

Erev Rosh Hashanah, 5780/2019

“Love and Covenant”

Rabbi Steven Folberg

Dear Friends,

During this past year, I've been ruminating, possibly more than is advisable, about what it means to be sixty-one years old and thus, *well* into middle age.

Recently, after conducting a baby naming, for example, I found myself standing in line at the buffet luncheon, chatting with a fellow I've just met. I'm guessing *he's* in his 70s. The conversation has turned to music, and we are gushing over Bruce Springsteen, Led Zeppelin, Steely Dan and Dire Straits, talking about how that was "real music."

Later in the day it hits me that our unshakable love for the stuff we were listening to in high school exactly parallels my late parents' reverence for the big band sounds of Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey, not to mention the Yiddish novelty recordings of Mickey Katz.

There's no denying it. I have become a musical geezer! When did *that* happen? Probably around the same time that my left knee mysteriously started to hurt. But it's true. At a live performance of the great rock 'n' roll band, Chicago (idols of my trumpet playing youth), and at recent shows by Donald Fagen or Steely Dan, I've noticed my baby boomer self mirrored in the appearance and mannerisms of the

majority of the fans seated around me. In his memoir, *Eminent Hipsters*, Donald Fagen of Steely Dan fame himself muses, “Michael [McDonald], Boz [Scaggs] and I are pretty old now, and so is most of our audience. Tonight, though, the crowd looked so geriatric I was tempted to start calling out bingo numbers. Nevertheless, by the end of the set they were all on their feet, albeit shakily, rocking out to Mike’s performance of Buddy Miles’s “Them Changes.” So this, now, is what I do: assisted living.”

Of course, noticing that time is passing and that you and the people around you are growing up, maturing, getting older, is one of the core themes of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We are to take the measure of our lives at this particular moment and ask ourselves questions like, What do I value? Where have I wandered off track? How are my relationships doing? Knowing that so much is not within my ultimate control, nevertheless, in a world awash in trouble, where do I want to put my energy, my effort, to help make the world better? To quote the famous Rabbi Hillel, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And – especially as you get to be “our age” – If not now, when?” Judaism gives us many ways to respond to these rather urgent and deeply human questions, and tonight, I’d like to look at them through the lens of two beautiful Hebrew words.

The first word is *berit*, usually translated as “covenant.” You may know the word *berit* from the phrase *berit milah*, which means, “the covenant of circumcision.” In Ashkenazic Hebrew or Yiddish, *berit* is of course pronounced “*bris*.” At a *berit milah* for a boy or a *berit bat* for a girl, we celebrate that this tiny human is part of the Jewish covenant, our relationship or “deal” with God. (By the way, considering how central the idea of breach or covenant is in our Scriptures, an earlier draft of this sermon suggested that an alternative title for the Torah itself could very well be, *The Art of the Deal*, but I decided, probably wisely, not to go there.)

The covenant or deal in question is negotiated between God and Abraham way back in the book of Genesis. God’s side of the bargain is to multiply Abraham’s descendants, bring them into a land of their own, protect them and make them a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. Abraham’s side of the bargain is to practice righteousness, justice and compassion, teach that way of life to his descendants, occasionally give God a hard time, and circumcise his male children on the eighth day of life.

All the Torah’s deals or covenants involve God and human beings. The first *berit* in the Torah is entered into between God and Noah and (because Noah is essentially "Adam 2.0") with all humankind after the Great Flood. The second covenant is negotiated between God and Abraham, as we’ve already said. It is renewed with Abraham’s son, Isaac and with Isaac’s half-brother, Ishmael to

whom Muslims trace their lineage. The bargain is renewed between God and Isaac's son, Jacob and Jacob's brother, Esau. And then, this *berit* or divine-human agreement is expanded at Mount Sinai to include Moses and all the Israelites.

