

Rabbi Lucy H.F. Dinner
Kol Nidrei, 5777

Temple Beth Or
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Love They Neighbor, Love Thyslf

I. Mira's Healing and the Love of Community

We are all due one collective sigh of relief, to have Zemer Lexie's daughter Mira safe and well. Judaism has a prayer for the emergence from a threatening event in one's life called Birkat HaGomeil. I've invited Zemer Lexie (and Mira) to offer the Birkat HaGomeil tonight as we give thanks for Mira's return to health. After Zemer Lexie (and Mira) complete/s the blessing, the ritual concludes with our affirmation of her prayer.

Lexie:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַגּוֹמֵל
לְחַיִּים טוֹבוֹת, שְׂגַמְלֵנִי כָּל טוֹב.

**Ba-rukh A-ta A-do-nai, El-o-hei-nu Me-lekh Ha-O-lam,
Ha-Go-mel L'kha-ya-vim To-vot, She-ge-ma-la-ni Kol Tov.**

Mira: Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, Ruler of the universe, who shows goodness beyond merit, and bestows favor upon me.

And we respond:

May God who has been gracious to you continue to favor you with all that is good.

AMEN

I have to admit that not long after I left Mira and Lexie at the hospital, second to my concern for Mira, but looming nonetheless, was how we would be able to pivot our music to meet the call of these Holy Days. It is not a secret that the first question I was asked when I interviewed here was: "So, we hear you cannot sing, what is it that you can do?" It is not far-fetched to see how we could have easily been reciting the Birkat Hagomel for me, our choir, and staff, as well as for Mira and her family tonight.

Instead, our Temple Beth Or team stepped up to recreate months of planning in the few hours that remained before erev Rosh Hashanah. Our choir, our youth musicians, Rabbi Citrin, our music director Matthew Shepherd, and our accompanist and so much more -- Susan Reinhard, all united to fill in the gaps. In a matter of hours, we had: back up support working with our youth musicians; the choir learning new music; Rabbi Citrin rehearsing High Holy Day music she had not sung since pre-ordination; and volunteers coming out of the woodwork to make copies, help rearrange set ups, and assure that we would usher in the New Year with the sacred awe that this holy season warrants. All of the while another group of congregants shifted their pre-holiday preparations to offer support for Zemer Lexie and Mira. **A remarkable snapshot of our community's loving grace at its finest; there to support us at times of trepidation; there to stand in for us when we cannot stand ourselves.**

On Rosh Hashanah we lived up to the Jewish ideal of community, that: *kol yisrael aruvim zeh b'zeh*. All of us are responsible for one another. It is the very definition of the most famous line in the Torah portion for Yom Kippur afternoon “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And it is the heart of true *teshuvah*, repentance, **more than just renouncing our sins, turning toward a path of healing and love.**

A finicky thing, that thing called love. Too often, we allow fear of failure to overshadow our propensity to reach out with love. Too often, we think we have to be stingy with our love, to only share it with exclusive people, to reserve it for an elite few. We all have faced occasions where, in relationships with an individual or a community, we responded to struggles by folding and declaring: this is not my problem; this is not my responsibility.

Growing up I believed that love was supposed to be reserved, that it was so special, so elite that it could only describe the most *idealized* of relationships, never to be bantered around freely, certainly not shared with a whole community of people.

I remember studying the classic novel “1984” in high school. “Big Brother,” the polar opposite of what one wants from a brother, contrary to a loving society, a community where everyone and everything is suspect. At the time the idea of a “Big Brother” community where instead of supporting one another everyone spied on each other, was beyond my contemplation. So, too, I thought back then that the year 1984 was so far in the future from my high school years that I could boldly say I’ll find that perfect love of my life, the love that seems so stingy that I could only ever say those words to one person, to the one, and only, I’ll find that person when the world reaches 1984. That much turned out to be true: I did marry that one I love in 1984.

It took a couple of decades more for the world itself to reach the “Big Brother” world of the book. The world where cameras are everywhere, not only in movies like *The Truman Show*. I bet at least a quarter of my neighbors have security systems with motion censored video cameras pointed to the street so they can identify every car that goes through the neighborhood. When you use a computer, travel on an airplane, swipe a credit card, text or talk on a cell phone, or present an ID, “Big Brother” records it. It is not impossible to live off the grid, but you would have to be pretty deep in the woods to escape all of the ways “Big Brother” watches over you.

