DS 420]. He spoke to them as if the bride and groom were two kids who grew up in his congregation who he's known for years. I loved the warmth, the unpretentiousness, the cadence of classic African American preaching, and the emphasis on the divine gift of love. I felt myself being carried by the rhythm of his words; and I even found myself in overwhelming agreement with the theology...until he said the following words: God is love. He didn't invent that idea, it comes from the first epistle of John 4:16 in the Christian Bible. But I immediately thought of the Rambam, the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides who said that as soon as we declare that God is one thing, it means that God is not anything else. When we affirm what God is, we have necessarily limited God, because we have, by implication, also said what God is not. That's a big no-no for Jews.

Moreover, love is complicated. Consider the very first time the word love, *ahava*, is mentioned in the Torah...you can find it in Genesis 22:2, which also happens to be what we read this morning, just a little while ago. *Vayomer*, and God said to Abraham: *Kach na et bincha, et yechid'cha, asher ahavta*: Take your son, your only son, the one who you LOVE, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering... That's the first time the word love appears in the Bible! And it is fraught with complexity. For starters, Abraham doesn't have one son, he has two sons. I'm quite sure that Abraham didn't only love one of them, he no doubt loved both of them. And if love means sacrificing its recipient as a burnt offering, I'm not sure I want any part of it! If you were to examine every time the word love shows up in the Book of Genesis—I already did the work for you, so you don't have to—you will discover that almost every time *ahava* is mentioned, it is in the context of some kind of family feud or conflict. Isaac loved Esau, the Torah tells us, but Rebekkah loved Jacob. Jacob, loved Rachel more than he loved Leah, and he loved Joseph more than he loved his brothers. The Har Shalom players performed that musical right here in this room two years ago! *Sh'chem* the Hivite supposedly loved Dinah (*va'ye-ehav et ha'na'ara*, the Torah says), but he more accurately desired her,

lusted after her, or loved the idea of her...and he ultimately raped her in Genesis 34. In the words of Dostoevsky: “Love in practice is often harsh and dreadful.”

Now look, love isn't always so problematic in the Bible. There is a whole lot of romantic love, carnal love, steamy erotic love in the Bible...

Listen closely:

Oh give me the kisses of your mouth, for your love is more delightful than wine. (Song of Songs 1:1)

Upon my couch at night I sought the one I love—I sought but found him not...I met the watchmen who patrol the town. Have you found my love? Scarcely had I passed them when I found the one I love. I held him fast. I would not let him go... (S.S. 3:1-3)

You have captured my heart, my own, my bride, you have captured my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one coil of your necklace. How sweet is your love!

Shakespeare has nothing on Song of Songs! There is nothing platonic about the love described in these verses. In selections from this book I chose not read in mixed company, there are specific references to the beauty of the human body and the passion of human love. And this is all in the Bible! That's because unlike other traditions, Judaism does not regard sexuality as illicit or dirty or a necessary evil in order to perpetuate the species. Judaism rejects the idea of celibacy in service of God. Our tradition teaches that the desire of the flesh is holy and healthy when channeled in the appropriate ways.

But that's not all the Bible says about love. We are actually mandated to love; commanded to love. In what is arguably the Torah's most famous instruction: *Ve'ahavta l'reiacha kamocha*, we are commanded to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. By the way, if we have to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, then that means we have to love ourselves also. How psychologically astute that Judaism instructs us to view ourselves favorably, and that we have to possess self-love as a prerequisite for loving others! We are similarly required to love the stranger, because we know the pain, the isolation of being strangers. Psalm 34 asks: “Who is the one with a passion for life, loving every day and seeing good?” It seems that according to the Psalmist, we have to love life as well! And of course, each time we say the *Sh'ma* we are

reminded that we must love God “with all our heart, all our soul, and all our might.” Martin Buber once taught that love of God and love of that which God has created are one and the same. So how do we love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our might? By loving others God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our might! In Judaism love is not simply an emotion, it is active, it is concerted, it is a verb in the truest sense. In fact, the Hebrew word for love, *ahava*, is likely derived from the root “*hav*,” which means *to give*. So if what you call love doesn’t involve giving of yourself to another, then it’s probably something other than love. And it all begins with God, the Creator of the Universe.

