

I'm going to teach you an important word in Hebrew tonight—just one word—a word you can use, that you need to use and should use in the year ahead--a word you have heard over and over already tonight. Here goes: AHAVAH. Say it with me: AHAVAH. It sounds like a sigh. AHAVAH. AHAVAH. Anyone know what it means? It means LOVE.

Love. Tonight and at almost every service we chant v'ahavta et adonai elohecha... "You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might...". Tomorrow in the afternoon Torah reading we will read Leviticus 19 which includes among other things the commandments - v'ahavta l're-acha kamocho ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself... And, v'ahavta lo k'mocha ki gerim hayinu beretz mitzrayim... You shall love the stranger as yourself for you were strangers in the land of Egypt .

How can we be commanded to love our neighbors, strangers and even God? And what do we mean when we say, "I love you?" Contrary to what some folks think, Judaism has lots to say about love and tonight, this night of essential things, is a good time to explore this essential emotion.

Love. AHAVAH. Say it with me again. AHAVAH.

Jewish tradition of course recognizes the distinction between Eros, or romantic love, and other forms of love. Just read Shir HaShirim/The Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible:

Now he has brought me to the house of wine,

and his flag over me is love.

Let me lie among vine blossoms,

in a bed of apricots!

I am in the fever of love.

His left hand beneath my head,

his right arm

holding me close.

Daughters of Jerusalem, swear to me

by the gazelles, by the deer in the field,

*that you will never awaken love
until it is ripe. (2:4-7)*

Beautiful as this poetry is, erotic love is not the focus of Judaism for obvious reasons; passions are like the weather, always changing, unpredictable, some times deadly. Love is too important and we are too grounded as a people to consign love merely to the whims of the heart.

So if not romance, what are we talking about when we talk about “love.”? Remember Fiddler on the Roof? (“If I were a rich man...”) One early scene illustrates a different Jewish understanding of love. Tevye asks his wife Golde the very modern question: “Do you love me?” At first she tells him that he’s a fool or maybe sick and he needs to lay down. But Tevye presses her, “Do you love me?” and she responds with something like, “for 25 years I’ve cooked your meals, cleaned your house, washed your clothes, given you children, milked your cow, after 25 years why talk about love right now!”

Well, what do you think? Did she love him?

A few years ago I had the pleasure of hearing the renowned Orthodox Rabbi Avi Weiss speak at a meeting of the San Francisco Board of Rabbis. He covered a number of topics including what does it mean to love someone, and he told this story:

Rabbi Weiss’s father was the Askenazi Rabbi of Natanya in Israel. And at that time, Rabbi Weiss was the only one of their children living in New York. So, when his parents would come to visit him from Israel it was quite an honor. Before one visit to the States, his dad calls and says, “Look Avi, we’ve changed our plans and instead of coming in on Thursday, we’re coming Wednesday morning. Can you please pick us up from the airport?” R. Weiss replies, “Abba, [father] you know how much I love you, you know how much I love Mommy...I was able to pick you up on Thursday but I can’t make it Wednesday morning.” His dad calls him his childhood name, “Avrumi! you know your mother is not well, you know it is hard for us to schlep all our stuff, hail a cab. Please Avrumi, pick us up!” “But Abba, I’m sorry, I can’t make it. I’ll send

someone.” “Avrumi, you’re now a hotshot rabbi in Brooklyn New York and you don’t have time to pick your parents up at the airport?” “Abba, you know how much I love you, but...” “Avrumi, do me a favor. Don’t love me so much and just pick us up at the airport!”

R. Weiss’s Abba and Tevye’s Golde are saying the same thing: love from a Jewish perspective is more about doing than feeling. It’s not that loving feelings aren’t nice. Who doesn’t like feeling “in love”? It’s nice but it’s not something we can count on to motivate us to do what we otherwise might not, like stand with and by our spouses through thick and thin or rearrange a busy schedule to pick up elderly parents at the airport. Love in Judaism is fully realized in covenant with others as an expression of mutuality, commitment and responsibility.

Rabbi Weiss’s story is especially poignant because it reflects an almost daily reality for many of us; how best to help, honor and support our aging parents? “What do I do rabbi? My mother is not safe in her home alone any more but she refuses help, and won’t even think about moving to an assisted living facility.... My father, God love him, insists on driving but it’s clear he is no longer safe behind the wheel... What should I do?”

