

Mighty is Love

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A few weeks ago I received a package in the mail from Professor Thomas Oord, a Christian theologian who teaches at Northwest Nazarene University in Idaho. He mailed me two of his latest books because he read an article of mine and he thought they would help us launch a conversation. The two books offer an extended argument that the central virtue of Christianity ought to be love - not faith, not salvation, but love. Reading his insightful books (*Defining Love* and *The Nature of Love: A Theology*) it occurred to me that the subject is one that has a natural home in Judaism, and calls for a Jewish reclamation. I want to make an argument for why love is important as a Jew; what it is that Jewish love looks like, and how we will might resolve to attempt a more persistent and resilient love to heal this broken world and to bring wholeness to shattered hearts.

I do not need to tell you that this is a brutal age. All you have to do is peruse the news to know that this era reels from gruesome violence; that vast civilian populations are terrorized in every sector of the globe; at home the political system is stymied by rampant partisan viciousness, as Democrats and Republicans have lost the ability to learn from each other, and instead they caricature each other, yelling invectives from across the aisle. We witness examples of humanity's inhumanity in all regions of the globe: so called "honor" killings, terrorism so prevalent that the newspapers no longer use that word to describe the people who assault innocents and who murder children. Slavery, which we once thought was relegated to the 19th Century, is now practiced in most parts of the world, especially victimizing children and women. There is ubiquitous sexual predation; we see bigotry based on orientation, or faith, or skin color, or ethnicity, or place of origin. The list goes on and

on and on, of people assaulted by the violence of others, and as a result, feeling increasingly lonely, lacking in community, lacking in belonging, and lacking in meaning. The cycle spirals out: the more people fear, the more they give into hate. The more vulnerable they feel, the more they hate. The more ruthless and unconnected, the greater their rage and hatred. Adrift in meaninglessness, they confuse hatred for purpose, and multitudes cling to their desperate disdain of those they don't really know as a way of anesthetizing their own fragility. Terrorists and extremists feed on that fear and desperation. They suck strength from the way people feel assaulted, misunderstood, or at risk, causing people to feel further victimized. The cycle begins again.

We Jews know that same reality from our own history, both ancient and recent. We are told that we were slaves in Egypt and outcasts; we know that we were to the Egyptian overlords *to'evot* - abominations - and so we caricatured them as idolators and they caricatured us degraded. We construed our encounter with Egypt as a cosmic battle between good and evil. Throughout our ages there have been an endless series of people who have beaten, raped, and murdered Jews simply for being Jews, and that same Antisemitic distortion and violence continues in our own time around the world, most especially, I believe, in a level of hatred against the State of Israel and calls for its destruction that can only be characterized as insane. Meanwhile we Jews also make choices that contribute to the victimization of others even as we attempt to transcend our own victimization.

The need for love - strong and abiding - is so pressing because the hatred is so great. Judaism's response to hatred has always been to redouble our efforts at love. To be able to love more persistently than those who hate; more resiliently than they fear; to answer acts of violence with acts of resolute justice; to be able to stand for values of righteousness and decency and inclusion in places of terror and of fear, and of exclusion. It is time to reclaim

chesed, covenantal love, as the imperative of this age, and to assert *chesed* as the central Jewish religious value. We need to talk about love.

Love is the Antidote to Hate

Why is love the antidote to fear and to hate? Scripture tells us, “*olam chesed yibaneh* - I will build this world with love (Psalm 89:3).” The cosmic and biological force for building a new and a better world is love. Supernovae give of their core to spawn new generations of galaxies and to forge the elements that make life possible. Life clammers toward complexity and consciousness by transmitting love and life to new generations and new expressions of life. Mammalian parents cradling their young understand the redemptive power of love. Children clasping the arms of an elderly grandparent understand the redemptive power of love. Every one of us in churches, synagogues, mosques and temples read lyrical liturgical poems of love, and secular and religious alike soar to the creative efforts of artists across the centuries who share their love in music, sculpture, drama, and in words.

