

Feel the Love

L'shanah Tovah! A Happy and Sweet New Year to you and to yours. Following each set of Shofar blasts in the Musaf service just now, we sang "*Hayom Harat Olam: Today the World is Born!*" That prayer evokes the metaphor of a parent's love: "Today, all creation is called to judgement, whether as your children, or as your servants. If as children, show us a parent's compassion..." Like a child who feels held in the gaze of a loving parent, may we all feel supported by a Divine, loving presence as our lives unfold into a New Year.

I imagine that at many of our dinner tables last night or today, parents and children, other family members, or dear friends who have become our family through the years, will be together, dipping apples and honey, saying *shehecheyanu* over pomegranates or other fruits, and feasting on traditional family recipes. And even when dear ones can't be present, in some ways, they are still at the table. My mother lives in Jerusalem, 6,000 miles away, and hasn't been able to join us for yom tov dinner in years. But I will still be serving her brisket, and I always call her to tell her when I am making it. Fran's grandmother has long passed, but her cranberry jello mold may still be part of the menu. The tastes carry sweet, warm memories of people whom we love, and who love us.

Our holiday table has gotten smaller, even though our family has grown larger. Once, we were a family of seven; now we are up to 18. With three of our five children married and with kids of their own, we are now 10 adults and 8 grandchildren. But their homes are in New Jersey or in Israel, and it is rare for us these days to sit at the same Shabbas or holiday table.

Last month, however, it happened. All 18 of us were in the same country at the same time, and of course, we took advantage of the opportunity. My daughter Talia hosted a weekend-long Liben family convention at her home in New Jersey, and even hired a professional photographer to immortalize the occasion.

Well, have you ever tried to get 11 adults (Jonah's Israeli girlfriend, Nofar, was part of this party) and 8 kids to stand still and smile for a picture? At the last Liben photo shoot a year and a half ago, we gave up and photo-shopped in Meirav, who was then the baby. Now, a year and a half later, we have a new baby, Tamir. Either one of them could have easily ruined the planned family portrait. But, let me tell you what actually happened that morning:

We were waiting in the park in Linden New Jersey with Tali's family and the photographer for several late carloads of Libens to arrive, and we were already not relaxed. Everyone was watching the clock. Fran and I had to get on the road and drive to a wedding in Connecticut that I was officiating, and Jonah and Nofar were scheduled to fly from Newark Airport in two hours. Finally, Micah's and Noah's cars pull in to the lot, each with a distraught child wailing from the back seat. To our surprise, it was not the babies, but the big kids, the 8 and 9 year olds who were causing the fuss.

Ayelet is crying because she fell on the pavement just as they were leaving the house. There she sits, her arm covered up and down in Band-Aids, her dress slightly torn, and her dignity in tatters, refusing to get out of the car. She is inconsolable.

In the next car, tears are streaming down Dov's face, ruining the effect of the picture perfect clothes his mother picked out for the photo. His bare feet are stylishly tucked in to a new pair of boaters, and therein lies the problem. His mother told him that the shoes look better on him without socks, and Dov is hysterical because going sockless hurts his feet.

I look around. The plan seems to be unravelling. Sara Miriam and Jonah are valiantly coaxing and cajoling their nephew and niece to no avail, parents are trying to hold in their exasperation, and patience is dwindling. “Dov,” his mother, says, “Its ok. Just take the shoes off. You can take the picture in bare feet.” But this concession was too little, too late, and does little to calm either his anger or his tears. He is so upset; he is still choking out his words... like the broken sobs of the shofar.

Although I also tried pleading with the kids, I was of no help. Then suddenly, in the midst of the rising tension, the ticking clock, the waiting photographer, I smiled. I just couldn't help myself. In fact, taking in the whole scene, I almost giggled, which really would have gotten me in trouble.

I was overcome by an unexpected wave of appreciation for this very human family moment. “Yes!” I was overwhelmed by love for all of *this*: messy, unpredictable, emotional, *this*. And in that moment, any frustration I had with these two little people, whose tantrums were standing in the way of our plans, dissipated, and all I really felt was how much I loved them.

I just saw it: Ayelet's refusal to get out of the car was not stubbornness; her arm really hurt. She was afraid that the band-aids would ruin the picture, for which everyone so carefully planned, and it would be her fault. She was scared, embarrassed, and confused. She was being an eight-year old.

