

I have loved you, says YHVH
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5776
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This year, I got a dog. Fishke is a 4-year old Maltese stray, and he loved us from the start. When we're home, he follows us around. When we leave, he camps out in the front window, waiting, and upon return, Fishke comes running to the door. **Do you love me? Do you love me now? Do you still love me?**

Fishke's only problem is our 6-year old son, Gus. Gus LOVES Fishke but Fishke is teeny and Gus weighs 50 pounds. Gus doesn't mean to hurt him, but Gus's version of hugging and petting involves smothering and yanking.

When Gus is too rough, poor Fishke yelps. He never bites.

Fishke loves Gus no matter what Gus does. Gus traps him in the laundry basket, and Fishke still loves him. Gus once tied Fishke's hind legs together and blindfolded him. I promptly sent Gus to his room and banned him from the television for two days. When Gus was released from time out, Fishke was waiting for him. **Do you love me? Do you still love me? Do you love me now?**

I think my dog is the purest Earthly example of divine love. I know the usual metaphors are parental love and romantic love, and that makes sense if you were blessed with a loving parent or a loving partner. But partners and parents get angry. Partners and parents want things from you.

My favorite psalm declares: *ki l'olam chasdo* – for God's love goes on forever, beyond time and space and all eternity.

I needed a reminder of that fact recently. On Thursday, July 30th, a Jewish man stabbed 5 people marching in the Jerusalem Pride Parade. That Sunday, one of the victims died – she was 16 years old. On Monday, I had jury duty. Really. This is an entirely true story. I swear to you, on Rosh Hashanah, that I am not making this up. I actually wrote the opening to this drash waiting to be called for jury duty.

Of the 1200 people called for jury duty on August 3, 2015, I was lucky #17, so I was called for the first trial of the morning. The charge was... 'first-degree murder.'

My mind started racing – Did he do it? He probably did it. Maybe he's a sociopath. Maybe he's innocent. Oh, dear God, don't make me do this.

After two hours of sitting in the courtroom vacillating between this internal dialogue and the open screen on my laptop, the judge got a phone call, and

dismissed us. I was off the hook. I should have rushed for the elevators, but instead I went to the ladies' room. And as I came out, who should be standing by the elevator, but the defendant and his attorney. And so I stood there, waiting, and trying not to be obvious that I was eavesdropping on an accused murderer. The defendant checked his texts, and said, "it's from my son." He proceeded to tell his lawyer how his son was a good boy, doing well in school, and how he hoped he'd go to college some day.

And then the elevator doors opened, and I got into an enclosed space with a loving father who had most likely killed in cold-blood. And when I was sure the maybe-murderer and I had parted ways, I walked to my car, and drove to pick up my son.

I swear to you, that while I was sitting in that courtroom, I typed these very words: At the center of the Torah, the literal middle, is a teaching about love. – Love your neighbor as yourself.

At the center of the secret Torah, the Zohar, the holiest text of our mystical tradition, is the Idra Rabbah, a book about God's love. The Zohar is revered above all other mystical teachings. The Idra Rabbah, also known as the Idra, has been called the holy of holies - the holiest and most secretive part of the Zohar. The Idra describes the body of God and the three faces of God – how they love each other and how they love us. As the Idra says:

"For us the matter depends on love, as it is written: 'You shall love Adonai your God' (Deuteronomy 6:5), and it is written ***'I have loved you,' says YHVH (Malachi 1:2).***

The Idra describes Arich Anpin, the highest manifestation of God, so pure it has no color and no body. Arich Anpin is only a face. The Idra spends pages and pages describing every inch of that divine face.

The Idra declares:

The Ancient of Days will open God's (sic – his) eyes upon you...It has been taught: If this eye closed for one moment, none could endure...This eye, the eye of watchfulness, is constantly open, constantly smiling, constantly joyous.

Just as God's eye remains ever open, joyously smiling and watching over us, God's mouth is ever speaking. Arich Anpin says only one word – over and over again. God says, "salachti, forgive me."

God doesn't say, "I forgive you." God says, "forgive ME" – salachti.

Ki l'olam chasdo – God's love is overflowing and boundless, beyond all time and space and eternity.

Don't get me wrong.

Tzedakah - Justice matters.

Teshuvah - Repentance matters.

I was reminded of this, as well, during jury duty.

Before I knew the charge was murder, before I ever laid eyes on the defendant, I was chatting with three other potential jurors. "They'll never put me on a jury", he said. "Why?" I asked. "My wife was raped and every time I tell the judge that there was no justice for my wife, and I don't have faith in their disgusting system."

Less than an hour later, the judge asked people to stand to answer yes to the question, "have you or anyone you know ever been the victim of a crime?" I watched this previously happy, friendly man stand up and give the judge a look that I can only describe as overwhelming hatred. Based on that look, if I hadn't known what happened to his wife, I would have been more terrified of him than of the defendant.

So yes, justice is sorely lacking. No wonder God asks for our forgiveness. No wonder God created teshuvah. Repentance isn't a get-out-of-jail-free card. In fact, in Jewish criminal law, remorse has no bearing on one's punishment. You did the crime; you do the time.

