

Meta: Loving-Kindness

Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman Erev Rosh Hashanah 5769

This past winter I had a three-month sabbatical a week of which I spent on retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in West Marin. Spirit Rock, to be clear, is a Buddhist retreat center. And also to be clear, it's a very familiar place to me. In fact, I probably sat there in silence on retreat, I think, seven times in the last eight years, and, three of those times, it was for a week of complete silence; two of these were for rabbis. It sounds just like a joke; rabbis go on retreat, and they can't speak; and the truth is that this is the only way to get me at a retreat center with a bunch of rabbis for any length of time! But, I will say one thing: the first time I ever went there, Rabbi Michael Robinson was part of the group, and we both sat in silence next to each other for four days, and fell in love.

The heart, it's bigger than the words, and the words often get in the way. It's also important for me to say that Sylvia Boorstein is my mentor and friend, and she has been my guide for over a decade, as both a Buddhist scholar and quite a Jew. Now, you may be asking yourself, is this kosher? A rabbi going to a Buddhist retreat center? In truth, I have developed over the years what is basically a Buddhist meditation practice. So, is it kosher?

I think this is a reasonable question.

So I'm going to spend just a second here to answer this question with a question: Was the great rabbi, physician, philosopher, scholar Maimonides kosher? Would anyone even ask, "Is the Rambam kosher?" I don't think so. The reason I asked this question is that in the 12th century, Rambam lived in Egypt amongst Muslim Arabs, and there he fell in love with Greek thought, with philosophy, and then he translated into Arabic, and he studied it; and he became, for all intents and purposes, an Aristotelian thinker. So much so that he argues that Moses actually was an Aristotelian thinker also! Moses as a Greek philosopher? So Maimonides.....Now it's true that they burned Rabam's books for a few centuries. OK, but he did win the day. I'll be happy and really flattered if people burn my books—I have to write them first! So, the short answer to the question is this "kosher" is simply that Judaism is not as hermetically sealed as you might think and over the centuries we did take on aspects of other cultures, of other philosophies, and we made them part of Judaism. And so, the Rambam did it, and I don't mean to compare myself to Rambam, but I and many other Jews are doing it today with some aspects of Eastern thought. One last thing I'm going to say is that my interest is not in Buddhist metaphysics but is simply in their meditative technologies which have been translated faithfully for over 2500 years and are exceptional.

So, I've made Spirit Rock one of my spiritual homes over the years and its form of meditation one of my spiritual practices. I have done what the Talmud says, I have created a heart with many chambers –it's a beautiful saying– and one of the chambers allows me to meditate in a form that was passed down for many centuries, and I have been the recipient of some of its teachings.

The focus of this last retreat was called “Meta,” which is loving-kindness practice. It’s actually very simple. You wish yourself and others well. So my simple phrases are: “May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be free from suffering. May I be at ease.” Now it may sound simple, even silly. But try doing that without a break 24 hours a day—we get to sleep—but every day, all day, for seven days without stop. Try it, and I don’t think you’ll say it’s simple or silly. Sylvia, speaking in the Buddhist context, calls it a purification practice. But what I quickly realized is that it is a great teshuvah practice—wishing oneself and others well.

But first I need to remind you what teshuvah means and then I’ll explain. Teshuvah is probably the primary goal of the Holy Days. It’s translated in different ways; probably the most common and the most flawed is “repentance.” So, in this form of understanding teshuvah, we are to recognize what we’ve behaved inappropriately in some way and thus need to seek forgiveness for our “sins”. We’re then to commit ourselves to not repeat that bad behavior again. That’s the basics. We all have things we’ve done wrong, and we all need to go through that process, but actually, if you look at the word “teshuvah” in Hebrew, its root, ’shuv,” means “to return.” So, I think another meaning, I would say, a deeper meaning, a meaning closer to the root of the word and these Holy Days, is to recognize who we really are and try to come home. And if, as our tradition teaches us, we are tselem elohim, we are created in God’s image, then it’s a recognition of who we really could be, an aspiration to try to be that person in the New Year. I’m going to quote from Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, the great mystic of the 20th century. He wrote, “The primary role of teshuvah is for one to return to oneself, which is the root of one’s soul. In this way, one can return to God.” So, this meditative practice, “meta,” loving-kindness practice, creates an environment for the more traditional form of teshuvah, repentance, and also this more elevated form of teshuvah I am about to describe.

