

ROSH HASHANA
ALL WE NEED IS LOVE
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There are more popular songs about love than anything else in the annals of songwriting. Throughout the generations, songwriters and lyricists have written songs for their contemporaries. For my parents' generation it was *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* sung by Andy Williams; for my generation it was *All You Need Is Love* sung by The Beatles; for my daughters' generation, as suggested by Shira, it was *Can You Feel the Love Tonight* sung by Elton John. I'm not even sure what the songs are today for my grandchildren's generation. However, it is clear to me that love does make the world go around.

A hasid once asked a tzaddick, "Why is it customary to say L'Chaim before reciting a benediction over the wine? Is it not disrespectful to bless mortals before blessing the Immortal One?" The tzaddick responded, "The word *ve-ahavta*, you shall love, occurs three times in the Torah. It first occurs in the phrase, 'Love your fellow as yourself' in Chapter 19 in the Book of Leviticus. The second time it occurs is in the phrase, 'you shall love him (the stranger) as yourself,' also in the same chapter. It finally appears in Deuteronomy, Chapter 6, in the words that are familiar to all of us, 'You shall love the Lord your G-d with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.'" The tzaddick continued, "Why is it that G-d is mentioned last? Because if you do not love people, you cannot love G-d."

Sometimes loving people is not easy. There are individuals who are part of our lives and even as we recognize their strengths, we know their weaknesses and frailties. It is sometimes easier to love another from afar rather than one who is closer to you. Perhaps according to the tzaddick you need to start with loving the person closest to you because that is not always easy.

We are all familiar with what became known as the Golden Rule. The new JPS translation reads it as: "You shall love your fellow as yourself." Most of us are familiar with the translation which is used, for example, by Soncino Press, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." However, it is worth noting that the word "*Rea*" can also be translated as "your friend" and also as "your lover." In other words, while your fellow seems somewhat distant and your neighbor seems a little closer, your friend or your lover is someone with whom you are involved, sometimes intimately, on an ongoing basis. The tzaddick reminded the hasid that chronologically in the Torah this kind of love comes first.

One of the innovations of our daily Siddur Sim Shalom, and now our Mahzor, Lev Shalem, is found right at the beginning of our early morning service. Before we begin reciting the Birchot HaShachar, the early morning prayers, we offer a personal devotion which is attributed to Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Safed mystic, who began each day with the reminder of the command to love, believing that through its fulfillment redemption would be achieved. Following his text, we recite these words: "I hereby accept the obligation of fulfilling my Creator's mitzvah in the Torah: 'Love your fellow, neighbor, friend, lover, as yourself.'" Right from the beginning of our early morning services we recognize the challenge of loving

those closest to us. At the same time, we know that if we can't love them we can't love anyone else.

Love has a transformative power. It takes another individual and brings him or her into our orbit. They are no longer people outside of our circle of concern; they are now part of our ongoing need to relate to them as we would have them relate to us. Therefore, when we wake up each morning we must ask ourselves whether we are willing to take upon ourselves the responsibilities entailed in the words of Rabbi Isaac Luria's prayer. Are we willing to love and show respect, admiration, care and concern to those around us? Are we able to express our love and deep abiding concern to our parents, siblings, spouses, children – those indeed closest to us and with whom we have a tie that can never be broken? Are we willing to extend beyond our own individual self-interest, to see others as Martin Buber suggested in an "I-Thou" relationship, recognizing them as human beings worthy of the same respect that we ask of them? Do we allow ourselves to love others, exercising responsibility toward them, performing acts of kindness for them? It is a hard task and we must not take the responsibility lightly. Those of us who cannot love those closest to us will never learn to love those beyond our immediate circle.

Earlier this year we commemorated the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic. Most of the current generation knows the story from the Oscar-winning movie. Two of the passengers on the Titanic were Isador and Ida Strauss. Isador was business partners with R.H. Macy. When Macy died Isador moved into complete control of the store. He was extremely close to his brother Nathan and together they were the founders of the A & S (Abraham and Strauss) chain. They became multimillionaires, renowned for their philanthropy and social activism. Nathan was a Zionist and the City of Netanya is named after him. On a trip to Palestine, Nathan and his wife, Lina, opened a soup kitchen that provided 300 free meals to the destitute. While he was in Israel, his brother Isador, who was not as zionistically inclined, was travelling in Europe along with Ida. They decided to travel back to the States on the Titanic and boarded it in South Hampton, sharing a first-class ticket.