These are challenging situations for everyone; our parents and us. There are no easy answers. But one thing can help: remembering that ultimately whatever decisions we make about our families, young or old, those decisions are an expression of our love for one another.

This kind of love, far from the quixotic emotions of the heart, reflects a deep commitment to one another, built upon mutual respect and understanding.

AHAVAH. Say it together again. AHAVAH.

With this kind of personal love in mind, we are ready to tackle the more global questions: what does it mean to be commanded to love our neighbor, the stranger or God?

When you walk into Shomrei Torah, the first thing you see is a lovely, large cabinet displaying our namesake Torah among other heritage objects. Inlaid near the top of the wood frame are the words, in Hebrew and in English, v'ahavta l're-acha kamocho-- "Love your neighbor as yourself." Why those words? As a community we decided that was the most important verse in the whole Torah, and it should be used to greet people as they enter our building.

I think for us the meaning is really pretty simple; v'ahavta l're-acha kamocho means treat everybody whether they are Jewish or not, regardless of their politics, socio- economic status, skin color or sexual orientation, like you would want to be treated. In other words, remember, we are in a covenantal relationship with all other human beings that demands at minimum mutual respect and possibly much more.

A number of years ago I was at Camp Newman and heard July Silver give a concert. By the way, she's coming to Shomrei Torah for a weekend in February! One of the songs she sang included the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself." I'll never forget what she said: "Your neighbor is not just your friend, or your bunk mate. Your neighbor is also someone you don't know, who doesn't look like you. Your neighbor might smell bad, or look different. Your neighbor might be handicapped, or even scary to look at..."

Julie Silver makes an essential point; "neighbor" is not just the folks we are comfortable with or the people that look or think like we do.

We at Shomrei Torah pride ourselves in being a welcoming congregation: a hemisha place. Needless to say, I have yet to meet a congregation that thinks they're cold and nasty to people! We fashion ourselves as warm and welcoming and I think mostly we are. We also blow it some times like when it comes to welcoming Jewish Republicans. You laugh but what I have noticed is this; liberals are great at being tolerant of other liberals but are often intolerant of people that don't think the way they do. I'm sure one can say that about Conservatives as well, but they don't make up the majority of our congregation. If the congregation is going to live up to the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, we need to learn how to make a respectful space for the full range of political beliefs. And, if we succeed here we offer a little tikkun, a small repair in the rent of the democratic fabric of

our country, which is becoming more and more polarized, and dysfunctional by the minute.

AHAVAH. Let's say it together. AHAVAH.

When it comes to V'ahavta l're-acha kamocho/loving your neighbor as yourself, there is one area in which we are leaders in the Jewish community here and around the country and that is with interfaith families. We are an intermarried congregation--80% of our families with kids are intermarried and over half the congregation as whole. Our Jewish ancestors could not have imagined the community we have built together. Our vitality, our growth, and our strength in large part is thanks to the many folks in our congregation who, while not being officially Jewish, have decided to throw their lot in with us. For example, 3 of the last 6 presidents of the congregation have been intermarried and 5 of the last 6 presidents have intermarried families.

To be clear, Shomrei Torah does not offer an interfaith experience; we are a Jewish congregation and we assume that if you are here you are looking for a Jewish experience. Yet, we strive to make sure that the Judaism we offer is accessible, inclusive and compelling for everyone whether you are Jewish or not.

Ahavah... Ahavah

Now I would like to address what it means to "love the stranger"? At first glance it seems that the commandment to "love the stranger" expands the circle of mutuality, value and respect from those we know to the "other", folks truly foreign to us. Not a bad teaching but the Torah has something more in mind; "the stranger" is code for the most vulnerable in society. The stranger is vulnerable because he/she exists outside the rule of law; one can abuse or take advantage of the stranger without the same consequences of mistreating your neighbor.

This touches a raw nerve for Jews. As recounted in the story we retell every Passover, We know what it is like to be a stranger, other, a slave, and that first hand knowledge should lead us to just and kind treatment of those who society would otherwise take advantage of

or abuse.

