This is my first High Holiday season as an abba, a dad. One year ago, Gabriella and I were eagerly awaiting the birth of our first child. I could never have imagined how it would change our lives. We’ve plumbed new depths of exhaustion, of course. But we’ve also reached new levels of patience and unimagined heights of love.

I’ve long been in awe of my wife’s giving nature, but in watching her with Asher, I’ve been awed anew. She is just utterly loving, even when she’s sleep deprived and physically exhausted. You might say it’s natural for any mother of any species, including humans, to care for their child. And I would say: yes - and how amazing is that? And what does it teach us about human nature?

What are we, as human beings? I believe that our true essence is love. Compassion and benevolence are a part of human nature, rooted in our brain and biology, and ready to be cultivated for the greater good.¹

And so when we do teshuvah on Yom Kippur - when we do the act of returning - we are returning to our essence of love. I first understood love as the goal of teshuvah after reading something several years ago. One of my rabbis had posted on Facebook saying that he had asked his then-six-year-old son what he thought he should say about teshuvah on Yom Kippur. His son said: “you should grow in love every day, but on Yom Kippur, even more.”

¹ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_compassionate_instinct
And that is my whole sermon. As the Psalmist says, “out of the mouth of babes…” But really, I was astounded. This six year old boy had intuited and articulated that love is the essence of *teshuvah* and human nature.

*Teshuvah* is a spiritual awakening, a process of recognizing our essential goodness, our natural compassion. *Teshuvah* is returning to that essential goodness, which is our loving nature. Sadly, our stratified society, which is built on a mindset of competition and scarcity, obscures our true nature by forcing us to think and to act selfishly. But according to researchers like Dr. Emma Seppälä of Stanford University, our first instinct, from birth, is compassionate love.²

And so today we must ask ourselves: Have we embraced our compassionate essence? Are we loving? How would love lead us to behave? How would we treat our partners, our families, and our friends? How would we treat strangers? And how would we treat ourselves? What can we do to reconnect to our innate love and compassion and share it with all humans and all beings on this planet?

The Piaseczno Rebbe, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, said that the purpose of human existence is *tikkun*, repair and healing. In Jewish mysticism, *tikkun* means restoring balance to God, because God’s quality of *Din*, judgment, has become overactive. What is the counterbalance to an excess of harsh judgment? *Hesed*, loving-kindness, is the antidote. And so *tikkun*, the ultimate task of human beings, is to bring more *Hesed*, loving-kindness into the world and into God to restore the balance and to heal the world.

Anodea Judith, an American author, therapist, and scholar of the Hindu chakra system, agrees with the Piaseczno Rebbe and the Kabbalists, putting it this way: “Through love we are

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² https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/feeling-it/201306/compassion-our-first-instinct
able to expose our instinctual core and evolve to the next step of expressing our truth. Through love we are able to embrace and heal the larger world around us.”

Love works in incredible ways. It lifts us up and allows us to reach our full potential, and go above and beyond what we thought we could do, enabling us to achieve things that were once unimaginable. I was reminded of this when I was reflecting on the life of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg of blessed memory. Justice Ginsburg’s mother, Celia Amster, was born four months after her family arrived from Poland in the United States and worked as a bookkeeper in Brooklyn. Celia took an active role in her daughter’s education, often taking her to the library. She wanted her daughter to be able to go to college, which she thought would allow Ruth to become a high school history teacher. In this way, Celia’s love for her daughter led to accomplishments that Celia could not and did not imagine during her own lifetime. Love can change everything.

In one comment about Judaism, Justice Ginsburg said: “we are taught to do right, to love mercy, to do justice, not because there’s gonna be any reward in heaven or punishment in hell… We live righteously because that’s how people should live and not [because we] anticipate any reward in the hereafter.” In other words, Jewish tradition asks us to lift up our most basic yet most divine instincts: love and compassion.

The words of Kol Nidrei affirm our desire to do good. Kol Nidrei is not a prayer, but a statement declaring that we have made mistakes in the past and we likely will make mistakes again in the future. And in doing so, Kol Nidrei reminds us that we are not the mistakes we have made. We are not the promises we have broken. What we are is up to us as we do teshuvah and return to our loving nature.
Human communities are only as healthy as our conceptions of human nature. It has long been assumed that selfishness, greed, and competitiveness lie at the core of human behavior, that they are the products of our evolution. It takes little imagination to see how these assumptions have guided most realms of human affairs, from political policy to media portrayals of social life.

Recent scientific findings from universities such as the University of Wisconsin, Emory, Princeton, and UC Berkeley forcefully challenge this view of human nature. We see that compassion is deeply rooted in our brains, our bodies, and in the most basic ways we communicate. What’s more, a sense of compassion fosters compassionate behavior and helps shape the lessons we teach the next generation.³

But even if the findings suggested that we were naturally selfish and competitive, Jewish tradition would still assert that we always have a choice between selfishness and love. We can do teshuvah. We can seek forgiveness, we can heal our relationships, we can change our ways, and we can come back to the better angels of our nature.

I’d like us to engage in a spiritual practice right now, a meditation of sorts that I adapted from my teacher Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels. If you’re comfortable, you can close your eyes, or just rest your eyes somewhere in front of you. Now call to mind all the people who ever cared for you or helped you. You might quickly realize it’s not possible to do this all at once, or really at all. It’s not possible to remember your own birth, and the nurses and doctors who delivered you and cared for you in your first moments of life outside of your mother’s womb. Maybe you can remember your preschool or kindergarten teachers. Can you remember your childhood

³ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_compassionate_instinct
friends who helped you up when you fell on the playground? Can you picture those childhood friends’ parents, who shared meals with you? What about the love and care you received from your own parents and siblings and aunts and uncles and grandparents? Clearly, it’s not possible to remember every act of kindness that you’ve ever received. But try to imagine how many people cared for you and helped you reach this moment. Now multiply that love by 7.8 billion - the number of people who exist today on earth. Each of those people has received some basic amount of care in order to survive. That’s how much love there is the world. If your eyes are still closed, you may open them. If you see others on Zoom, know that they too have received and given so much love. Know that you yourself have received and given so much love.

Mindfulness teacher, Jack Kornfield, says that love is like gravity: it is the vast, invisible, unstoppable force that connects and supports all things.⁴ The Rabbis of the Talmud tell us that teshuvah preceded the creation of the world, meaning that it is always available to us. And since teshuvah is returning to love, this means that love is always available to us. As the poet Stephen Levine says: “Love is not what we become, but who we already are.” Let us use this time of prayer and reflection to return to who we already are and access that love anew. Gemar ḥatimah tovah.

⁴ Cf. Jack Kornfield, The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace, p. 68