

RH 5783 – Love and Connection

Looking out into the world, it is not hard to see and hear of things that are disconcerting, and worrisome. There are lines of division that dismay and even frighten us, reaching to us from world events, world views, random violence, racism and antisemitism. This affects our lives and maybe even keeps us awake at night. The last two years has separated us, brought many into seclusion and isolation inside their homes. This has disrupted lives, and we can feel distant even from friends and family.

So I would like to talk about love today. We need more love.

In *Pirkei Avot*, our Sages teach us about love, love that survives and love that does not¹: *All love that depends on a something, [when the] thing ceases, [the] love ceases; and [all love] that does not depend on anything, will never cease.*

I think that we often speak of this as the difference between conditional and unconditional love, with conditional love not really being love at all. In *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm takes this deeper, saying that *love is an activity, a power of the soul* – that love comes from within us, not from “out there.”

We need more love in the world. Indeed, the Torah instructs us,

You shall love your neighbor like yourself (Lev 19:18) וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעִי כְמוֹתִי

We need more love, and more connection. And not just with those we are close to, like our friends and neighbors. How do we know this? Just a handful of verses later in Leviticus, we are instructed: *The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Lev 19:34)*

Caring for the stranger², is mentioned 36 times in the Torah. It is mentioned more than any other mitzvah. Why would this be? Because it can be very hard to do. We want to be with, talk with, and surround ourselves with those who are comfortable to be around. Being with strangers on the other hand, can be awkward, disconcerting, and even frightening.

Anyone who has ever been the new kid at school, the new person in the group, the one who doesn't look like everyone else, or the one with a different worldview or opinion, may have experienced what it is like to be the stranger.

Why the two commands: to love your neighbor as yourself, *and*, you shall love the stranger as yourself? Isn't this redundant? No, it is not.

¹ Pirkei Avot: 5:16

² In Hebrew, the word for stranger is *ger*, and occurs three times just in Lev 19:18. The word *ger* is used in a post-biblical concept known as the *ger tzedek*, one who chooses to become Jewish, and also *ger toshav*, the stranger who resides with us.

We draw lines around what we have, who we are, who is in, who is out, who is right, and who is wrong. We are given the two instructions, because to love our neighbor as ourselves is only part of the equation. We are to do more: 36 times, the Torah commands us to love the stranger. Why are we told that so many times? Because it's really hard to do.

Torah presents us with stories that challenge us. The traditional reading for today is from Genesis 21, where Hagar and Ishmael are sent away. Why are they sent away? The text only says: *Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."* This is not the most shining moment for our matriarch. And even Hagar's name remains in our text and reveals how we remember her, and how she was treated. Hagar literally means "the stranger."³

As many of our stories in the Torah do, this teaches what *not* to do.

A positive example from the Hebrew Bible is depicted in The Book of Ruth. Ruth was a Moabite princess – Moabites are idol-worshippers, they are the ultimate "other." Ruth married into the family of Naomi and Elimelech. The story, somewhat abbreviated, is:

During a time of famine, Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons left Bethlehem and came to the country of Moab to dwell there. Elimelech died and his two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Ten years later, the two sons died. Word came to Naomi that the famine had ended, and she and her two daughters-in-law left Moab to travel back to Bethlehem. On the way, Naomi said to Orpah and Ruth, "Turn back, each of you to your mother's house. May God deal kindly with you as you have dealt with my family and me." She then kissed them both farewell.

"No, we want to return with you to your people," they said through their tears. "Why should you go with me?" Naomi said. "I have no more sons to give you to marry."

So Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell, but Ruth clung to Naomi and declared, "Do not urge me to leave you, for wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you dwell, I will dwell. Your people will be my people, and your God my God."

So Naomi and Ruth walked until they reached Bethlehem, just at the beginning of the barley harvest. One day Ruth said to Naomi, "I will go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain so that I can bring back something for us to eat." "Yes, daughter, go."

So Ruth gleaned among the ears of grain, picking up the leftovers after the reapers went through. The field belonged to Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's. Boaz saw Ruth gleaning in his fields and asked the reapers who she was. "She is a Moabite girl who returned to

³ God watches over Hagar and her son, and from Ishmael arises a nation, the Ishmaelites.

Bethlehem with Naomi, she has been on her feet all day gathering sheaves behind us. She has rested very little.”

“Listen to me, daughter,” Boaz said to Ruth. “You don’t need to glean in any other fields. Stay here behind my reapers. And when you are thirsty, drink some of the water that my workers have drawn.” “Why are you so kind to me when I am a foreigner?” Ruth asked. “I have heard of your loyalty to my relative Naomi after her husband and sons died,” he told her. “May God reward your deeds.” “You are most generous,” said Ruth.

Then Boaz told his workers, “you are not only to let her glean among the sheaves, but you must also pull up some stalks of grain and leave them for her to take.”

Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. When Naomi saw how much she brought home with her, she asked, “Where did you glean today? Blessed be the one who was so generous to you.” Ruth told her mother-in-law all that had happened, and how kind Boaz had been to her.

“Daughter, I must seek a home for you where you will be happy,” Naomi said to Ruth. “Tonight, Boaz will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Bathe, anoint yourself with oil, and dress in your finest clothes. Then go down to there to meet him. Tell him you wish to join his household as his wife.”