I spent some time this summer learning in a yeshiva in Jerusalem. I began each morning studying an 18th century ethical treatise by Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzato called *Mesillat Yesharim*, or The Path of the Upright. The text begins with the assertion that God created the world, because God had all this love to share and just wanted something and someone to share it with! God is the ultimate lover, the ultimate giver, which is why we are all here right now.

But at least on Rosh Hashanah, God is not *only* a lover; or to respond to Bishop Curry, God is not only love. Today, our tradition teaches that God is actually possessed by two competing characteristics; Two impulses, two inclinations...Today, after all, is called *Yom Ha’Din*, which doesn’t mean Jewish Valentine’s Day, it means *the Day of Judgment*. Today we call God *dayan u’mochiach, ve’yodea va’ed, ve’chotev ve’chotem, v’sofer u’moneh*...the Judge, the prosecutor, the expert, the witness; the one who presents the indictment, the case, the counts against us. One of God’s impulses is strict justice. We have sinned, and we deserve to be punished. We have done wrong, and we must be held accountable for that wrongdoing. Now if *din*, if justice was the only impulse, we’d probably all get zapped by lightning bolts or swallowed up by the earth. We have seen in our own country what justice without love looks like: Stringency without sensitivity. Enforcement without empathy. Justice by itself is the marble, blindfolded woman who holds the scales in one hand and the sword in the other. There is no room in that cold statue for compassion or sensitivity. But God’s justice is tempered. God’s justice is balanced by God’s love for us...by God’s desire to forgive us. In our daily services we recite words from Psalm 78: “*Ve’hu rachum yichaper avon ve’lo yashchit*: Our merciful God grants atonement for sin and does not destroy. Time and again God restrains wrath, refusing to let rage be all-consuming...*Chas’decha v’amit’cha tamid yitzruni*...Your unfailing love always guards me.”

Whatever the case is against us, it is balanced by God's overwhelming desire to forgive us. So at least today, God is both love and justice.

And I think that's a profound paradigm for us, and for our world. We demand justice. We want others to be held accountable, and I would argue that we ourselves want to be held accountable. This is such a great opportunity to think about whether we are living up to our own expectations for our lives. Are we growing enough, learning enough, doing enough? Are we pursuing all the dreams, goals, expectations we had for ourselves? Last year at this time we made all kinds of promises and vows to become better...well, have we? This is the same reason that people go to AA meetings, or GA meetings, or OA meetings, or NA meetings. That's why we have coaches and trainers and mentors. If we're working a program, we need to check-in, we need someone to pay attention. We need to be able to justify our progress or recovery. It is the attribute of justice that makes those demands on us. It is justice that demands that we come up with some answers, and more importantly that we make the necessary adjustments and corrections. But it is love that makes sure that when we do come up short, or we haven't been our best that we don't give up on ourselves or loath who we have become. It is love that makes repentance possible, love that creates second chances, love that inspires us to forgive and to be forgiven. It is because of love that God never gives up on us, and why we should never give up on each other or ourselves.

In one of my favorite parts of Bishop Curry's wedding sermon he said:

When love is the way, no child will go to bed hungry in this world every again.

When love is the way, poverty will become history.

When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary.

When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more.

When love is the way, there's plenty good room, plenty good room for all of God's children...

The truth is for those visions to come true, love and justice will have to be the way. For this vision of the world to be made real, we will need to insist on both accountability and sensitivity; responsibility and benevolence; rigorousness and humanity. When love and justice are the way, we can transform our lives and our world in unfathomable ways. So in 5779 let love and justice

well up as a mighty stream, and may this year be filled with blessings for us, for our families, and for our world!