Only when people feel valued, recognized, affirmed, only then can we take the risk to see the humanity of the people around us. Jewish tradition understands that insight and cherishes knowing that we have been chosen by God as precisely what gives the Jewish people our resilience, generosity, and fortitude. It is only through love that we can, in fact, become open to the needs of other people to affirm their humanity, however much they may belittle their own. The story is told of one of the great Hassidic rabbis in the late 1700s, a man named Rebbe Moshe Lieb Erblich, who is also known as a Sassover rav:

The Sassover Rebbe enters an inn, and sits beside two local peasants. As the two peasants sit at the bar and drink, they begin to fall into a drunken stupor. One turns to his comrade and says, “Tell me, friend, do you love me?” His colleague responds, “Of course I love you. We're drinking companions. Naturally I love you.” Then the

first one said to his friend, "Then tell me, friend, what causes me pain?" His colleague said, "How should I know what hurts you? I'm just your drinking buddy." He said, "If you loved me you would know what causes me pain."

It is told that from that day on, every time the Sassover Rebbe taught, he taught his students that to love another human being means to know what causes them pain, to know what makes them suffer, to know what makes them hurt. And it is a small step from knowing what it is that causes someone's heart to break, to feeling mobilized to do something to alleviate the pain.

Another story about the Sassover rebbe:

It is told that on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, the Sassover's congregants were sitting in the shul waiting for the services to start - but no rabbi. One woman decided that she was close enough to her home that she could leave the synagogue quickly, check in on her child, make sure that he was safe and comfortable, and then she could rush back; no one would notice. She ran home, opened the door to her hut, and there, sitting next to her child's crib, was the rabbi, cradling the sleeping child in his arms. He looked up at her and said, "I was rushing to get to shul on time, and I heard crying coming from your house. As I entered the house I saw that your child was awake and scared. So I rocked him in my arms and we sang together until he fell asleep. By then I had forgotten what day it is today."

What kind of a great tradition tells a story about a rabbi who forgets that it is Yom Kippur?!? What an amazing heritage recounts the tale of a *tzaddik*, one of the righteous, who thinks that rocking a baby to sleep is more important than leading services?!? What a beautiful and wise pathway to understand that it is in holding each other, in singing together, that we

fashion the kind of world in which we aspire to live. Perhaps that is why *Shir Ha-Shirim* - the greatest love song of all time - and the book the ancient rabbis tell us the Bible's most sacred, teaches us "love is as strong as death, and as mighty as *sheol*."

In an age teeming with merchants of death, in an age in which there are people who seek to impose a living hell on their fellow human beings, we must respond with a redoubled *ahavah*, a redoubled love. We must love stronger than they hate. We must love longer than they hate. We must teach them that our *chesed* will draw out their poison.

What Kind of Love Can Save?

It is said that one can tell a lot about a culture by its vocabulary. I don't speak Eskimo languages, so I can't verify the popular claim that Eskimos have dozens of words for snow. But I do know that we Jews have inherited many ways to say love. I have already utilized the first:

- ❖ *Ahavah* is, simply, love.
- ❖ *Achvah*, the kind of fraternal brother/sister love that one feels for someone who understands your soul.
- ❖ *Rachamim*, a kind of love that comes from the word *rechem*, a womb. It is a mothering love, and we even affirm that mother-love is so important that the Talmud refers to God as *Rachamana*, the womb-like one who births new worlds.
- ❖ *Chafetz* is desire, as in "*mi-ha-ish heh-hafaytz chaim*, who is the person who desires life?"
- ❖ *Ratzah* is will, as in *Yehi ratzon ... may it be your will, Lord our God, to grant us a sweet and a happy year.*
- ❖ *Hedvah* is passion.

- ❖ *Reut* is friendship.
- ❖ *Chibah* is longing, yearning.
- ❖ *Chashak* is desire.
- ❖ *Yedid* is beloved.
- ❖ *Chanan* is sweetness.
- ❖ *Chesed*, most frequently mentioned of all, is lovingkindness.