Well, the simple explanation is that, when we attempt to wish ourselves well, we inevitably end up confronting ourselves. You see, most of us, deep down inside, and sometimes right on the surface, don’t like ourselves. Who are we to be happy? Being at ease? Give me a break! Suffer? I was born to suffer! You know, I make it a little funny, but it’s not really very funny. I know this is true for me and, I think, for most folks.

And now, I’ll give you a couple of examples from my recent work as a rabbi teaching this practice in the congregation. Recently, I gave three classes on Thursday night to a meditation group; and then we held a beautiful retreat in our new synagogue all day, and we practiced this process. And this is what I heard from people: “May I be happy...?” This is an actual quote... I talked to someone about what their struggle was, and this is what she said: “I can’t be happy.” I said, “Why?” “Because I wasn’t there for my mother when she died..” That was over a decade ago...

What about healthy? Another person said, “Whenever I get to the word ‘healthy’—closing my eyes saying ‘May I be healthy’—my late husband comes in my mind. Then, when I try to say, ‘free from suffering’, I just see him in pain.”

May I be at ease? “What does ‘at ease’ mean?” another person said. “As a child of a survivor, I can’t imagine ever being at ease.”

Wishing oneself well, self-love is very challenging. The weight of our lives can simply be overwhelming, especially as Jews. But a great question to ask yourself for the New Year is “How heavy are you?” And I don’t mean on the scale. Could we set some of our unnecessary burdens down? It’s common to make a New Year’s resolution to lose weight in the physical sense. But what about the emotional weight of our lives? Why not resolve to let some of that go as well?

So I spent the first three days of my retreat wishing myself well, and it wasn’t going very well. “May I be happy, may I be healthy, yada, yada, yada, yada.” It just wasn’t happening. And the teachers there say, “Well go where the juice is”. I just felt nothing. I felt like—I don’t know—a recorder that was broken, just repeating over and over these things. But, on the third day, I had a breakthrough. I decided to switch out of the Buddhist mantra and go with Judaism. And I changed the mantra to “Elohai, n’shamah sh’natata be tahorah he,” “My G-d, the soul you have given me is pure.” Naturally, I was up on a hill with a breathtaking view of the coastal mountains.... very beautiful hills on both sides and the picturesque, Japanese style buildings of Spirit Rock below. It was probably 6:30 in the morning.

The sun was just coming up, and we were all—you know—pretty ‘out there’ by then. Some of the people were walking—it was a walking meditation time. And I’m up on this hill bellowing, “Elohai, n’shamah sh’natata be tahorah he.” But I really didn’t care, because, finally, finally, I got it! “Tahora-he”: The soul you have given me, G-d, is pure. Pure! And no one can take that away. No matter what’s happened to you, no matter who you are, what you’ve done—“Tahora he!” The soul G-d has given me is pure.

Now, we’re still responsible for our actions. So this horizontal plane between you and another person, bain adam v’chavero—there is no getting out of that responsibility. It’s still our lot. But deep down inside, no matter what: tahora he! The soul is pure; it’s in every one of us. I recently learned a beautiful teaching about this in the context of the blowing of the shofar. Rabbi Avi Weiss, a famous, well-known orthodox rabbi from Flatbush, New Jersey. He is renown in part because he works also with both the orthodox and the non-orthodox Jewish world. I went to hear him speak in San Francisco. And this is his teaching about the shofar. He said the sound of the shofar is the expression of the inner breath of the inner soul. Now hold on! He reminds us of the creation story. God forms Adam out of clay. V’yitzair adonai elohim et ha’adam afar min ha’adamah v’yipach b’apav nishmat chayim v’yehi ha-adam l’nefesh chayah. God formed Adam out of earth, blowing the breath of life into his nostrils; Sh sh sh sh...

