

A Rabbinic Perspective *By Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom*

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“Too Little Mercy, Too Little Love”



As part of AJ's 150th anniversary year, we are producing a film about the history of the congregation, its present, and its future.

When I was interviewed for it, I was asked, “What do you think the major role of the synagogue is today?” As I formed my answer, I found myself reflecting on how the world we live in seems to be increasingly difficult. We are anxious about our health, the economy, and our children's future. We fear global terrorism and urban

terrorism. We fear for our jobs and our economic security. We work longer and harder and have less and less “margin for error” in our lives. Each new technological advance makes it possible for us to do more with less. We burn the candle at both ends. We run just to stay in place. We are exhausted, physically and emotionally, as never before.

And so I said to the interviewer “More than ever, we need the synagogue to be a place of love, a place of safety and acceptance.” Now I know that many people think that Christianity, not Judaism, is the religion of love. But when I was growing up in Rochester, New York, there were two giant stained-glass windows flanking the Aron HaKodesh. On the right, the window portrayed, in Hebrew, the verse from the book of Deuteronomy that is part of our daily prayers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” On the other side of the Ark was the verse from the book of Leviticus that teaches “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

What more powerful message of love can there be than these verses, teaching us to love our God and to love other people? Together they remind us that you cannot really love God without loving God's human children, and when we love our fellow humans, we love God, in whose image we are all created.

And as these verses surround the Ark, we are taught that they are the essence of *Torah*. What more exalted mission is there for the synagogue than to teach the love of God and the love of humanity, and how these two “loves” are inextricably intertwined? And yet it is ironic that sometimes religious institutions foster contention instead of harmony; spiritual affliction instead of tranquility. Those who observe more think they are better Jews, and those who do less are made to feel that they don't measure up. Instead of being a place of peace, members sometimes see themselves divided into competing camps climbing over each other to prove their virtue.

But is this what God expects of us? Did not the prophet Micah say in one of the most exalted verses in Scripture, “It has been told to you, O mortal, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”?

Many of you know that I am a fan of singersongwriter Jerry Jeff Walker. On one of his earlier albums he sings a song by Mike Reid which laments, “The backstreets [are] full of mystery, people frozen in their dreams, too little mercy, too little love, too much night.” We all live on the backstreets of life. Sometimes we are frozen in our tracks by the lack of mercy and love, by the lack of kindness and acceptance. “Too little love. Too much night.”

Rabbi Sidney Greenberg, of blessed memory, composed a meditation on *Mah Tov*, the prayer that begins our services with the declaration “How lovely are thy tents, O Jacob; thy dwellings, Israel, O how fair!” In part, he wrote:

May the door of this synagogue be wide enough to receive all who hunger for love, all who are lonely for fellowship.

May it welcome all who have cares to unburden, thanks to express, hopes to nurture.

May the door of this synagogue be narrow enough to shut out pettiness and pride, envy and enmity.

May its threshold be no stumbling block to young or straying feet.

May it be too high to admit complacency, selfishness, and harshness.

May this synagogue be, for all who enter, the doorway to a richer and more meaningful life.

What more worthy mission for our synagogue, as we approach our 150th anniversary, than these noble ideals. We need to teach, and model more love and more mercy; more acceptance and more kindness. We need to be a place that teaches us to love God and to love our fellow human beings; that love of God and love of humanity are one.

More than ever, this is the mission of the synagogue.

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