Permit me to point out an interesting characteristic about *chesed*, and in fact, about all of these loves. They do not refer simply to internal feelings. They are not just a kind of emotion. If all you do is feel a warm burning in your heart, swallow some Tums©, lie down, and the feeling will go away. Love is not love if it does not generate empathy, well wishes, and deeds of lovingkindness. That is why the Bible almost always precedes the word *chesed* with the verb, *oseh*, to do. *Chesed* is not merely something you feel, *chesed* is something you do for the people you love.

Judaism understands love to be covenantal – the dynamic and persistent integration of the inner emotion/virtues of affection, empathy, desire, yearning and delight with deeds of *tzedek* (justice), *shalom* (wholeness/integrity), and *berakhah* (blessing/wellbeing).

Chesed is covenantal; it is always about relationship. Love takes place between two parties, not internally within a single individual. *Chesed* is dynamic, meaning it is always changing, open to integrating new insights from the world and the covenantal partner; and it is persistent. Love does not back down; it neither retreats nor surrenders; and *chesed* integrates and harmonizes emotions and behavior, specifically the emotions of affection,

empathy, desire, yearning, and delight with three great offerings of deed: the rubrics of *tzedek*/justice, of *shalom*/peace, and of well being/*berakhah*.

Chesed is Covenantal

That definition is a mouthful, and it will reward us to analyze it's component parts in turn.

Jewish Love is Covenantal. Covenants are not necessarily restricted to equal parties. Kings and vassals are not equal, yet they provide the sociopolitical context for the biblical covenant. God and the Jewish People do not claim to be equal. But they do insist on the ability to bridge the chasm of disparity with relationship, and in relationship one may stand as a partner even with someone who is not your equal. Love that it spans that gulf, and unequals are able to stand in partnership and in dignity together, despite their differences; perhaps because of their distinctiveness. Our entire tradition is a recurrent outpouring of covenantal love, so that God creates the world, we are told, in order to have an object to love. As if that isn't enough, God rises up against Pharaoh and brings us to freedom, because God so loves our ancestors. And then as if that isn't enough, God brings us to the foot of Mt. Sinai, and there offers us a covenantal contract, which the rabbis tell us is a *Ketubbah*, a wedding contract. The wedding contract sealing the relationship between the Jewish people and God is the very *Sefer Torah*, the Torah scrolls, we read from. Ours is an ancient tradition of covenantal love. And strikingly, covenantal love is very different than popular culture's portrayal of love, in which love is the pitter-patter of a heart, but that pitter-patter only lasts as long as it takes to cook a pop tart. Five minutes later, our attention drifts to some other infatuation. So we live in a culture with all these romances, passionate beginnings and frequent flammable finales. We read about the various stars and their love affairs, and we can read about their breakups and their new love affairs. That superficial, provisional

appetite is not Covenantal love. Covenantal love, we are told, nurtures understanding and generosity; seeing the best in your lover; seeing the best in your children; in your community; in humanity; in the world; and then with similar generosity, sharing in their struggles; sharing in their efforts.

Such covenantal love is both dynamic and persistent. Love is sometimes misunderstood as a fleeting fad or passion. Or even worse, it can be taken to be a cool intellectual assessment of value. Between the incinerating heat of passion and the icy chill of assessment, there is no room for a love that lives. Jewish love is alive, which means always open to change, always in relationship. As the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig reminds us, “Love brings to life whatever is dead around us.”

Nobody can be in a relationship without being open to change. Ask any parent, and they will affirm that what it means to be a child's parent is different now than it was a year ago. And it will be different, thank God, a year hence. Love alters when it finds alteration - a responsive vulnerability, but it must also be persistent. When your child presents you with a challenge, it is your love that will sustain the child, providing the strength to overcome. It is that yearning for life, for wholeness, and for connection that allows us to withstand life's disappointments, pains, and brutality. This our enemies do not understand. They rely on force. They rely on fear. They rely on terror. These traits are static and they shatter from their brittleness. But love, expressed diligently and persistently, will wear them down.