And Adam became a living being. And this is what he said. “God blows the breath in, and, when we blow the shofar, it is a reversal of that breath. Elohai, n’shamah sh’natata be tahorah he. My God the soul you have given me is pure... (song). May we be happy! May we be healthy!

Teshuvah necessarily begins with the self. Mi sh’yodeah nafsho yodeah boro. One who knows his soul knows its creator. Forgiveness, compassion, love—it starts with the self. Our ability to love others is directly related to our ability to love ourselves. During my retreat, we started with the self and then branched out to other people, which is what we always do. So you start with “May I be happy,” and then you switch to others: “May you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be free from suffering.” And it’s best to start with folks who are easy to bless, like your family. When I was working on this sermon, I went to Sylvia’s book. I turned to the chapter on

“Loving-kindness,” and in there folded was a note written by Levi and Sophie, written when they were—I don’t know, 7—that said, “Thank you for the game boy and the games. Love you, Daddy, Levi and Sophie.” It’s easy for me to wish my children well, so I started there...

So start there. Start with someone you can easily bless, and then move on to challenging people in your life. People you’d say “Happy! A pox on your family!” Or: “As much tsuris as you’ve given me, may you suffer forever!” You see, my guess is that there are people for all of you here tonight that you would love to bless, and there are people—maybe the best case scenario—you’d rather not think about at all. They’ve hurt us. They’ve let us down. They’ve disappointed us. We tell stories about them, sometimes in our head, which is better, and sometimes to others, which isn’t so good. And those stories may be true. Interesting! You know, the hurt voice, the angry voice, the disappointed voice, the resentful voice—it lies! So you may be sure that those stories you’ve been telling about folks are true, but, have you ever really listened to them and tried to listen objectively and asked the question, “Are these stories really true, or am I just telling them because they serve some need, maybe not a healthy need? The story, though, that we don’t tell is that they, like us, want to be happy, want to feel safe, want to be connected to other human beings, want to be forgiven and forgive, want to love and be loved. They may not know how to do it, and they may have totally blown it with you or someone you love. But that does not mean they are no longer human. And to be human is to want these things. And when we are in a space that’s negative, it’s toxic. Recognizing that, deep down, even those folks we perceive as our enemies want to be loved makes it easier not to hate and opens the possibility of loving-kindness. It also keeps us from hurting ourselves, because, if you notice, having ill will towards others is self-inflicted pain. Just see what it’s like. “I don’t like that person; he hurt me.... G’errrrrr!” Feel that... It hurts us! It’s bad for us!... “May they be happy, may they be healthy, may they be free from suffering, may they be at ease.”

Traditionally, Jews wish each other well during the Yomim Nora’im, these Days of Awe. You could send a New Year card. Say “Shana Tova.”

So, OK, let’s take a moment now; and, if you’re comfortable with this, I’d like you to close your eyes and picture a loved one in your mind’s eye and simply say to them to yourself, “May you have a sweet New Year.” And, if you’re comfortable and they’re sitting next to you, hold their hand and think to yourself, “May you have a sweet New Year” (a few minutes elapse). Now open your eyes and wish the person sitting next to you a Shana Tovah (another time elapse). It feels good, right? It feels good! Now, imagine approaching a person, someone you’re struggling with, with such an open heart. Imagine starting the New Year with a heart ready to love yourself and the other. In essence, this second form of wishing well to others is an answer to what is, according to Rabbi Akiva, the great Talmudic sage, the most important wisdom of all, V’ahavta re’echa k’mocha, loving your neighbor as yourself.

