

We must love our neighbors as ourselves.

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A few years ago I was in a car on the other side of town when an alert went off on my phone. The fire alarm at my house was going off, and my then 14 year old son was home by himself. I tried calling the house, but couldn't get ahold of him. I tried calling my husband, no luck there either. I called our neighbor, no answer. As the seconds and minutes ticked by, my panic grew more intense.

Desperate to find out what was happening, I called the chocolate store around the corner from my home, a place where my kids are frequent visitors, and I tried explaining to the owner's daughter who I was, who my kids were, and where we lived, and asked her to go to my house to see if my son was ok. I asked her even though I knew that it meant she had to close her shop during the evening rush hour in order to check on my child.

When she got there, she called me back to let me know that he was fine, and the neighbor who I couldn't reach was there with him, as was the fire department.

And my son? He was perfectly calm. Because as far as he was concerned, everything worked exactly as we told him it would if there was a crisis. We had told him that he could always ask our neighbors for help. We told him that emergency services would come when they were called. And that he would be ok, even if we weren't there.

My son was fine because the community responded exactly the way it should when there is a problem. So while he was rattled by the fire, he still felt like everything was going to be ok.

In that moment, I was grateful to know that we lived in not merely a physical neighborhood, but in a real community, where people truly cared for each other's well being.

And I realized that I needed to work on my son's cooking skills if he were to survive outside our home someday.

Right now our larger community is in a crisis. We have two very real and competing needs vying for our attention, we are having to balance lives and livelihoods. We are having to ask what is the right thing for us as individuals and as a society.

Both are real and urgent problems, and each problem, and each solution, is more complicated because they are both intricately connected one with the other. We cannot find a solution if we look at these as separate problems. Lives and livelihoods are both necessary, we cannot have one without the other.

This week's Torah portion is Parashat Kedoshim – the Holiness Code. And while the portion does include some laws pertaining to ritual, the overwhelming focus in the Holiness Code is about creating a society that is based on justice and compassion, a society where no one is left behind, and every individual is accountable, to God and to each other.

And it is from this Torah portion that we get the words that are inscribed on the side of our temple: "Love thy neighbor as thyself (Lev. 19:18)." The 18th century Chassidic rabbi, Shmuel Shmelke wrote that the real meaning of this verse is "to recognize that the other person is truly part of oneself. Deeper than the boundaries that separate one person from another is a substrate that includes both in a larger whole."

In other words, when we love our neighbor we are recognizing that we are both part of a society that encompasses, and depends on, both of us.

To put this in our current reality, if I want to be healthy and do well economically, I need to be concerned with the health and well being of my neighbors. Because each of our individual state of well being affects each other. It is as the noted anti-Semite and titan of business, Henry Ford understood, if he paid his workers a living wage, then they then had enough money to buy his product. If they were doing well, he would as well.

Parashat Kedoshim reminds us that Judaism believes that ideally, government and governance is meant to be a sacred covenant.

The Holiness code begins with God telling Moses to speak to the Israelites and say:

קדשים תהיו כי קדוש אני יהוה אלהיכם:

K'doshim t'hi'yu, ki kadosh ani Adonai elo'he'chem.

You shall be holy; for I the Eternal your God am holy.

And then God, through Moses, proceeds to give us a very long list of laws, including laws that require us to pay our workers fairly and on time, to treat the stranger, the widow and orphan fairly, and love your neighbor as yourself, amongst others.

God was telling us that with freedom comes responsibility. That we were freed from Egypt not so we could each do what we felt like, but so that we would become a nation of laws, of justice, of compassion. And that through these laws, or mitzvot, we could collectively become a holy nation.

Just as the Torah is the foundational document of the Jewish people, the Constitution is the foundational document of the United States. And as the Holiness Code sets the tone for Halacha, the Jewish legal code, the Preamble of the Constitution sets the tone for our government.

The Preamble of the Constitution begins: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America. (Preamble to the Constitution)”

“K'doshim T'hiyu – You, the Children of Israel shall be holy,” and “We the People of the United States” are both statements of community – of recognizing that the intention of a legal system based on our highest values is intended to protect all of us. Not some of us. Not just the wealthy. Not just the elite. Not just the ones with power. ALL of us.

Right now we are all living through a medical and economic crises – but we are not all being affected by it equally. Just as some are more vulnerable to the Coronavirus, there are others who are more vulnerable to a weakened economy, and for others still, there is a painful overlap of heightened vulnerability to both.

But the only way we will get out of this ok is if we all work together, each of us taking actions that are not only for our own benefit, but the benefit of the larger community. Because unless we realize that our lives and livelihoods are dependent on how well our neighbors lives and livelihoods are doing, our society will not be able to rebound from this crises.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan wrote “God is the assumption that there is enough in the world to meet our needs but not to meet our greed for power and pleasure.” Right now we are being asked to address the most basic of questions.

What is needed to keep each individual safe and alive?

What is needed so businesses don't go bankrupt, and that more people don't lose their jobs?

What is needed so people don't lose their homes?

What is needed so everyone has enough to eat?

Our country has the capacity to respond to these urgent questions, but only if we live according to the values expressed in the Preamble: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.”

The US cannot behave as 50 different states, or 58 separate counties in California, or isolated communities in Sacramento county, or each of us as though we were disconnected from our neighbors – we must work

together, as “We the people” to be effective in our common defense against this pandemic, and invested in our collective wellbeing in order to truly be a more perfect union.

I read a story recently about a teacher who brought balloons to school and instructed the kids to blow them up and then write their names on the their balloons. – Clearly this took place before the Coronavirus. – She then told them to put all of their balloons in the hallway, and she mixed up all of the balloons and told the kids they had 5 minutes for every kid to find their own ballon. Each child frantically dove into the balloons searching for what they though of as theirs. But when the time was up, not a single kid had found their own balloon. The teacher then told them to take the balloon closest to them and find the person whose name was on it, and give them their balloon. Within two minutes every child had their balloon. The teacher said “Balloons are like happiness. No one finds it when they are looking only for their own. But when everyone cares about each other’s happiness, they will find their own much more quickly.

But I think that the teacher was only partially correct, what also changed was the children stopped looking for an object, and started looking for each other. And that is how we’ll find our way out, if we look out for each other, if we care about what happens to each and every person’s life and livelihood, if we live by the principal of “love your neighbor as yourself,” then and only then, we will find our way out.