Finally, in the book of Deuteronomy, in the Torah portion that we read on Yom Kippur morning, this covenant is renewed with all the Israelites. Moses is about to die and the people are about to enter the land of Israel without him. Moses says:

“You are stationed here today, all of you before the Eternal your God... for you to pass into the Covenant ... Not with you alone do I seal this covenant and this oath but with the one who is standing with us this day before the Eternal our God, and with the one who is *not* here with us this day... [And if among you there is someone who hears this and thinks], “I will be fine, even though I follow my own stubborn heart,” [know that it will result in ruin for everyone] ... For this command which I charge you today is not too wondrous for you nor is it too distant. It is not in the heavens, to say, “Who will go up for us to the heavens and take it for us and let us hear it, that we may do it? And it is not across the sea, to say, “Who will cross over for us beyond the sea and take it for us and let us hear it, that we may do it?” But the word is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it. See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil... blessing and curse. Choose life so that you may live you and your offspring after you!”

What do we learn about the covenant from Moses's words? We learn that the *berit* includes everyone, and that the inevitable *schmegegee* who thinks it applies to *everyone else* is going to screw it up for everybody. We learn that the covenant is understandable and doable, not up in the sky and not across the sea, which I think is a reference to Moses himself, who, after all, went up on Mount Sinai to receive the Torah and lead the people across the sea. Thus, Moses is telling them, I'm not going to be hanging around forever begging God to perform endless miracles for you guys. When the going gets rough, don't go all nostalgic on God and start whining, "Oh, where is Moses now when we really need him?" Look to yourself, and not to some heroic savior. The covenant is yours, and the time to start acting like it is now.

So, to review: Our covenant, says Judaism, belongs to each one of us, and yet, it binds us, through the covenants with Noah and his offspring, with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, with Moses and the Israelites, to all people, and to every living thing, as well. And we learn that the goal of the covenant is for us to "choose life."

There is one more dimension to this covenantal way of looking at our lives, and it's extraordinarily powerful. The covenant connects us to what the Jewish mystics called *Ayn Sof*, the Infinite One, and to each other. But the Covenant also extends through historical time: it's what Moses is referring to when he includes "those who are here with us this day, and those who are not with us this day." Or, as the

ancient rabbis poetically phrased it, the souls of all the generations of Jews yet to be born – including us – stood at Sinai to enter the covenant. So, being part of this covenant, this *berit*, means that I am not only bound to my Jewish family and my greater human family, but that this connectedness, this covenant relationship and its obligations to God and to others, began long before I was born, and extends infinitely far into the future.

When you take this idea seriously, when you look at your life through the lens of covenant, you realize that you are dependent upon your most distant, unknown ancestors, because without their lives and choices you would literally not exist as the person you are right now. And this Covenant connects you, as well, to future generations, and to descendants who will walk the earth long after you are gone, their lives shaped by the choices you make in this moment. In other words, you view your birth, growing up, maturity and aging as part of the great human story.

What powers or fuels this covenant is *hesed*, and that's our second Hebrew word. *Hesed* is typically translated as "lovingkindness." When we act toward other people with *hesed*, it's called *gemillut hasadim*. In fact, when we march the Torah around tomorrow morning before we read it and we sing "... 'al ha-Torah v'al ha-avodah, v'al gemillut hasadim," we're quoting a text from the Talmud. It says that *hesed*, lovingkindness, is one of the three pillars upon which the world rests, as if

on a tripod or three-legged stool. Without *hesed*, the world topples. No *hesed*, no world.

Let me take a moment to make clear what *hesed* is *not*. It is *not a feeling*, not an *emotion*, not the kind of sentimental, nonspecific, unthinking, “warm fuzzy” that, Herzog, the title character in Saul Bellow's great novel, dismissively called "potato love." *Hesed* is what you *actually do* for someone you love. And quite often, *hesed* requires exhaustion and inconvenience.

Sleeping all night at the hospital with your friend's postsurgical mother so that your friend can go home and get some rest is *hesed*.