As for Dov, in that moment, I knew that his meltdown, though supremely inconveniently timed, was understandable, because it wasn't really about the shoes. It had been a very long summer for our Dovi. He spent four weeks away at summer camp for the first time, knowing when he left, that he would never see his old house again, because the family was moving to a new town, and he would be coming home to a house he'd not yet even seen. Saying goodbye to

old friends, and then to camp friends, he would have to make new friends. On top of that, the new house wasn't ready, so he spent the next few weeks of the summer bouncing between grandparents and babysitters. Now, after a weekend when all the cousins, even Aunt Sara and Uncle Jonah from Israel were all together, after the pictures, everyone would be going in their separate cars and leaving. Again. After being a real trooper all summer, Dov had just had enough.

Parents, and anyone who has ever cared for children, know that their agenda is rarely our agenda, their need for our attention rarely in sync with the time that we have allotted to bestow it; their interests, needs and passions rarely aligned with our own. That's understandable: we are adults, and they are not. Different parents do better with this at different stages. I am good with babies. I still love holding them; you know the way some of them just snuggle in to your shoulder? I call that nature's sedative. Fran on the other hand, had less patience with that stage, and couldn't wait until they became little people. And teenagers? That's when Fran was at her best and I felt totally out of my league. Fran stopped going out to any night meetings in those years because my job keeps me out most evenings. And Fran knew that a teenager might unexpectedly plop down himself down in the bedroom and pour out his troubles, but only when he was ready. That's what teens do – they take you by surprise. Fran knew one of us had to be there waiting, or the opportunity to listen and to parent would be lost.

And that's what parents do: they take on the commitment to try to understand who these growing young people really are, what they are experiencing and needing, again and again and again; even when we are tired from work, or preoccupied, or at times excruciatingly bored. We give them what they need. We give them love.

Danya Ruttenberg, a Rabbi and a mother of two, recently wrote a very wise book, called: Nurturing the Wow: Finding Spirituality in the Frustration, Boredom, Tears, Poop, Desperation, Wonder and Radical Amazement of Parenting. Ruttenberg suggests that parenting is a spiritual practice. Essentially, it's a practice of *loving*, and whether or not we are parents, all of us spend our lives figuring out how do *that* better.

What makes it a practice? Well, a practice is something we commit ourselves to do regularly, consistently, in order to get better at it, although we know that we will never fully master it. A practice demands focused effort and concentration, which has the result of sometimes finding ourselves in a state of expanded awareness, in which we become so in flow with the object of our practice, that we let go of our normal, ego-centered perspective. It's as if we momentarily become part of something larger than ourselves. Athletes know this. Musicians know this. Certainly meditators and people who develop a prayer practice know this. So do parents. And lovers.

Ruttenberg offers us M Scott Peck's definition of love. "Love," he suggests, "...is the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." *One's own or another's growth....* We extend ourselves, we stretch, we put limits on our own freedom, we sometimes do things we may not care to do because we love them and we want to help them become better people. And, in some mysterious way, it makes us better, more fully actualized, too.

Here's a thought experiment: See if you can recall, right now, a mitzvah that you performed for another person. Maybe you called a friend who was sick, helped a neighbor with a chore, or cooked a meal for a family going through some difficulty. Or, maybe you put on

your heavy coat and went out on a cold night to buy a special food that your beloved was suddenly craving. How did it make you feel? How do you feel right now, just thinking about it?

When we do even simple acts of *Hesed*, we feel recharged. It's as if, by doing for others, we tap in to a flow of divine, loving energy. And that's the first thing I want to say about love today. It is an unlimited natural resource. It makes both us, and those we love, better people.

Judaism actually has two words for love: *Ahava*, and *Hesed*. *Ahava* is the word we use for love that is relational, whether romantic or not. It's what Martin Buber talks about when we transform a relationship with another person from I-It, to I-Thou. When we see another person not in terms of how useful they are to us, but when we truly see them, in their unique *Tselem Elohim*, their Divine Image. When a parent gives himself over to what his child is experiencing in spite of the ticking clock and the frustrating interruption of a plan, that's an I-Thou parenting moment; that's love. But its source is in the quality that we call *Hesed*, sometimes translated as Lovingkindness. This is the larger dimension of love and caring, of Divine pathos. According to our Jewish mystical tradition, *Hesed* is the cosmic dimension of love out of which all creation flows. *Olam Hesed Yibaneh*: the world is built and sustained through it. But only when we ourselves manifest it. Sometimes, when I am angry or frustrated, or simply faced with a difficult decision, I ask myself, "Where is the potential for *Hesed* here? Where is the possibility for Lovingkindness? Asking that question, again and again, that's a great practice.