Chesed is the integration of values and emotions with deeds. One of the defining characteristics of every living creature is homeostasis, the ability to maintain a consistent, internal environment despite an external environment that changes. That ability to integrate is the hallmark both of being alive and of having character. Love is the ability to integrate all our powerful emotions and in consistent empathic behavior. Our emotions

inspire us to act. Our actions hone and habituate our feelings. The cycle is never static and never ending. The cascade of feeling to behavior to elevated feeling to ennobled behavior spirals us toward infinity. “I love (*ahavat*) you, says God, with an everlasting love, therefore I continue my lovingkindness (*chesed*) to you (Jeremiah 31:2).”

Love (*ahavah*) ripens as lovingkindness (*chesed*), primarily in three clusters:

The first is tzedek, justice. The symbol of *Tzedek* is the scale evenly, tentatively balanced. Judaism understands that love and justice are not conflicting values. They are dual expressions of one core value, as light is both particle and wave. Indeed, Judaism affirms that love is the source and the root from which nourishes justice, while justice is the fruit and the flower of determined, abiding love. Jewish tradition reminds us, “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of a stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt (Exodus 23:9).” Or in sage advice attributed to an ancient Jewish philosopher, Philo, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” We know that *chesed* results in acts of caring and of justice. Covenant love is not weak; it does not tolerate a world in which there are no rules, no consequences. *Chesed* is resolute, strong, insistent, and fair. But it is, above all, love.

The second great cluster is shalom, which is understood as peace, but it means so much more than merely peace. *Shalom* comes from the Hebrew word, *shalem*, which means wholeness, integrity. The Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza writes, “Peace is not the absence of war; it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice.” Love must be grounded in the entirety of who we are - our memories, character, experiences, body, temperament, and aspirations. And our love must be grounded in our integrity - in the authentic selves we are in private and in public. As the Hasidic master, Rabbi Simcha Bunim told his students, “You cannot find peace anywhere if you do not find it

in yourself.” The wholeness and integrity of shalom means not making yourself small because others would have you shrink from your own greatness. *Shleimut*, wholeness, means offering to the world the fullness of who you are at your best: your beauty as you are, your greatness as you are. That shleimut means inviting others to rise similarly to their unique greatness. Jewish tradition understands that the value of *Shalom* is an act of love so significant, that it is nothing less than messianic. It will advance the age of universal harmony if we practice shleimut with resolute determination: “If you fulfill the law of kindness to birds, you will fulfill also the law of freeing the slaves ... and you will thereby hasten the advent of the coming messiah (Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:7).”

Finally, the third great cluster is the value of Berakhah - of blessing and wellbeing. There is so much bounty manifest in this world, a harvest which we did nothing to deserve. We were simply born into a world that was prepared across the millennia for our arrival. Our task in the world is to savor the bounty, to delight in it, to steward it, and to help each other to do the same. We are make of ourselves a blessing and commit to being grateful for the blessings. That is why the structure of Jewish prayer always starts *Baruch Attah*. *Baruch*, in the blessing formula, does not mean blessed literally. God does not need our blessing. God is the Source of all blessing, the fount of all bounty. So we start our berakhah, our spur to mindfulness by noting: You, God, are bountiful, *baruch Attah*. After that general admission we then specify God’s particular lovingkindness of that occasion: You are bountiful for giving us Torah ...You are bountiful for giving us life and bringing us to this season ... You are bountiful for giving us bread to eat. Jewish prayer is a resilient discipline reminding ourselves of the bounty of being alive, and that we are called to embody God's image. We are called to be like God, sources of bounty and blessing for others: “Be a blessing ... and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed (Genesis 12:2).”

In a world so afraid that it routinely erupts in hatred, we are commanded to love. In a world in which children go to sleep without knowing that they are safe, or that there will be a meal tomorrow, we Jews are commanded to love. In a world in which people believe they can bully the State of Israel out of existence, we are commanded to stand tall for the liberation and national self expression of all peoples, and to love. In a world in which some go to bed hungry, some go to bed impoverished, some go to bed sick or lonely, we Jews are commanded to know what makes them hurt, and we are commanded to lift them up.

At this precious moment of new beginnings, I bless us all that we feel in our hearts the resilient power of *chesed*, of *rachamim*, of *ahavah*, of love, and then, knowing that we are loved with an eternal love, we roll up our sleeves and return to the task of healing this cruel and beautiful world.

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