

Rosh HaShanah 5779/2018  
Relationships  
Rabbi Amy L. Memis-Foler  
Beth Emet the Free Synagogue, Evanston, IL

In the musical production *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye and Golda, the parents of five daughters, have just resigned themselves to the fact that their second daughter, like their first, is engaged to be married to the man she loves. Tevye, reflecting back on his own traditional and arranged marriage of 25 years asks of Golda, "Do you love me?" and Golda replies, "Do I what?" In a somewhat humorous, somewhat serious exchange, we learn of all the ways that Golda—in her obligation to fulfill her role as wife—has catered to her husband: ...I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow... But does that constitute love? In traditional, arranged Jewish marriages the relationship was not based on love, though after 25 years it might be so. As Golda outlines in the song, her love is expressed through a series of obligations that one spouse has fulfilled for the other and, after a number of years in the relationship.

While many of us in our 21<sup>st</sup> century mindsets see love as a feeling, love is more than an emotion. Love is expressed in action. It's what we do for someone else with whom we are in a relationship. So perhaps it's not so surprising that in the Torah we are commanded to love. Yes, commanded to love. The opening words of *V'ahavta*, the prayer we chant right after the words of *Sh'ma. V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha*, "You shall love the Eternal your God."<sup>i</sup> These words command us to love God. Also familiar to many of us, is what some call the Jewish Golden Rule. *V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho*, "Love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>ii</sup> These words command us to love our neighbor. Dr. Ron Wolfson, in his book, *Relational Judaism* notes: "This is striking. We are commanded to love God and our neighbor...How can one be *commanded* to love? Why this imperative to 'love'? Because love is at the heart of relationship[s]."<sup>iii</sup>

On this *Rosh HaShanah* morning we speak of the importance of relationships, a topic fitting for the Jewish New Year, and especially for us on this New Year of 5779. This year at Beth Emet will be one of creating many new relationships. As Cantorial Soloist Shawna Rosen, Administrator Marla Topp and I, along with the many members of Temple Judea Mizpah (TJM) enter the doors of this building, and this beautiful new Sanctuary, we enter not only a physical structure, we enter into a relationship with our neighbors. *V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho*, "Love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>iv</sup> This is what the Torah instructs us. But the truth is that these relationships have already begun.

Rabbi London and I met back when we were in rabbinical school in NY. Early in our rabbinate we attended a National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL) conference with other young leaders from all streams of Judaism. In 2007, with a few other colleagues, we co-chaired the Women's Rabbinic Network convention held in Chicago. Over the last several weeks we have closely collaborated with others. Rabbi

London along with Cantor Cohn, Klaus Georg, Barb Wertico and members of the choir have been working with TJM clergy and choir members preparing for these High Holy Day services. Creating their own ties, Bekki Harris Kaplan and Marci Dickman have put in many hours with Marla Topp preparing for everything else related to the New Year and the beginning of Religious School. Over the summer several members of each congregation have spent time at the other's worship service or attended other programs. Over the past many months, our lay leaders, including Ross Bricker and Helayne Levin, Patti & Mel Gerbie, Jeff Mann, Carol White, and Georgene Wilson, along with Jeffrey Butler, Rob Derdiger, June Gordon, Ken Gutstadt, Barb Hanan, and Seymour Lipton have engaged in multiple conversations to bring together (our) two communities. And now we are one. There are also new members of Beth Emet who joined just this year as well as those from Menorah who last year became a part of the fabric of this congregation. Let us get to know one another throughout the year by our regular attendance at Beth Emet Shabbat and holiday services, education and social action opportunities and other events. The connections have begun, and it is time to increase them and deepen them. *V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho*, "Love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>v</sup>

You may be familiar with the story from the Talmud in which a gentile seeking to convert to Judaism asks Rabbi Shammai to teach him the entire Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai pushes him away. The same gentile then goes to Rabbi Hillel with the same request. Hillel converts him then instructs, "Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to another. This is the entire Torah, the rest is commentary. Go learn."<sup>vi</sup> The essence of loving our neighbor as ourselves as Rabbi Hillel interprets it is making sure that we do not do those things to others, which we would not want others to do to us. Love is not merely an emotion, it is demonstrated by action, or in some cases, by not acting in a negative way. We can express our love to our neighbors by introducing ourselves to one another, and then present that new person to someone we already know to expand the connections. And most importantly, the next time we meet remind one another of our names. [What if we wore our name badges all year long?]

As we spoke last night about making the old new and the new holy, creating these new connections is also a way *nitkadeish et hechadash*, that we will make holy the new. We can deepen these connections by extending an invitation: to go for a walk along Lake Michigan, to meet for coffee, a meal or other outing in small groups or one-on-one. I personally look forward to meeting and getting to know more of you and deepening these relationships. At a Women's Rabbinic Network Convention, then co-President Rabbi Ellen Nemhauser greeted everyone at the opening program. She encouraged participants not merely to hang out with your old friends who you already know. "Make an effort to meet new people," she said. "Your new best friend might be sitting in this room, but you have yet to meet her." Our new best friends might be sitting in this Sanctuary, but we have yet to meet them. *V'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho*, "Love your neighbor as yourself"<sup>vii</sup> by making connections, deepening them and creating new relationships this year.