When the Titanic hit the iceberg, Isador got into lifeboat #12 with his wife, but he was asked to get off because men were not allowed to go first. Ida was invited into the lifeboat and could have spared her own life. However, she decided to stay on the ship saying in words very reminiscent of what Ruth said to her mother-in-law Naomi, "We have lived together forever. Where you are I shall be." Instead, they put their maid on the lifeboat and sat on the deck chairs waiting to die, which they did on April 15, 1912. Isador's body was recovered, but Ida Strauss was lost forever.

None of us ever hope that we have to make those kinds of decisions for love. Yet, we do have to ask ourselves what we are willing to sacrifice for those closest to us—our fellow, our neighbor, our friend, our lover? What are we willing to do to make sure that we love them just as much as we love ourselves? Are we willing to change for our spouse, when we know that certain behaviors bother them? Are we willing to allow our children to find themselves rather than mold them in our own image? Are we willing to reach out to a sibling who may not ask for our help even as we know they need our assistance? Are we able and willing to sacrifice our time, and our financial needs, to show our love and respect to our parents as they age and become infirmed? Are we willing to reach out to those who are our

neighbors with whom we may not have daily contact, but who are people just like us, with shattered dreams, frustrations and difficult moments?

Erich Fromm, in his book *The Art of Loving*, writes: “While one is consciously afraid of not being loved, the real, usually unconscious fear is that of loving. To love means to commit oneself without guarantee, to give oneself completely in the hope that our love will produce love in the loved person. Love is an act of faith, and whoever is of little faith is also of little love.” That is the challenge we take upon ourselves each morning when we recite the words of Rabbi Isaac Luria. Are we able to love another? Are we able to give of ourselves to another human being and take the gamble that our love will be unrequited? Only if we are willing to extend ourselves to another human being with love and respect can we expect the same in return.

The next level, according to the tzaddick, is to extend your love to the stranger, one with whom you are not intimate, with whom you have no personal relationship, but who is also worthy of your love and respect. Thirty-six times in the Torah we are reminded that we were strangers in the land of Egypt. Therefore, we have the responsibility of being kind to the stranger, and even going beyond that, to love the stranger. It is not simple, for in this case, we must reach out to people who are different than we are and sometimes may actually make us fearful.

Daniel Gordis has just written a new book entitled *The Promise of Israel*. In it he outlines reasons that the world wants to de-legitimize Israel and also discusses the great challenges of the Jewish state. In attempting to show how Israel is not so self-absorbed, that it does reach beyond its borders and help other countries and nations, he tells the story of Foreign Minister Golda Meir who established MASHAV, the Israeli organization that reached out to fledgling African nations as early as 1956. Golda Meir explained to her staff: “We Jews share with the African people the memory of centuries-long suffering. For both Jews and Africans alike, such expressions as discrimination, oppression, slavery – these are not mere catchwords. They don’t refer to experiences of hundreds of years ago.” In this manner, Israel was responsible for many agricultural and industrial innovations in a number of African countries.

He also recounts that in the summer of 1977, an Israeli cargo ship bound for the Far East came upon a boat loaded with dozens of Vietnamese refugees who were out of provisions, including water, and the boat was slowly sinking. Previous boats of different registries had passed the refugees, but ignored them. An Israeli crew, however, brought the refugees on board their ship and then to Israel, where Prime Minister Menachem Begin, ultimately granted them asylum and then citizenship. In the next several years, Israel absorbed another few hundred Vietnamese immigrant refugees.

Prime Minister Begin told then President Carter why he had done so: “It was a natural act to us, Mr. President. We remembered, we have never forgotten, the boat, the St. Louis, with 900 Jews, which left Germany in the last weeks before the Second World War.” He

reminded Carter that no country was willing to accept them and, therefore, Begin felt, that his first act as Prime Minister had to be to give these people a haven in the land of Israel.

Gordis writes that, "Israelis reaching out to the Vietnamese boat people or the Somali refugees is no accident. The sense of obligation to others stems from first learning an obligation to one's own family, community and people." Yes, it is true that today Israel is having difficulty with the many refugees that have left Africa and have attempted to find refuge on its shores. The immigration issue is a very serious one in Israel, there are no clear-cut solutions. But it would not even become an issue if Israel did not recognize its responsibility to reach out beyond its own individual problems and attempt to help others fleeing from tyranny and oppression.