Fixing a big pot of chicken soup after a long day and giving it to an acquaintance whose husband is going through chemo is *hesed*.

Making space in your heart to listen to someone else pour out *their* problems, even when *you* are overwhelmed with things *you're* burdened with, is *hesed*.

Advocating tirelessly for a special needs kid to get them the help they need, filling out form after soul-sucking health insurance company form, while listening to the horrible hold music they've chosen to play on their 800 number, that's *hesed*, as well.

***Hesed* is what you do out of love.**

Let me hasten to add that acts of *hesed* are not necessarily unpleasant! Rejoicing with a couple on their wedding day – called *hakhnassat hatan v'kallah* by the rabbis – is also a form of *hesed*. So is making room for guests in your home – that's *kakhnassat orhim* – and treating older people with special respect – that's *hiddur z'kenim*.

Does anyone know, according to the rabbis, what the highest or purest form of *hesed* is? Yes, the highest, purest form of *hesed* is called *hesed shel emet*, which means true lovingkindness, and it refers to the things you do for people who have passed away. Providing a funeral, lighting a *yahrzeit* candle on the anniversary of their passing, giving *tzedakah* in their memory, setting up a marker at their grave and leaving a pebble when you visit so that others know that this person is remembered – all of these acts are revered in Judaism. But why? The answer is simple. To use a phrase ripped from today's headlines, there is no *quid pro quo*, no *payback*, from the dead person whom we honor in these ways. We do it strictly out of love and out of a sense of rightness and sacred obligation.

But this pure, selfless *hesed* also extends into the future, similarly pure and holy because we do it for those in the future who, like the deceased, can do nothing for us, who cannot thank us, and whom we will never meet.

I want to tell you about two people who have taught me a lot about this kind of future oriented *hesed*. The first is my dad, of blessed memory, who passed away two years ago this past April, at the age of 95.

About five years ago, we engaged in a tug of war over his hearing aids. When he first started having trouble hearing and understanding conversation, it wasn't difficult, thank God, to convince him to get fitted for a pair of hearing aids.

Likewise, he accepted using a walker without drama; he wasn't vain about that kind of thing. But as his hearing loss became more profound, a tug-of-war emerged as I tried to convince him to get a pair of top-of-the-line hearing aids which, as I know some of you know, can run \$4000 or more, and that's **per ear**! Even though having trouble understanding conversation was making him miserable and depressed, you can only imagine how hard it was to get him to spend that kind of money on himself. It's not just that he and my mother were relentless supermarket coupon clippers, or that they were children of the Great Depression who had grown up poor, so that there was always a used, Lipton teabag in a little glass in the refrigerator, because you never threw away a teabag until it had been used to make two or 3 cups of tea and was completely drained of its capacity to even change the color of the boiling water. No, it was something deeper than that. Whenever I tried to get him to spend money on himself, he would say, "This is *your* money. I'd be *stealing* this from you."

What he meant, of course, was that a part of his *raison d'être*, his reason for clipping the coupons and making the choices he had made, was not only to “never be a burden on his children,” but also to have something to pass along to his children, their children, and perhaps even *their* children after them. It was only after he was gone that I began to understand this more fully, what it was to live a life significantly devoted to taking care of your descendants.

The other extraordinary person who is teaching me so much about covenant and *hesed*, is a 16-year-old Swedish girl with long pigtail braids named Greta Thunberg. I'm sure that many of you have heard of her by now. She, too, speaks for her generation, and for generations not yet born – for those who do not stand with us this day, to quote the Torah – by reluctantly but forcefully leading a quickly growing, international, young person's movement to confront the crisis of climate change. More accurately, her movement confronts my generation, and all the generations of responsible adults both older and younger than I, offering what the Torah calls *tokhecha*, reproof. She stands before the United Nations, and before the United States House of Representatives, and she says, “Don't listen to me, listen to the scientists. And if you don't listen to them, and if you do nothing, and if you allow global temperatures to rise even further, and cripple the earth's capacity to sustain human civilization, my generation will never forgive you.” If there is a prophetic voice in our time, I believe it belongs to Greta Thunberg, even as it

belongs to the young people of the Parkland community who launched the burgeoning gun safety movement, so that in the future, elementary school children will not be subjected to the terror of active shooter drills.