Who is the stranger today? Who's most vulnerable in our society? There are many good candidates, but tonight I want to focus on Immigrants, undocumented workers and their families because as vulnerable as others are, undocumented workers have the additional challenge of existing in a grey area, a "no mans land", filling essential jobs in our workforce without protections and benefits the rest of us take for granted, and all the while existing outside the rule of law. This is exactly the situation the Torah legislates against. "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt... (Lev. 19:33-34)

No wonder there is a broad consensus - rare in it self - in the Jewish community in support of immigration reform. But are we doing enough about it? Some times things have to get personal before we are really motivated. It's sure personal for my family now.

Our kids Levi and Sophie are close friends with a young man named Miguel. They went to school together. Miguel just graduated from Carillo- he's a year ahead of them - works at Oliver's and goes to the JC. He's a regular around our house, at our dinner table. Miguel was looking down not to long ago and we asked him what was wrong? It had been a bad week, he said, his uncle had been picked up by ICE and was likely to be deported. It was then that we found out that while he and his little brother were born here and are thus citizens, his parents were not. Miguel is 18! He has lived his whole life with the fear that at any time his parents could be taken away from him. 18 years! For over 18 years his folks have worked as home health care aids; essential work, without any of the essential benefits. There are literally thousands of families like Miguel's in Sonoma County and 100,000's in the country as a whole.

Loving the stranger in Sonoma County today, in America today means working towards just immigration reform that respects the dignity and the human rights of the millions of immigrants in the country as well as the rule of law. Having been strangers, we know what it's like. We know the pain of the "other". How can we not care? How can we not act?

There is something we can do right now that can make a difference and that is call Governor Brown and encourage him to sign the Trust Act. As you leave the sanctuary this evening, members of the Social Action Committee will be standing by with a flyer that gives you all the information you need to learn more about the Trust Act and call Governor Brown.

AHAVA. Say it with me. AHAVA.

One more kind of love needs to be a part of tonight: ahavat HaShem, loving God. How does one love God especially if you're not sure you even believe in God? We are not the only ones to ask this question. The early Sages considered it the most important of all the commandments. They suggest that to love God is to behave in such a way that you inspire others to love God. "How do we do that?" you ask.

We have services at the end of Religious school every week and I often ask our kids this question: what does it mean to love God? Hands shoot up. "Uh... loving God means feeding our pets before we feed ourselves...", "Loving God means being nice to my little sister...", "Loving God means helping my grandpa who has cancer..." Our kids intuitively understand that loving our neighbor and the stranger IS loving God.

The contemporary Rabbi Rami Shapiro tells a story that helps illustrate what it means to love God. After the horrible tsunami that hit Indonesia a number of years ago, he was asked to speak at a huge Christian rally in support of the victims of the disaster. There was a rockin' band and a number of charismatic preachers and then Rami was invited on the stage. He about fainted when he caught a glimpse of himself on the Jumbo Tron! This is what he says:

In Genesis it doesn't just say we are made in God's image. It says, we are created "btzalmenu kidmuteinu" in God's image and likeness. Now the Bible does not waste any words so the important question is what is the difference between being in God's image and being in God's likeness? Being in God's image is a given. We're born that way. Like the waves are to the ocean, we are to God. Likeness however, is

another story all together. Likeness is about potential. We are born in God's images but only through our actions can we become like God and what you are doing tonight, caring for and raising money for people who live around the world from you, who don't look like you, who are not of your religion, that is being in the likeness of God.

Though he doesn't say it, it's obvious given what we have learned tonight that such selfless love of the stranger – the kind of love that embodies both living in the image and the likeness of God – is also essentially loving God.

AHAVAH. One last time together. AHAVAH.

Loving God does not have to be some abstract, religious ideal. Loving God is basically being a mensch. Same goes for loving our neighbor, or loving our families. Easier said than done, but worth committing to in the year ahead.

Did Tevye love Golde as we have come to understand love tonight? Absolutely! And that was also what Rabbi Weiss was teaching his son – the kind of love that really matters is the kind of love that leads to action – “love me less and pick me up at the airport!”

So it goes with loving our neighbors, the stranger and God. When we love fully, we become the hands and feet of God.

Ken y'hi ratzon...