Ruth did everything her mother-in-law told her to do, and went down to the threshing floor where Boaz saw her. He was pleased with all that Ruth said to him. “You are indeed loyal! First to Naomi and now to me. I will do in your behalf whatever you ask.” And Boaz filled her shawl with six measures of barley to take back with her.

“How is it with you, daughter?” said Naomi when Ruth returned. “Boaz gave me this barley,” she said. “He did not want me to go back to you empty handed.” “Stay here, daughter,” Naomi said, “Boaz will come and tell us his plans.”

Boaz did come to see Ruth and Naomi, and Ruth became his wife, and Ruth bore a son to Boaz. The child was named Obed, and he became father of Jesse, who was the father of David, who became king of Israel.

What is so important about this story? Yes, Ruth, a Moabite, is the great, great grandmother of King David. But don’t lose sight of what Boaz did. At just the time where Ruth, a Moabite, a stranger, gleans in the fields, Boaz takes her under his protection. He makes it known that she is welcome, and to be protected and treated well. He truly sees her – she is loyal, kind and caring. He opened his heart and took the time to find out who she is, he sees more than a poor person gleaning from the corners of the field. Just as Ruth gives her gleanings to Naomi, Boaz gives her sustenance, his attention, his time, and he takes action, speaking favorably of her to the whole community as well. The Book of Ruth is a story of *chesed*, love, and connection.

We need more love and connection in the world. We begin by giving of ourselves.

This love, this connection, comes from being willing to give. To give: of our ears, to listen; of our eyes, to see; of our attention, to be present; of our hearts, to be open; and our voice, like Boaz, to speak up for others when needed. These are all gifts. Rav Dessler, the Mussar teacher from the early 20th century, tells us that our souls connect with love when we give to another.

People are all so different – God makes each of us unique. We are different in the ways we live, in our views, our thinking, in our decisions, in our families. Living in a world with over 7 billion people is not simple. The way we look, think, love, and live is varied and quite diverse and remarkable. It can be unsettling though, to encounter what we don't understand, or don't agree with. But when we endeavor to listen to, learn from, understand one another, and raise our voices in support of those in need, we can begin relationships, and repair broken relationships. Even differences within families are to be expected, but these differences should take place *within* a vessel of love, not break it.⁴

We need more love and connection in the world. We need to give from an inner wholeness, an inner light. Our inner light can become dimmed when we wrong others, or when others have wronged us. Rosh Hashanah calls us to repair our relationships by seeking forgiveness from those we have wronged and reaching out to those who have wronged us – and this reaching out is a gift – a gift which brings us into the process of rebuilding bonds of love, and restores our inner light, and can brighten that of those around us as well.

It is a custom, on the afternoon of the first day of Rosh HaShanah to go to the shore of the sea, the bank of a river, or other running stream of water, as a symbolic enactment of the words of the prophet Micah 7:19: "God will cast (*tashlikh*) into the depths of the sea all their sins." The ritual of *Tashlich* is to symbolically cast away our sins, which allows us to drop our baggage, those things that we blame ourselves for, and blame others for. This is meant to accompany the process of repentance, of *teshuvah*. There are pieces of paper in the foyer, each printed with a question. Upon leaving today, I invite you to pick up one of them, and ponder for a moment your answer, and then place the paper, printed side up, into a bowl of water, here, or at home. I invite you to watch the words on the paper as it floats for a moment. Allow any baggage you have to just float away. I also have another gift, a handout for each of you.

One side is a *tashlich* meditation that you can take and walk with, out into nature, around a lake, or even at the beach; on the other side of the handout is some *Tashlich* humor.

We need more love and connection. We begin by giving of ourselves. It starts with us.

⁴ Inspired by and adapted from 5783 Rosh Hashana email message from Dr. Alan Morinis, the founder of The Mussar Institute.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner teaches us that we each carry pieces of a puzzle⁵:

There must have been a time when you entered a room and met someone and after a while you understood that unknown to either of you there was a reason you had met. You had changed the other or he had changed you. By some word or deed or just by your presence the errand had been completed. Then perhaps you were a little bewildered or humbled and grateful. And it was over.

Each lifetime is the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.
For some there are more pieces.
For others the puzzle is more difficult to assemble.
Some seem to be born with a nearly completed puzzle.
And so it goes. Souls going this way and that
Trying to assemble the myriad parts.

But know this. No one has within themselves
All the pieces to their puzzle.
Like before the days when they used to seal
jigsaw puzzles in cellophane. Insuring that
All the pieces were there.

Everyone carries with them at least one and probably
Many pieces to someone else's puzzle.
Sometimes they know it. Sometimes they don't.

And when you present your piece
Which is worthless to you,
To another, whether you know it or not,
Whether they know it or not,
You are a messenger from the Most High.

Love in this world starts with you and me. Forgive, and forgive yourself. Throw away baggage. Love newly, with a whole heart. Feel your inner light shine with love, connection, and hope. Raise your voice and lend a hand to help those in need. Share your puzzle pieces. May this year of 5783 be a year of greater love and connection for each of us, in our families, in our communities, and greater goodness in our world.

L'Shana Tova,
Rabbi Lisa Bock

⁵ Honey from the Rock, by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, pp 69-70.