Then there are those to whom we feel are nearer than our neighbors: They are our closest friends, and of course, our family. When it comes to our relatives, the Torah does not command us to love them. However, the Torah does command us: *lo tisna et achicha bilvavech* "you shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart."<sup>viii</sup> The Jewish New Year is also a time in which we look back over the past year and think about these closer, more intimate relationships. With whom should we reconnect? To whom do we need to apologize? Who do we need to forgive?

Two families lived across the river from one another. Through many years they became like family as did the next generation, supporting each other through good times and bad. No one knows how it happened, but small disagreements arose, which turned into petty arguments and then into deep grudges that seemed insurmountable. Eventually, one man on one side of the river decided that enough was enough. He hired a worker to build a wall. A wall that would separate the two families, so that they never needed to see each other. That was how bad it had become. The worker came and heard the details of what the man wanted, and why he wanted it built. The worker said that he would be happy to help, and he was glad to work alone while the man who hired him was away for business.

But when the man returned, he was furious at what he saw, because the worker hadn't built a wall. Rather, he had built a bridge—a sturdy, simple bridge that went from one side of the river to the other. And just when the man, who had asked for the wall to be built went to look for the worker to yell at him, a woman from the other side came walking across the bridge. And with a hand held out, she said, "I couldn't for the life of me figure out what was being built here." "And in some ways, I kind of hoped that it would be a wall to separate us. But no, you built a bridge! to bring us back together to where we were before— like a new beginning. Thank you. I, too, will do whatever it takes to bring us back to that place.

Let us think back on 5778, and with whom we might need to reconnect or repair a relationship. Then between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, let us make the effort to build that bridge and bring the relationship, if not back to where it was before, at least to a new beginning.

We have learned that the Torah commands us to love our neighbor; the Torah demands that we not hate our kinsfolk, and as we know from the *V'ahavta*, the Torah instructs us to love God. *V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha*, "You shall love the Eternal your God."<sup>ix</sup> How so? Love and God. Can either of these intangibles be proven? Dorothy Kripke, in her children's book, *Let's Talk about God*, explains how we might be able to relate to these things we cannot see.

"We cannot see God. We cannot see many things. We cannot see the wind. But we see autumn leaves flying and dancing, all orange and gold. We see a bright green kite sailing the in the sky. Then we know the wind is there. We see what the wind does, even though we cannot see the wind itself. We cannot see love, but we know when someone

loves us. We feel love in a hug or a smile or a friendly look or a warm touch. We feel love in many ways, but we never see love. We know it by what it does to us. We cannot see God, but we do see what God does in the world ... We cannot see God but we know that God is there.”<sup>x</sup>

There are those who do not believe in God, others who doubt God’s existence. But as the Kotzker Rebbe responded to the question as to where God is, “Wherever we let God in.” It’s not a matter of place as to where God is, rather it’s time. God exists when a person is ready to open up and let God in. Regardless of one’s belief in God one can express a love of God. As Golda had expressed all those years to Tevye, the intangible love is carried out through tangible action. Dorothy Kripke notes love can be expressed in a hug, smile, friendly look or warm touch—all actions. Similarly, love of God is expressed by living our lives Jewishly.

If we take the words of the *V’ahavta* literally, then we would express our love of God by putting on *t’fillin* (as a sign upon our hand and symbol before our eyes) and affixing *m’zuzot* in our homes (upon the doorposts of our house and gates). We would recite the words of the *Sh’ma* at night before bed and when we awake in the morning (when you lie down and when you rise up). But to express our love of God is not limited to these specific acts. We can show a love of God through the practicing of traditions: by regularly observing Shabbat—lighting candles on Friday nights, reciting the long *kiddush*, prayer over the wine, that also praises God for making Shabbat a holy time, saying the *motzi*, prayer over the challah, before joining in Shabbat dinner with friends and/or family, coming to *shul* for services on a Friday night or Saturday morning, engaging in Torah study. We can express our love of God by participating in Jewish holidays year round. We can express our love of God with other rituals such as: wearing a *kippah* on our heads when we pray or study, donning a *tallit* at morning services, being mindful of what we eat in connection to kosher and dietary laws. We can express our love of God through other deeds of loving kindness, such as: feeding the hungry with our High Holy Day food drive, volunteering at the Beth Emet weekly soup kitchen or at A Just Harvest’s monthly meal, donating *tzedakah* to a worthy cause, reading Jewish Books, learning Hebrew or taking other Jewish classes. The opportunities are endless. For my part, this year I plan to engage in *g’milut chasadim* every time I food shop. Whenever I go to a grocery store, I will buy just one item more—with the intention of donating it to a food pantry. It’s my aim to make this small, but meaningful *mitzvah* become a regular ritual.