Rabbi Romi J. Shapiro tells a great story that relates to this teaching: He was invited after the tsunami in Indonesia to come to a concert, a Christian music concert, to raise money for the victims of the tsunami. And it was organized by the evangelical community, and he felt a little uncomfortable; all these preachers and all these rip-roaring fundamentalists and this little rabbi. So they’re rocking out and raising lots of money and saying a lot of halleluyahs, and it’s his turn. And he gets up on the dais and he’s a little uncomfortable, and he says, “You know, I’m a rabbi

and rabbis teach Torah. I'm going to teach you some Torah. He started with a question that's very appropriate for the eve of Rosh Hashanah, which is, among other things, the birthday of the world. He asked them, "Why does the Torah say we are created in the image and the likeness of God, but after God creates us, God simply refers to us as "b'tselem elohim," the image of God. What happened to likeness?" Why doesn't God say after God created us that we were in the image and likeness of God? And this is the answer: He said, "Tselem elohim is God manifest. So look at the ocean; the ocean is God. The waves are us. We have no choice in that. We are God manifest. We are the waves whether we like it or not. But likeness—that is more potential." And this is what he said to this huge crowd: "Being the likeness of God means that we have the potential to act in a godly manner. It means that we have, regardless of our ideology, theology, and politics, engaged each moment and each other with loving-kindness. Image of God, but not yet the likeness of God. You were born in the image of God, but living out the likeness of God is a choice; and you are making that choice right now, here, thousands of you, coming together to help people, most of whom you have never met. The people struck by this tragedy don't look like you, they don't believe as you do, they don't share your culture or speak your language or listen to your music. They couldn't be more different. And yet, here you are. Your heart is broken over their tragedy, and your wallets and purses are open to be of service in their recovery. Why? Because moments such as these—and this is the most important part—we do not see the other as stranger but as neighbor, as an image of God. And when we see the image of God in others, we cannot help but act out the likeness of God ourselves.

V'ahavta re'echa k-mocha. Loving your neighbor as yourself is a profound Jewish ideal, but, in truth, it's very hard to realize.

So, come with me and imagine, you're having a busy day and you're running late, and you've got to be somewhere real important, but you're hungry and you, if you don't have food, you're going to take a dive right when you need to be together. So you're running to Food for More or Whole Wallet—I mean, Whole Foods—and you get a healthy snack, and you go to the express lane, and it's looking good. But then, you notice that the person in front of you is holding a little baby, and the woman checking out everybody is putting her arm around the baby, and now she's taking the baby in her arms and now she's giving the baby back. And your blood pressure is getting up, you're sweating, and you're trying hard to hold back all the nasty things you want to say: "Look, it's the express lane and I'm in a hurry—don't you get it?" You know, it's all going on in your head, but you're OK, you're not saying it. It's going on inside. Luckily, you don't say a word and you don't have a heart attack. You almost hit somebody with your car as you're speeding away, but nobody got hurt, you got your food and you are on your way... This is what you don't know. What you don't know is that the lady who's checking people out—her husband was killed in Iraq last month, and the baby that woman was holding—well, that's her baby, and she only gets to see her baby one time during the day, and that was the time. That's what we didn't know. And this is the truth. There's so much we don't know about the other. Yet, we rarely really try to understand, lovingly, who they are.

Ahavta l're-echa kamocho" means constantly trying to see the image of divinity in everyone. It's hard.

There's a bumper sticker I love that goes something like, "Don't assume malice when it could easily be ignorance." You know, it's actually quite narcissistic to think that someone is out to hurt us. I'll give you an example. Let's say you're in synagogue and you're sleeping while I'm speaking. It never happens! But let's say, OK, you're sleeping. I could say, "that's so rude!" I mean, I plan, I work, it's no fun for me.... Other people see, and then other people think I'm boring, and—how could you do that? Or I could think, "You've had a rough day, you're tired, and isn't it nice to have a safe, comfortable space where you can sleep? But, seriously, it's amazing the knots we can tie ourselves up in when we don't see our relationships through the lens of loving-kindness. We tell distorted stories, and we hurt ourselves along the way.