I want to say one other thing about *hesed*, and its role in energizing and sustaining the covenant. Our nation right now is awash in rage, angst and resentment, and understandably so. From neglected human needs, to government corruption, to racism, sexism, homophobia, violent anti-Semitism and white nationalism, to the abuse of immigrants and scapegoating of people of color, there is much to resent, much to be angry about, and much to worry about, as well.

Yes: sometimes anger is understandable and even appropriate, especially if it leads to acts of righteousness and compassion. But resentment and rage are also corrupting, corrosive and draining and, for the long haul, unsustainable fuel for fighting the good fight that devotion to the Covenant requires.

Covenantal *hesed*, however, acts of loving kindness that spring from connection and a sense of responsibility to others, *will* sustain you for the long haul. Not only that, but aligning your actions with loving kindness lifts you up, ennobles you, fills your life with meaning and purpose and brings – dare I even say it – a measure of happiness.

In the long run, for example, there's a big difference between civic engagement and political activism grounded in a loathing for a particular elected official, and civic engagement grounded in love and reverence for the system of government crafted by our founders, and given to us in trust, so that unborn generations of Americans might be guided by its balance and wisdom in the future.

I am not a person given to certainty about too many things, but at this point in my life I am certain of this: The joy of serving a noble purpose greater than yourself – the covenantal joy of living so as to preserve what has been given to you from the past so that it will be there for your descendants – is a kind of happiness unattainable by any other means, and it is the greatest happiness there is. As one wise person has put it, “There is nothing more beautiful in life than living so as to be a good ancestor.”

Let me conclude with the words of a great Jewish teacher:

“The fundamental, unifying principle... Of the Jewish religion is redemption.

According to the Bible, the human being is created in the image of God. According to the rabbis this means that every single person is unique and equal and endowed with the dignity of infinite value. But in history most humans have been degraded or denied their due. Judaism affirms that this condition should never be accepted; it must and will be overcome.

The Jewish religion is founded on the divine assurance and human belief that the world will be perfected. Life will triumph over its enemies – war, oppression, hunger, poverty, sickness, even death. Before we are done, humanity will achieve the fullest realization of the dignity of the human being... In a world of justice and peace, with all material needs taken care of, humans will be free to establish a harmonious relationship with nature, with each other, with God.

Jewish tradition has dreams, not illusions. It knows the world is not now a garden of Eden. Redemption is a statement of hope. The Torah offers a goal worthy of human effort, to be realized over the course of history. Through the Jewish way of life... The Torah seeks to nurture the infinite [*hesed*] and unending faith needed to sustain people until perfection is achieved... The whole process of transformation will take place on a human scale... Realization of perfection will come not through escape from present reality to some idealized utopia but by improving this world, one step at a time. Universal justice will be attained by starting with the natural [*hesed*] and responsibility for one's family, then widening the concern to include one's people, and eventually embracing the whole world. Perfect world can be reached only by an endless chain of human effort. The actions of any one people or any single generation are not enough. The Bible teaches that the Jews pledge their lives, their fortunes, their sacred honor to make this hope finally come true. By

their acceptance of the Torah, the Jews promised not to settle or stop short of that goal. This is the Jewish covenant...”¹

May this Rosh Hashanah fill our hearts with *hesed*, inspiring us to live as faithful descendants of Abraham and Sarah, as wise and compassionate heirs and guardians of a great and just American civic vision, and as the mindful ancestors of children we will never meet, but whom we love dearly and for whom we will sacrifice eagerly, nonetheless.

Shanah Tovah.

¹ From *The Jewish Way* by Irving “Yitz” Greenberg, pp. 18-19.