II. Love your neighbor as yourself

How can one “love thy neighbor as thyself,” when your neighbor spies on your every move? This summer on sabbatical I studied several texts that address the issue of love. The first text which comes from Jewish mystical tradition, I shared in detail at Temple’s Board of Directors meeting last week. Rabbi Jonathan Slater offered it in a series addressing the issue of God’s love. It specifically confronts how one finds God’s love amidst the vicissitudes. It suggests that the “hindrances” in life hold the key. Reb Nachman says that: “God actually hides God’s self in the hindrance.” God who upholds both judgement and loving grace before humanity, implants a Godly presence within the hindrances – the roadblocks of our lives, the injustices that we perpetrate and those perpetrated against us. In order to find God’s love, counter intuitive to one’s first inclination, one approaches rather than avoids the hindrances. “Through the hindrances themselves, one draws closer to God because that is where God is hidden.” (*Sefer Likutei MoHoRan, I, Section 115*).

This day Yom Kippur asks us to face our own foibles, not so that God can rebuke us, but so that we can find God's loving presence, and from that sacred presence emerge into the New Year. The Torah calls Rosh HaShanah the Day of Judgement, Yom Kippur the Day of Atonement. Our fasting, our prayers, our confessions, are not for judgement on this day, but for recon-ciliation, at-onement. Facing our own faults, we open the door to God's love and to the loving community that accompanies us.

So, too, when our neighbor perpetrates that hindrance, when our neighbor is the "Big Brother," neither trustworthy nor decent, God's love hides there as well.

Recently, in my own neighborhood a friend of the family was visiting us one evening. He took a walk to smoke a cigarette, in respect for our family's no-smoking policy. A neighbor from around the block saw him and came out to confront him: "What are you doing here, you don't belong in this neighborhood" he said? "I'm visiting a friend, taking a walk," our guest replied. The neighbor retorted: "You don't belong here, get out." Our friend kept walking, clearly not fast enough for the neighbor who chased him back to our house.

What am I to do about this hindrance? Do I stay away because it's not safe to engage with enraged people in this day and age? Do I rebuke my neighbor for his offensive treatment of my guest? Do I post the incident on our neighborhood chat page? Or, could I waltz into the hindrance? What would happen if I approached my neighbor with love and empathized with how scary it must have been to see a stranger in the neighborhood, especially with the volatility of terror threats so often blasted on our news feeds? How can I best love this neighbor as myself?

III. ***What is hateful to you do not do to thy neighbor.***

"Love your neighbor as yourself." Rabbi Hillel teaches that in order to love your neighbor you must start with yourself. He states: "What is hateful to you do not do to your fellow" (BT, Shabbat 31a). His inverse of the verse, starting with self, reminds us that personal perspective colors how we deal with our fellow. If one does not love oneself, there is no capacity to love another. Hillel takes the Torah's emotional verse on love and presents a practical application. It is hard to quantify, much less command, what it means to love your neighbor. Hillel teaches that love begins by eliminating our own practices that we find hateful when perpetrated by another. "What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor." Parents often use it as a parenting tool: "How would you feel if your brother/sister did that to you?", albeit usually after rather than before the offensive behavior.

In the heat of the moment, especially with those we love the most, it takes discipline to reflect before we spew painful responses. Walking into a disheveled house after a long day at work, 50% of the time, I will respond with the command and condemn mode. The other half of the time, with a more loving frame of mind I turn to my loved ones and say: "it must have been a hard day here." Using the Hillel test, "don't do what's hateful to you," makes for a much more harmonious home.

In our homes and beyond, if before acting, each of us would check our own behavior through Hillel's lens it would go a long way toward restoring the grace so sorely missing in our culture.

While I agree with the great sage Hillel; nonetheless, I am not satisfied that not doing what is hateful to you goes far enough in fulfilling the commandment to love your neighbor. Love means so much more than eliminating hate.