Here is another definition of love, this one from Fred Rogers, the Presbyterian Minister behind the TV show, Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. He says, "To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now." Even when she is having a tantrum, and unable to respond to your repeated pleas to stop crying and get out of the car

already! We strive, as Mr. Rogers says, but of course, we don't always succeed, because we are only human. It's in our nature to get tired, bored, distracted, or simply overwhelmed by competing needs. Like the meditator, who sets an intention to focus on a single point of concentration, but is continually distracted by thoughts and stories, or the yogi, who sets an intention to hold a pose, but loses his balance and has to return again to his intention, we return, again and again, in spite of our failures, to our intention to love the other. It is a practice.

So that's the second thing about love that I want to say today. Loving is a practice of seeing the other as she truly is, and not as we would conveniently have her be. It is a practice in which we are continually called upon to try again, to overcome the obstacles of our own egos and desires and fears. It is a practice of teshuva, of turning from the things that distract us, again and again, to the things that really matter.

The Rabbis teach us that Elul, the name for the month during which we prepare for the coming New Year by examining our priorities, is an acronym for the Biblical verse: "*Ani l'dodi v'dodi li- I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.*" Why link Elul to love? I think the Rabbis are suggesting that we don't have to be afraid to do the work of this season. We don't have to be embarrassed to examine our failings and our challenges because, like a child who knows that he is loved, we are supported; we don't have to do the work alone. *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li.* God sees our essential human goodness, even when we think that no one else does. Often, children can be so incessant in their demand, "Look at me, Mommy, Look at me Daddy, look!" But, don't they just really want we all want: to be seen, really seen, for who we are? To know that there is a caring presence that takes note of us, and loves us? *Ani l'Dodi v'Dodi li.*

Ok. Show of hands: How many of you are just a little uncomfortable with the words, "God loves you? How many of you have an instinctive reaction when you hear those words, that

it's not Jewish? That is sounds so...Christian? So many of us have internalized the stereotype that Christianity is the religion of love, while Judaism is the religion of law. Now, without needing to either compare religious traditions, or to get into some of the historical reasons why Christian polemicists in antiquity framed the conversation in that way, let me just say that we do an injustice to Judaism, and to ourselves, by internalizing that notion, because no tradition can have a monopoly on love.

It is so important to remind ourselves of this truth. Sometimes, when I listen to people, and hear their stories, I fear that there is an epidemic of feeling unloved, of thinking, in the deepest recesses of our souls, that we are unloveable. This is not a Jewish problem, this is a universal human problem. We judge ourselves harshly; we believe that we are not good enough, not smart enough, or don't work hard enough...that we don't deserve to be loved. Thus, we similarly judge others, become stingy in the love we bestow, forgetting that love is the infinite divine source out of which all creation continues to flow.

My teacher, Rabbi Sheila Weinberg, offered a meditation to a group of us in which she invited us to think of a person in our life who loved us, and to connect with a moment either recent or in the past, in which we felt truly loved. The goal was to feel that flow of *Hesed*, of Divine love, flowing through us, providing us with a sense of wellbeing, and connecting us to others through that love. We weren't asked to pick the *most* perfect, the *most* loving relationship, just someone through whom we could connect to a moment in which we felt loved.

The participants in this exercise reported that, on first try, they had tremendous difficulty: "Well," went some of the comments, "my parents loved me but sometimes we fought, or I disappointed them, or that person loved me, but then the relationship changed. Maybe I should

pick this other person, but I feel so guilty thinking about how I didn't do enough for him when he was sick, or...was there *ever* a moment when I felt really loved?"

How sad that we can't hold on to life's most affirming, loving moments. And how unfortunate that we forget the most important teachings of our tradition. What's the single most important prayer in Judaism? Yes, that's right: the verse, "Shema Yisrael: Here Oh Israel, the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One." Twice each day, morning and evening, the blessing that is our prelude to the Shma, is the blessing about love. "*Ahava Rabbah Ahavtanu- With a great love You have loved us.*" Or, in Rabbi Rami Shapiro's felicitous translation: "*We are loved by an Unending Love.*" We may read the words, but we don't hear them with our hearts. And perhaps that's exactly why the Rabbis intended for us to say this prayer twice a day: to open our hearts to the possibility of feeling loved, as a regular practice.

Now, what's the very first word in the paragraph that follows the Shema? Right again: "V'Ahavta," which means, "And You shall love..." or perhaps, "*then* You shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, and soul, and might." Do you see the message here? In order to be expected to love the Divine Image that is reflected in another person, we first have to feel at least the possibility of being truly loved, ourselves.

And finally, here's one more truth about love that I learned from Rabbi Ruttenberg. Using parenting as her example, she illustrates how love, is infectious. It changes us. The caring that love evokes in us can't be contained; it overflows and deepens our concern for ever-widening circles of strangers.

It works like this: You love your child. You begin to care about the children in your child's class...and the families that are connected to them, and before you know it, you feel

protective of all children. Even children you've never met, in places you've never been. Caring about people is like Lays potato chips- you can never just stop with one!

Martin Luther King once said that all people "are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." Parental love concretizes that- it makes those words real; it makes us feel that garment.

A pediatric surgeon reports that, although she always treated her young patients with tender care, since becoming a mother, she can no longer begin surgery without first thinking, "this is somebody's child." Similarly, another mother reports that she no longer watches violent scenes in films or television, because she is always thinking, "that could be somebody's child." Other people's suffering becomes less theoretical, because we learn about the fragility and sacredness of life through our own experience of love.

The Rabbis know this too, and they convey this truth in a teaching about the shofar. In the Mishnah, the Rabbis disagree about whether the shofar should sound like sobbing, or like crying; three broken sobbing moans, (shevarim) or a series of staccato cries (Teruah). As you know, we do both to satisfy both opinions. On one thing, however, they agree: that the sound that is supposed to stir us today, should be like the sound of a sobbing mother. Not just any mother, but the mother of Sisera. Sisera was a Canaanite general whose army was defeated by Deborah the prophetess. The Bible pictures Sisera's mother mourning by her window, waiting for her son who will never return. In an audacious move, the Rabbis even suggest that the 100 blasts of the shofar that we aspire to hear today, are an echo of the cries of that bereaved mother. You see, even Sisera, was somebody's child.

Love evokes in us compassion for the stranger. Even for people whom we will never meet.... Even for people whom we don't like. Even for the mothers of our enemies. Because

that's another thing about love. It gives us courage to face even the most difficult challenges, and complex realities, and to see a larger picture, because it reminds us that we are not alone.

Israelis certainly understand this. Where else is everybody at the store or in the bus stop in your business, but in a good way...ready to help? Strangers are not really strangers; when times are tough, they have your back. As a society, Israelis has refined the practice of *Hesed* precisely because the ongoing violence that forms the backdrop of their lives is inescapable. But the ability to respond with care and with love, makes us less afraid. This is the secret of Israeli resiliency and courage.

The columnist Peggy Noonan, in a touching tribute to a young man who died on 9/11 because he chose to stay behind, to save more lives rather than proceed to safety, puts it this way:

“The way I see it, courage comes from love. There’s a big unseen circle of love that hums through the world, and some plug into it more than others, more deeply and surely, and they get more power from it. And it fills them with courage. It makes everything possible.”

A Jewish mystic could not have described it better. But how do we tap in to that it? How do we become more loving, more giving? That takes practice.

My friend and teacher, Rachel Cowen, is the co-author of a well-known book called, “Wise Aging.” Rachel has been battling cancer this year. One day, a caregiver walked in to her hospital room for the first time. “I understand that you teach meditation,” this person said. “Tell me, what kind of meditation do you practice?” Rachel thought for a moment and answered. “Life,” she said. “I try to make my life my practice.”

Neither love nor the practices that help us to cultivate love, will wipe away life's difficulties and challenges. But they can endow us with grace, courage and resilience. We can

grow in our sense of open-heartedness and glimpse the truth of our interconnectedness. This year, let us all work towards *that*.

Oh, and if you are interested in what finally happened at our family photo-shoot that Sunday morning, the Libens pulled it together! All 19 of us, smiling for the camera. Check it out on Facebook... You can feel the love.

L'Shanah Tova u'metukah. May the New Year bring us and all our dear ones health and joy, *Ahavah* and *Chesed*. Amen!