Yet whether or not you repent, whether or not you're forgiven, God loves you – no matter what. Despite everything – God loves you. Full stop.

Sounds like a Yom Kippur sermon, right? So why am I preaching about divine love on Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment? Today we're supposed to feel guilty while we imagine God on a throne, judging us.

But God loves you – EVERY DAY. Not just on Yom Kippur. 365 days a year, even on Judgment Day – God still loves you.

In fact, according to some of our traditions most secret texts, Rosh Hashanah is a day of love more than any other.

The Idra Rabbah describes a day when all three of God's faces unite. Not just the male and female aspects uniting in love every Shabbos – heteronormative I know. It was the 13th century. Stick with me here.

But one day a year, Arick Anpin, God's face of pure love and pure light, shines down on Zeir Anpin, God's face which is capable of justice and anger, and also on the face of the Shechinah, God's presence which we can sense. And all that love and light overflows. God's entire existence, in all its genderless and gendered manifestations come together, in one act of perfect love. The Idra describes it this way:

“When they unite, they are sweetened by one another – a day on which all are sweetened. Consequently, judgments were sweetened by one another, and those above and those below were harmoniously arranged.”

The Lurianic Kabbalah tells us that day is none other than Rosh Hashanah. What better day to sweeten judgment?

Puts a whole new spin on apples and honey, doesn't it? That honey is sweetened judgment. The honey of God's love for you. Not God's love for someone else. Not God's love in the abstract. That honey sweetens the judgment you deserve, because God really, completely loves you. No matter how big or small your many sins, *ki l'olam chasdo* – God's love is everlasting.

God kisses you with honey and says, “*salachti, forgive me*” “*for I have loved you.*”

So, you're assignment for tonight is to forget about teshuvah. Stop thinking about it!

God forbid the rabbi should stand on the bimah, on Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment and tell you not to do teshuvah. In the morning, worry about your teshuvah, but right now, I want us all to focus on something equally important that gets a lot less attention. I want us to focus on God's love.

More importantly, I want us to feel God's love. This is an assignment for me too, because I'm not very good at it. I KNOW that God loves me – intellectually, but I can't remember the last time I felt it. Not as an intellectual exercise, but as an experiential and emotional presence.

But let's try. You wouldn't dare not follow the rabbi's instructions on Rosh Hashanah would you? Of course not. Try. What do you have to lose? Just try to feel God's love.

Get comfortable in your chair. Clear your mind. If it feels comfortable, close your eyes. If you'd rather not close your eyes, settle your gaze on one spot in front of you. Sit up straight. Grow taller. Release those extraneous thoughts and distractions. Focus on my voice.

Feel loved. Imagine the honey on your tongue. Imagine the look of pride on your parent's face. Imagine your pet greeting you, lovingly, when you arrive home. Smell your grandmother's cooking. Feel your grandfather hugging you. See the look in your lover's eyes – you know the look. The sparkle in their glowing eyes that makes you feel like you're the only two people on Earth.

Just feel loved.

You are whole and complete and perfect just the way you are. God loves you, just the way you are.

Now, slowly open your eyes. Smile.

Right now, in this room, it all ***depends on love***.

I have loved you, says YHVH (Malachi 1:2)

It's from the prophet Malachi, chapter 1, verse 2.

I have loved you, says Adonai.

No matter what you believe or don't believe. No matter whatever you did or didn't do.

Ki l'olam chasdo – God's love is overflowing and boundless, beyond all time and space and eternity.

As the Idra declares, "For us the matter depends on love"...

Do you love me? Do you still love me? Do you love me now?

I have loved you, says YHVH (Malachi 1:2)

Erev RH kavannah/invocation for the hamotzi:

As we begin to conclude our service, we sanctify this holy day and our enjoyment of it with a series of brachot. There's a blessing of the day and a blessing of the sweet wine and a blessing of the sweet challah and a blessing of the sweet apples. But there's no special brachah for the honey. So I took the liberty of writing one. It's a joining of the priestly benediction and the Zohar. When I recite each brachah, at the cue 'v'nomar', please join in a loud chorus of "amen"s.

Hodu l'adonai ki tov, ki l'olam – Give thanks for God is good, ***God's love is overflowing and boundless, beyond all time and space and eternity.***

As the Idra declares, "For us the matter depends on love"...

***Do you love me?
For I have loved you, says YHVH***

Baruch Ata Adonai, eloheinu melech haolam hamotzi lechem min haaretz – v'nomar:
Amen.

Baruch Ata Adonai, eloheinu borie pri haetz – v'nomar: Amen

Nevarech et Ya, arbeh panai Eloheinu, yaer adonai panav ahavah aleinu, v'yisah
shechinah panav ohr aleinu, v'yasem lanu rachamim metukim – v'nomar 'Amen.'"
Let us bless Ya, our God of many faces, who shines the face of love upon us, and
lights us up with Divine light, and grants us sweet mercy. And let us say: Amen!

And may you never eat honey the same way again!

Shana tova u'metuka!