IV. ***Love your neighbor so that you can learn to love yourself***

Another scholar I studied with this summer Dr. Melila Hellner-Eshed is a professor of Jewish mysticism and Zohar in the department of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University. She combines the interpretation of “All Israel is responsible for one another” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” She starts from texts from the mystical platform that teach everything including God is connected; therefore, everything any one person does influences everything else in the universe. We who are carriers of the Divine image, impact God through our lives, because that image of the Divine in us is also connected to God. When we suffer, Divinity suffers. When we experience love, the Holy One of Being feels love. Our relationship with God is not a one-way street, of God pouring out benevolence or meeting out judgement on humanity; rather, it is reciprocal. God bestows blessings on us, and God winces at our pain and revels in our joy. What humans do affects the Divine cosmos. **We have the capacity to impact the cosmos.** And, when we open our souls we can experience God’s love and hold God’s suffering as well. Loving your neighbor, transmits love to God, who in turn transmits love back to you. *Love your neighbor as yourself as cosmic carma.*

This theological premise, which I know will seem foreign to many individuals’ conception of God, may better be understood in human to human terms. We have no qualms accepting the scientific explanation of the common DNA makeup that connects humanity to one another. That complex physical double helix marks every person in this room. Mutations in one person’s DNA may have ramifications for subsets of generations to come.

Hellner-Eshed posits that the same holds true for the human soul. “All Israel is responsible for one another” is not only about our obligation to the community. The soul stuff of all humanity has common DNA as it were. When another’s soul hurts it impacts all souls. When one reaches out to a downtrodden soul with love, that act lifts up the soul of all humanity.

What does “Love your neighbor as yourself” teach us in this context: that when you love your neighbor, all souls reap the benefit of that love; even your own soul, even yourself. Loving your neighbor brings love to you, not by how your neighbor reacts, but directly as a result of offering love to others; you add to the love of the world; and your own soul receives a portion of that added love.

Volunteering with those who face similar affliction is the loving pathway out of pain and loss for so many people. When one offers love and support to another, especially from that place of knowing, the bond of healing runs both ways. Look at the number of cancer survivors volunteering in cancer centers. So many hospice volunteers, who have lost a loved one, bring strength to others at the brink of loss. The peer counselors at addiction clinics, not only help others find a pathway out of their addiction, they keep their own addiction in check. Through offering love to another, one restores that sense of self love, and becomes whole again. Loving your neighbor teaches you how to love yourself.

V. Expansiveness of Love:

On Yom Kippur we come face to face with our shortcomings, walking into the “hindrance” in our lives, we open the door to God’s love hidden therein. That process represents the microcosm to healing that expansive love can bring to the world. With no shortage of hindrances in our “big brother” world, what a difference: “love your neighbor as yourself” can make. Too often in the 21st Century loving kindness has the connotation of weakness. From the four corners of the earth the message that love equals weakness reverberates:

- From the 6,000 factions fighting each other in Syria, to the North Koreans testing their missiles.
- From the African Americans pulled over by police 5-10 times a year for nothing except “driving while black,” to the innocent police assassinated while isolated on patrol protecting our cities.
- From the religious fanatics from every faith who mistakenly preach that God ordains their persecution of non-believers; to the anti-government, conspiracy, theorists who hide from the world in armed bunkers.

These Days of Awe ask us to transform that narrative of exclusiveness and hate. What might our world look like if we ***replace that: Tough it up, fight the other with all you got attitude with the expansive power of love your neighbor as yourself?***

My youthful, high school, conception of love was so narrow, so limiting. It was well into my adult life, before a friend jostled my constricted view of love, when she was talking about her love for her son’s awkward best friend. You love him? I asked. I understand that you care for him because he is your son’s friend but you actually love him? She replied, I find something to love in every person I meet. What a paradigm shift that was for me. Looking for that spark of the Divine, striving to connect the love in my soul to the soul stuff of every human I meet, has transformed the way I love my neighbor and myself.

Love is not a stingy thing – love is not only for the elitist of friends and family. Love is what we need to tame Big Brother. Love is what we need to tip the soul stuff of the world back toward good. On this Day of Atonement we begin through finding God’s love in the face of our own sins. Through the year ahead may that journey continue, as we stare down the pain of our world, reaching out in love to one another, searching deeply to uncover that place wherein love resides. Feeding love to our neighbors we reap love for ourselves, for our world, and for the Divine.

AMEN