

Grace Beyond Love

This week's *parashah*, Torah portion, *Va'etchanan*, contains two of the most significant passages in all of the Bible: The Ten Commandments and the *Sh'ma*. The Ten Commandments have become a featured part of Western culture as well as a major motion picture feature. The *Sh'ma*, of course, is the foundational expression of Jewish faith and monotheism: God is One, the Creator and Unifier of all life. It is the first prayer and Jewish expression taught to us as children and taught by us to our children. It is literally written on the doorposts of our houses as a reminder of our faith and that God is with us wherever we go, at all times, in every place, connecting even generations long past and those yet to be.

At *Shabbat* services this Friday night and Saturday morning we'll read the *Sh'ma* from the Torah and emphasize the profound significance of this expression: Love. Indeed, the first word after the *Sh'ma*, after the declaration of the unity of all life as being from and of God, is the word of Love: *V'ahavta*, "you shall love."

That's all very nice. Yes, love is all you need. We've grown up with the notion, with the thought, with the songs that "Love is all you need; I love you, yeah, yeah, yeah." But as popular as it is, that's not quite capturing the essence of this week's *parashah*.

What could possibly be beyond the significance of love? As disconcerting as the notion seems to be, follow this train of thought for a bit longer. Note that the first word of this week's portion is *va'etchanan*, which is popularly translated as, "I pleaded." Moses is retelling the time he "pleaded" with God to allow him to continue as a leader of the Israelite people into the Promised Land. The word *va'etchanan* is a derivation of the root *chanan*, "to be gracious." It is in the reflexive (*hitpa'el*) form and expresses a plea for grace, a searching for grace, both from God and from within. When at a loss and after a loss, perhaps it is a bit too much to seek or to find "love." Off-balance and spinning from life's setbacks and disappointments, is it really love that we're looking for? In the shadow of grief and mourning, are we really going to be mollified by "love is all you need?" Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe after a heartbreaking ordeal we aren't yet ready for love. But we sure are ready for grace. We sure are ready for some understanding, some notion that will help us process, recover, heal, and take that determined step forward. Last week, we gathered to observe *Tishah B'Av*, the 9th of Av, the day of the destruction of both the 1st and 2nd Temples, a day of unfathomable loss of life. How poignant it is that just a few days later we observe *Tu B'Av*, the 15th day of Av, a day of love and romance. Okay, that's very nice. Romance helps fire up the motivation to dream, to seek, to embrace, to commit, to create, and to celebrate life on the most intimate level. But well after the dating and the honeymoon we still need grace. We need understanding and purpose.

I think the point is that it isn't necessary to love one another. The necessity is to understand one another, because understanding, I think, is a block to hatred. We mustn't hate one another. But love is not the only alternative.

Oscar Hammerstein II

In this world of ours that seems to be spinning uneasily on its axis, love would be nice. But grace is essential. Let us find ways to better understand one another. Let us be patient enough to search for meaning and purpose. Let us be respectful enough to give another the benefit of the doubt and resist the temptation of judgement. And above all, let us find ways to gift the world with a bit more kindness, compassion and grace.

Please consider joining us for the Erev Shabbat service this Friday (6pm). We'll roll out the Torah and join together as we read the *Sh'ma* and *V'ahavta*. And our Shabbat morning service at 9am is always such a delight. We hope to see you!

Shabbat Shalom!
Rabbi Rick Rheins