As we enter the New Year and strive to improve ourselves, making ourselves better than we were last year, what new *mitzvah* will we each add to our lives? Our relationship with God is our relationship with Judaism, and there is always room for our further enriching our spiritual lives.

It may not surprise us to learn that the Torah commands us to love our neighbor and God. What may surprise us is to learn that the Torah also commands us to love the stranger. From a young age our parents and educators teach us about “stranger

danger.” Yet in Judaism the Torah tells us: *Ve-ahavtem et hager ki gerim hayitem be-eretz mitzrayim*, “Love the stranger,” Why? “...for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”.<sup>xi</sup> Over 36 times in the Torah we are taught: “do not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

“Stranger” is one of the words we use in English to translate the Hebrew word for *geir*. The essence of *geir* is related to the word *lagur* to live. The *geir* implies that it is someone who lives among you, yet is not like you. It seems obvious that we not oppress the *geir*. All we need to do is simply stay out of their way. Don’t harm them, and don’t make efforts to make life difficult for them. Yet our tradition teaches us not simply to stay away. Judaism tells us we must approach the *geir*, which requires action and effort. In Leviticus the Torah also teaches us that the *geir* who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; *v’ahavta lo kamocha*, “you shall love [them] as yourself.”<sup>xii</sup> Some have translated *geir*, the one who dwells with you as an immigrant. You shall love the *geir*, the “immigrant,” for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt. Yes, we were immigrants to Egypt and our collective memory as the Jewish people recalls how difficult it was for our ancestors in Egypt. Others of us have a more recent individual memory of immigration: Our great grandparents, grandparents or parents, came to this country, or in some cases, some of us in this room are the immigrants. Love the immigrant, for we too were immigrants—not so many generations ago.

Many of us have become disheartened by news over the past several months in which people fleeing the dangers of their countries of origin have been rejected at our borders. As a form of punishment, parents have been arrested, separated from their children, and in some cases, sent back to their country of origin, without concern about the perils they just escaped. The response of the officials in our country in no way resembles treating the *geir* who resides with you as one of your citizens<sup>xiii</sup> nor does this treatment embrace the value, “love the stranger...”

Here in Illinois we too are struggling to make life easier for the immigrant. Beth Emet is part of a coalition of over 25 Reform congregations in IL, in which TJM participated as well, known as RAC-Illinois. The RAC, R-A-C is the Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement, whose headquarters are in Washington, DC. Individuals within RAC-IL overwhelmingly chose as our most pressing issues those tied to racial injustices and those which unfairly treat immigrants who live among us in Illinois. This past summer three bills tied to immigration passed both the Illinois House and Senate. The Governor had until the end of August to either sign or veto these bills. Many individuals from RAC-IL called the Governor’s office to encourage him to sign them into law.

The bad news is that the governor vetoed two of them, which would have 1-helped protect immigrant survivors of domestic violence and trafficking, and 2-protected immigrant families against ICE (Immigration Customs and Enforcement) arrests at state-funded sensitive locations, such as hospitals, schools, libraries, and the like. The good news, however, is that the governor signed one of them: which will prevent Illinois from participating in any federal registry program that singles out groups based on religion

or national origin. And there's more for us to do. When the Illinois House and Senate are back in session, ideally during the veto-override session, RAC-IL will be advising us what we can do next to strengthen Illinois as a welcoming state for immigrants. Let us be pro-active in expressing our love for the *geir*. *Ve-ahavtem et hager*, "Love the stranger," and treat the *geir* who resides with you as one of your citizens.

On these High Holy Days we reflect back on the past year and think of the relationships in our lives. At the New Year we think of those whom we love. We turn to our tradition that commands that we love: Love our neighbors, family and friends, Love God, and love the immigrant. In Judaism we are commanded to love. Love is a mitzvah, a commandment, which we express, as Golda and Tevye did over the course of 25 years, through actions.

*Avinu, Malkeinu,*

God, our Parent and Ruler,  
open us to love this New Year.

To love our neighbor, to love You, the Eternal our God  
And yes, even to love the stranger.

Now is the time  
for us to establish,

strengthen and  
repair relationships.

Guide us, God as we take these steps,  
and may 5779 be for us  
a year of new beginnings,  
a blessed New Year.

Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5

<sup>ii</sup> Leviticus 19:18

- 
- iii Ron Wolfson, *Relational Judaism: Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community*. (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2014), 240.
- iv Leviticus 19:18
- v Leviticus 19:18
- vi Shabbat 31a
- vii Leviticus 19:18
- viii Leviticus 19:17
- ix Deuteronomy 6:5
- x Dorothy K. Kripke and Christine Trip, *Let's Talk about God* (Los Angeles: Torah Aura Productions, 2003) 12-13, 31
- xi Deuteronomy 10:19
- xii Leviticus 19:34
- xiii Leviticus 19:34