

LOVING AND LIVING

Delivered by
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on
Kol Nidre - Yom Kippur Evening
2007 - 5768
Temple Beth Shalom - Sandhills Jewish
Congregation
Jackson Springs, North Carolina

Every member of this congregation knows the watchword of our faith. Every child learns the *Shema* as his or her first prayer. It is on lips even in our last conscious moment on earth. *Shema Yisrael, Adonai, Eloheynu, Adonai Echad* – Hear, O Israel, the Eternal is our God the Eternal is One. It has been called the great summation of our faith. It is, we say, the principle statement of Jewish belief. It is our watchword.



But how do we make this simple, yet profound statement into a guideline for living? How do we translate the unity of God into a way of life? In a sense, all of Jewish tradition is aimed at that goal. But tonight, I want to suggest that we can find guidance for making the *Shema* into a living statement by reading one more word in the Torah text from which it comes. In the Torah, the very next word after the *Shema* is *v'ahavta* - and you shall love.

V'ahavta - you shall love. That is the key to living our lives in accordance with the teachings of the *Shema*. That is the command of our One God. The God of Judaism commands

love. It is a part of the rich system of values which is Jewish tradition. It is the key to living a rich and full and complete life. “*You shall love.*” Only when a person feels capable of giving and receiving love can she or he live a life of purpose and meaning. Not to love and be loved is not to be human. A person who loves is able to live, therefore, real living is loving. This is what *v'ahavta* commands. We must learn to love.

V'ahavta
וְאַהֲבַת

I. THE LOVE OF SELF

We begin with love of self. You cannot love another until you love yourself. You cannot regard another human being as worthwhile until you regard yourself as worthwhile. Each of us must become aware of ourselves as beings of infinite worth. Each of us is unique and we are endowed with a distinctive personality with is not like the personality of any other being.



AnneKarin Glass

We tend to reflect ourselves in our view of the world. A person who continually digs up dirt about others reflects the grime in her own soul. A person who is quick to condemn, no matter what, expresses that his own life lacks compassion. A person who sees no future for the world or those in it has given up on herself first. But none of these attitudes need be permanent. Through the process of sincere self-examination and forgiveness and self-acceptance, we can rediscover our own worth and our own selves which are infinitely worthy of love.

That is the basic idea of this day. Yom Kippur teaches us that God is loving of all of us and that God is forgiving, even when we are not. God knows we are not perfect. When we have fallen short of the goal, when we have missed the mark, we are still worthy of God's love. God loves imperfect people because they are the only kind of people God knows. Every one of us is imperfect just because we are human. That is what it means to be human. And still, we merit the love of God.

If God can love us with all our imperfections, then we ought to be able to love ourselves. Of course, we are aware of our shortcomings. We spend this day examining our lives. We know we have not lived up to the best in us. The prayer book reminds us. Some rabbi reminds us. We remind ourselves. And yet, we must come to accept ourselves, to love ourselves, in spite of our failings. Unless we come to love ourselves, in spite of everything, then we will never overcome our mistakes.

It may seem obvious to you that most of us care about ourselves. In fact, some would say that most of us care too much about ourselves; that we are too self-centered. But I wonder. Being self-centered does not always mean that we love ourselves.

Psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers offices are filled with people who have low self esteem; who do not love themselves. They often have such low regard for themselves that they are incapable of coping, incapable of establishing meaningful relationships.

Look at the numbers of people who try to escape from themselves with drugs and alcohol. It has become a serious phenomenon in our society that young people, stars, media icons, people like Paris Hilton, Brittany Spears, Lindsey Lohan, people who I know only by name, who seem to have everything, including the adulation of their fans, are destroying themselves with drink and drugs. This mirrors those at the lowest end of society, those who populate the mean streets of our cities whose lives are controlled by the drugs they use and trade.

But drug abuse and alcohol abuse is not limited to the bottom of our society nor to those pop stars who seem out of control. We used to think that addiction was not a Jewish problem. Over the years, I have had more than one parent, more than one young person sit in my office in despair over drugs or

alcohol. About twenty year ago, when I was President of Jewish Family Services in Baltimore, we established an organization to deal with Jewish addicts. Sadly, Jewish Addition Services is still needed in Baltimore and in every other city in which there is a sizable Jewish population.

Judaism is life affirming. The obligation to love ourselves means that we must take life and health seriously. We must do what we can to enhance life and living. When we say “*l’chayim*” before we take a drink, we are saying that we are celebrating a life affirming event. Not the drink itself but the occasion is “*l’chayim*”, to life. Can a person who is drinking because life disgusts him or depresses her say “*l’chayim*?” Can a person who is hooked on drugs because the world is dull or foul or frightening say “*l’chayim*” to life before he takes a snort? Can the person who takes tranquilizers or anti-depressants or pain killers or sleeping pills to shut out the pain of the world say “*l’chayim*?”

What we mean when we say “*l’chayim*” is that these substances must be used for life, not as a substitute for real living. Alcohol and drugs have their place, to enhance life, not to bring life to a tragic detour or an abrupt end.

“To love ourselves means to look at ourselves with both eyes, critically, lovingly, with the idea that we can turn, we can improve, we can be better. We can love ourselves.”



To love ourselves obligates us to look carefully at ourselves; to affirm our worth and our ability to live even with all our shortcomings. We cannot escape our humanity, as imperfect as we are – nor would we. To love ourselves means to look at ourselves with both eyes, critically, lovingly, with the idea that we can turn, we can improve, we can be better. We can love ourselves.

II. THE LOVE OF OTHERS

Just as we are to love ourselves, so are we commanded to love those around us – our spouses, our children, our parents, our neighbors. Despite their flaws, despite their imperfections, if they can put up with us, then we ought to be able to put up with them. If they can love us, then we ought to be able to love them. The penalty for not being able to love imperfect people is never loving, never living yourself. