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Love and More

Love. As a topic in Jewish life: not so present.

I mean. Think about it.

Love. As a topic. As a focus. I mean it's there. It's in our prayers to remind us and God of each other's obligation to one another and it's a huge sculpture outside the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

But really. As a topic and focus and over-arching emotion or motivator: not so present.

That's not to say we don't love or that we don't say it 4,000,000 times to our children every move they make. But when it comes to the Bible and our origins love is not a dominant theme.

Relationships ... and their complexity: we've got that down in spades. From Adam and Eve and the snake all the way to Joseph and his brothers to David and Bat-Sheva ... my goodness, is there a relationship in the Bible that isn't in need of the therapist's couch... speaking of which ...

When it comes to Jewish psychiatrists, psychologists, and writers-on-relationships, let alone sex therapists. We are totally covered. Like. Totally.

But ...

When we think about love, think about Jewish texts that come to mind.
When we think about love, think about Jewish holidays that come to mind.

I know. Shocking, isn't it?

We're really good on all sorts of things when it comes to holidays: seasons, renewal, the moon, agriculture, gratitude, praise, life. We've got memory down really well – and don't even get me started on numbers. I'm sure you'd rather I not. ☺ And on God ... there is SO much. And all the attributes of God. God as merciful, patient, kind, one who forgives, is just, ...

But Love. Our ancient texts are pretty limited. Save, of course, the classic: Song of Songs – which could easily be a love poem between God and Israel or between a man and woman. Either way – that one is steamy and dreamy and just ... lovely.

And really: There is only one Jewish "Love" holiday: Tu B'Av. And how many of us have celebrated it or even know of it? It's in the late summer and marked the beginning of the grape harvest and dates back about 2,000 years (mishnaic times). Go figure – a holiday about love associated with grapes.

So what texts do we have, when it comes to love in the Torah?

Love your neighbor as yourself. (Lev. 19:18) Always rather perplexing and seems to assume you love yourself first off.

Love him (the stranger who dwells among you) as yourself. (Lev. 19:34) Again, assumes the concept of self-love and is based on the idea that we were strangers in the land of Egypt and therefore as a matter of reciprocity, we know from being strangers and being estranged and therefore must love the stranger.

Love Adonai your God. (Deuteronomy 6:5) Again – challenging because what does it mean to love God?

And what about the connection between relationships and love in the Torah?

The first time we meet love in a relationship it is with God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac”. In other words, parent-child love is the first ‘love’ we meet.

Next time we meet love in a relationship it is with Isaac marrying Rebecca and (finally) finding comfort for his mother’s death. Not a big shock it took a woman to comfort him and namely a healing relationship after having been bound to an altar for sacrifice by his father, with whom we never see him speak again and surely in part because his mother died before he could get back from that fateful trip up the mountain.

But think about that – Isaac and Rebecca – over 20 generations into the stories of the Bible before we see two people in love. But ‘in love’ as we think of the term is not what our ancestors had in mind.

What is love biblically?

Love is about obligation.

Love is about connection.

And so when we are commanded: Love God. Love your neighbor. Love the stranger. It is about obligation and connection. Emotion is only a side-thought (though a thought nonetheless as witnessed with Isaac ... interestingly both times ... w/ his father and with his wife). Love brings with it a sense of providing and giving what is needed and remaining steadfast in loyalty.

Our Torah is really good on justice, on righteousness, on compassion. Terms like chesed & tzedek show up all the time. But ahavah (love). Nowhere near as prevalent.

And that is okay. And that is interesting. And that is instructive.

Because it means that when it comes to humanity, tribe, and God – love is about connection and obligation and less about emotion.

So when we see a past president of our synagogue approach us on Rosh HaShanah and ask us to feel a sense of obligation toward the community – it is good and it is Jewish to give to Jewish causes out of love from the standpoint of obligation as opposed to love, the emotion.

Indeed, when we do acts of kindness and justice – it is not because we love to do them. Charity is about love ... in fact love of humankind. Tzedekah & chesed is about justice and kindness and doing what is right. Love does not enter the picture of why we do social justice work or why we support Jewish causes that match our ideas of how we want the greater or the Jewish world to look.

And yet – how telling that the word associated with the stranger, the neighbor, and God is love. Ahavah. Not tzedakah. Because we allow that emotional level in ... and demand that emotional level to creep in. When we want to really be in connection and in relationship with someone or something else, we need to love, with all the many facets of love, one of which is understanding. As spoken by the Buddhist, Thich Nhat Hanh:

“Love is understanding. Understanding another’s suffering is the best gift you can give another person. Understanding is love’s other name. If you don’t understand, you can’t love.” [Thich Nhat Hanh, *How to Love*]

“Love your neighbor” because you understand your neighbor. You’ve been in her shoes or seen his suffering. “Love the stranger” because you were a stranger. You are a stranger. “Love God” because, well, you’re not God, but you are created in the Divine image. You understand complexity and the value of humanity and Creation.

My colleague, Rabbi Karyn Kedar writes: “Love is understanding. It is embracing our humanity, and by humanity I do not only mean the human capacity for love, but rather the human reality of imperfection. Perhaps this is radical. Love is not the desperate need to fill the empty ache of the heart. It is not the solution for loneliness. Love is not even the search for companionship.”

“Love is a gift, not a get. It is the gift of empathy, of understanding the suffering of another. It is the gift of a broken heart. When my heart understands suffering, understands my imperfections, I can understand yours. There is a mutual understanding, a common acknowledgement of the nature of our humanity. And our imperfections should be met with love and understanding. With as little judgment as possible. That is why it is written in Leviticus: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ We are commanded to have compassion for the humanity in one another. And we are commanded to have compassion for ourselves. Every diamond soul has its flaw. That is love.”

When we go to meet someone, really MEET them, and understand them, we have the chance to find God. We have a chance to find ourselves. It takes work and presence and calm and softness and appreciation and dedication and ... understanding.

You want to really love?

It takes a lot.
And yet it is so simple.
It is so layered.
And yet it is so simple.
It is complex.
And yet it is so simple.

Love is demanding and yet so easy. Love is about connection and obligation and understanding. It is about looking past oneself and yet never losing sight of yourself. Love is about seeing the other in yourself and recognizing your needs and his. Or hers. Love is about allowing yourself to transform. And be transformed without losing your soul or causing the other to lose his. Or hers. It is about transforming and being transformed to the point of expanding your soul to its fullest sense of soulfulness.

So whether it is marching with a Torah from Selma AL to Washington DC to highlight the turning back of voting rights' legislation or candlelight vigils held in Jerusalem after the attack on a Palestinian home by right-wing Zionists – Jews have felt the call to love and honor the obligation we have to humanity – to recognize the divine in the Palestinian and in the Black, to uplift justice for all regardless of age or gender, religion or people of origin. We are in search of ways to help Syrian refugees because we were strangers and because we believe in love, justice, kindness. We know our obligations and we must act on them. And on this Day of Judgment we know we will be judged by our deeds not our creeds.

The fact that the expression “v'ahavta” (you shall love) shows up but three times in the Torah and the three whom we are to love are: the neighbor, the stranger, and God tells us something mighty. We are all connected. We are all divine. We are all One.

Jew, non-Jew, God.
Israelite, non-Israelite, God.
The person sitting next to you, the person on the street corner, God.

There is no difference.

We may have different roles in this life and we may have different garments we put on ourselves (physical, spiritual, emotional) but we are all One.

The gematria (numeric value) of love (ahavah) is 13.
And the gematria of God's holy name (y.h.w.h.) is 26.

Coincidence?
If you want.

But if you want to find deeper meaning in this life of ours: the numbers instruct us. You want to find God? Then find love in and of yourself, find love in the other ... and you will find God.

Love + Love = God. $13 + 13 = 26$.

When we bring our sense of obligation to our neighbor, to the stranger, we can find God. We can find godliness. And we can find connection.

On this Yom Kippur, as we seek to understand our role in this life and in this world, the Torah instructs us very well. Love your neighbor, love the stranger, love your God.

And in so doing, you will find one another, find yourself, and find what matters. And bring blessing into this world.

With a definition of love being about obligation to the other, concern for the well-being of the other, understanding the other, I dare say the title for this sermon: #LoveMatters.

May our lives reflect it through our actions.