

Yom Kippur Sermon 2022/5783

Return to Love

On this High Holy Day journey we have been cycling through return, prayer, and acts of kindness. Teshuvah, tefillah, utzedakah. Beginning a month and a half ago with the Hebrew month of Elul, we began tuning into these messages. How can we return to our true selves? Our best selves? To G!d? What prayers do we want to say? Or *need* to say? What words connect us to the Divine and crack open our hearts, preparing us for the holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? And what actions can we take to bring kindness into the new year?

The Hebrew letters that spell the month Elul - aleph, lamed, vav, lamed - are sometimes seen as an acronym for the phrase Ani l'dodi v'dodi li, a verse from the Song of Songs that means, "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." So the month of Elul was an onramp to these holy days where we examine our behavior and set a new course to better connect with the ones we love.

Our tradition is filled with stories about relationships and we are reminded over and over again how important it is to connect with each other, with the earth, and with the Divine. Torah goes so far as to *command* us to love! From the end of Deuteronomy, we get the prayer that Jews around the world chant every morning and night - "V'ahavta et Adonai elohecha, b'chol l'vav'cha, uv'chol nafsh'cha, uv'chol m'odecha." You shall love your G!d with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might. How can we be commanded to love? Isn't love something we just feel? Like an ooey

gooey sensation when we see a beautiful girl across the room? Or the way we melt when we see a cute puppy? Well, yeah, okay. But love is also a behavior we can choose to practice every day.

“V’ahavta l’rayecha kamocho.” Love your neighbor as yourself. That’s probably the most famous commandment in the book of Leviticus. If we look at everyone we meet as someone deserving of the same love we want for ourselves, that idea alone could change the world. Truly.

“V’ahavtem et hageir.” Love the stranger. We are told that message 36 times in the Tanakh. Clearly, we were expected to forget and need frequent reminders of this lesson.

As children, we were reminded that we love our siblings, particularly at moments when they were at their least lovable. Our parents were preparing us for the complexities of loving. How can we love someone who is making us angry? How can we love the ones who are the hardest for us to love? This is our challenge. In the current political climate, this is one of the most difficult mitzvot for me. As I drive from our farm in Frederick County to reach the Interfaith Center here in Columbia, I pass several signs that (ahem) raise my hackles. Individuals who feel so passionately about past and future leaders that they display their names on the road along my path. Yet these names make me feel fiery anger inside me. I see them and have an impulse to stop my car and have a conversation with these folks. How can they possibly support politicians who I think are unkind, unfair, and much more? Surely they just need to be educated on what is true. Right? Hmm. What are the odds that some strange woman knocking on their door is going to bring them around to

my way of thinking? Not very likely. So I keep on driving. And then I have to figure out what to do with all that anger inside of me (and bouncing around my car). My goal in this divisive time and challenging election season is to return to our commandment to love. In 1957 in a speech called "Loving Your Enemies," Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said "Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." He went on to say that hating our enemies will only hurt and burden our souls. We should show love, compassion, and forgiveness. That sounds SO good and it is SO hard to do, isn't it? We have to take a deep breath and look carefully to see that there is goodness even in the person who champions the candidates and the causes that harm us and the people we love. We have to remember that a person doing hateful things is acting out of fear, ignorance, or misunderstanding. We must do everything in our power to see the divine spark inside the person for whom we struggle most to see it.

In the book of Genesis we are told that all humankind were created "B'tzelem Elohim" - in the image of G!d. This means none of us are above or below anyone else. We are commanded to recognize the divine in everyone we meet and honor them in the same way we want to be respected. Once we recognize their divine spark, our ability to forgive them gets easier. And when we begin to forgive, we open ourselves to love. And if we fill our hearts with love, then we won't have room for other things like resentment. It's all starting to flow together....

In this morning's reading from Deuteronomy, we heard "Lo bashamayim hi" - This commandment is not in the heavens. "V'lo mei-eiver layam hi" And neither is it beyond the sea. Rather, it is very close to you - in your mouth and in your heart. What is this commandment? *To Love*. "Asher anochi mitzav'cha hayom l'ahavah"- I command you on this day to Love and to walk in the ways of love. In the face of all the suffering, we are *commanded* to love! It is the reason we are here.

So let us go forth and love. Love our families and friends. Love our neighbors. Love the stranger. And maybe even work on loving the ones who are hardest for us to love.

G'mar chatimah tovah. May we all be sealed for a year of goodness.

(Ended with Elana Arian's song If We Loved Like That - V'ahavta L'rayacha Kamocha)