I'll give you another example—email. Emails are horrible things, bad in every way. Everyone knows I hate emails, OK? So you get an email. You can't see their face, you don't really know the context, you just see words, words you don't like, on the screen and you react. And, unfortunately, then you hit the "send" button, right? And then you go back, like ten minutes later, you look again and you realize, "My God, they just said "Happy Birthday," and I thought they said, you know, "You're a ..." or something like that.

Another example: I'm going to call it "an appointment with the rabbi." True story; actually, all I've said so far is true. Sad but true. Not too long ago, someone came to see me. The appointment was in my calendar, but it didn't say the purpose of the meeting, and neither Denise nor I remembered what it was about. Of course, it's always Denise's fault! The time for the appointment had arrived, and I was picking up my study a bit. I realized I was feeling a little tense. Perhaps I was tired or anxious; I don't really remember. But what I do remember is my utter surprise and relief when the person arrived and let me know she simply wanted to understand a Torah portion. She just wanted to study some Torah! I was blown away! I had assumed she was coming with a complaint or a problem. It often happens when you're the rabbi, but not as much or as often as the story in my head that day. And that story was not helpful to me or the person coming to see me. Once I got out of the story, my heart opened. In fact, I was filled with joy and ready to serve. Loving our neighbor means assuming the best about others. When we do that, we are also more likely to be at our best.

So, after wishing myself well and various other people well, I, like the hundred and twenty other people I was 'retreating' with, spent the last few days of the retreat blessing all creation, extending loving-kindness to all beings everywhere. This is a kind of like tree-hugging, and the truth is, once you get to such an open-hearted state, the beauty of a single tree can be overwhelming, and you seek it out to hug!

But quickly, for me, something else happened. I was confronted with the dark and foreboding shadow of the Shoah, the Holocaust. It turned out there were other Jewish folks there, and we had all pretty much had the same challenge. It was like this huge cloud that swooped in and hung very close. We were wishing the world well but what about all of our tormented, tortured and murdered ancestors? It was very, very hard. I asked one of the leaders for some help. He said, "Well, I'm Jewish, and I spent a week sitting in Auschwitz, and I can't tell you how to work with this problem....

What I found was this: I could work around it, but I couldn't work with it. The best I could do was to keep it there 'at bay'. Some things are beyond loving-kindness. But nevertheless, we have choices."

Some of you may have heard of Shlomo Carlebach, Chassidic rabbi, really known for his music, great music. There are Carlebach shuls. His music is really sung everywhere and in our synagogue as well. And he went to Germany a lot; he played lots of concerts there, and people asked him—you know—he came from a Chassidic dynasty; he lost everyone. I mean, everyone was murdered in the most horrible ways. He lost it all. And they said, "You know, how can you go to Germany and play all these concerts, given, you know, what happened to your family?" And this is what he said: "If I had two hearts, I'd devote one full-time to hate. But I don't. I only have one."

Practicing loving-kindness may not change the world, but it certainly can change how we respond to it. The Talmud teaches that the world was created on Rosh Hashanah. This is called yom harat olam, the day of the world's conception. And it says, on Rosh Hashanah, the world will also be redeemed. There is a great Jewish fantasy about what that means; I love it. You know the verse about "we will beat our swords into plowshares." Has anyone ever seen a plowshare? "Our spears into pruning hooks." "We will study war no more." No disease, no hunger, no poverty, no homelessness, no oppression. The world will be perfected. It's a great fantasy, and I love it. But reality starts with us, one open heart at a time.

The New Year is here. May it be a blessing for us all. May we be happy... May we be healthy.... May we be free from suffering.... and may we be at ease...

And let us say together, amen.

Shannah Tovah.