It is not an easy task to reach out beyond our own caring circle and be concerned about others with whom at least initially we do not have a relationship. Yet, that is exactly what Jewish tradition demands of us. We must be sensitive to the weakest links in our society. We must be proactive in reaching out to those in our community who are in need of assistance and support. Wherever there is poverty, racism, bias and hatred, it has been and continues to be the responsibility of Jewish people around the world to reach out and be helpful. "Not in my backyard," – NIMBY- is not a phrase that is part of Jewish vocabulary. We are all created in the image of G-d and, thus, everyone is in our backyard and we have a responsibility to take care of them. We must reach out to the strangers in our midst, the outsiders, those on the margins of society, those who are disabled, those who are discriminated against, those who are refugees in need of sanctuary, those who may be exploited because they can't stand up for themselves. It is a tall order, to be sure, but at the same time, it is part of our tradition. First, begin loving those closest to you, then reach out to others.

The tzaddick then told the hasid that once we learn to love those closest to us, then reach out to those further away from us, we are prepared to love G-d.

Byron Sherwin and Seymour Cohen in their book *How to be a Jew* write: "While a belief in G-d is not explicitly commanded by Scripture, love is. Love is a primal emotion binding us to G-d and G-d to us. In the order of the Jewish liturgy, G-d's love for us is affirmed before our love for G-d. The paragraph before the Shema in the morning liturgy declares, 'With an everlasting love you have loved us, Lord our G-d.'"

How do we exhibit that love for G-d? For the Jewish mystics, love was present as a cosmic principle that unites all of existence from its supreme upper source to every manifestation that G-d has created on the face of this earth. It is an intimate relationship with the Divine Presence at every moment of every day. It represents the yearning of the soul to be attached to G-d's eternal presence. Most of us who are not mystics have difficulty achieving that level of intimacy with the Shechina, G-d's loving presence. How then do we show our love for G-d? Louis Jacobs in his book *Jewish Values* suggests: "The command to love G-d does not belong to the mystical or the ecstatic. By studying the Torah and carrying out its precepts, by living a life of justice, righteousness, and humility, man's existence is illumined with the light of the divine." He writes: "A lover is delighted at his opportunities for caring

out his beloved's wishes." In other words, living lives that embellish the Divine Presence in our lives, that are exemplary models for all to see, that is how we show our love for G-d.

In our liturgy, we follow the same order, first we recite the phrase of Rabbi Isaac Luria then we recall our exodus from Egypt where we were strangers and finally we recite *v'ahavta* - to love the Lord our G-d with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our might. We need to build up to that challenge. We need to show respect to those closest to us, to those further away from our close circle, and then we are able to love G-d by following the Torah as the three sections that encompass the Sh'ma suggest to us. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes: "The biblical love of one's neighbor is a very special form of love, a unique development of the Judaic religion and unlike any to be encountered outside it." He then tells us: "The love with which G-d created the universe is not just divine. It is to serve as the model for us in our humanity. We are bidden to love the neighbor and the stranger, to engage in acts of kindness and compassion and to build a society based on love."

In short, we build up from our love for our fellow, neighbor, friend and lover, to those who are strangers and then to a love of G-d. And, at the same time, it is the love of G-d and G-d's love for us which bids us to be kind to the stranger and to be considerate and loving to those closest to us.

We come on Rosh Hashana to challenge ourselves and to work towards improving our behavior. In 1970, Erich Segal published a book which became a *New York Times* bestseller and was translated into 33 languages. It also became a very popular movie. Its title was *Love Story*. Probably the most famous line that came from the book or the movie was: "Love means never having to say you're sorry." That is not the Jewish way. The Jewish way is to say I am sorry, I do love you, and I can do better in the coming year.

I am very fond of standing under the huppah with a couple ready to begin life together and asking them to remember two Hebrew words, "*Chibah*" and "*Chovah*." The first means love and the second responsibility. I suggest to them that love bears with it responsibility. To love someone means to be responsible for their well-being, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and in all ways. If we are taught to love our fellow, our neighbor, our friend and our lover then we have a responsibility toward them; if we are taught to love the stranger then that same responsibility applies. The two Hebrew letters separating these words are a "Yud" and "Vav" symbolizing G-d's name. We have a responsibility in our love to G-d as well. We must live lives on this earth which are exemplary, making the image of G-d ever present on this earth.

As we come together on these Days of Awe, let us remember the words of the song from my generation: "What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of." May this year be filled with love for our fellow human beings and for G-d and may G-d's blessing of love be showered upon us all.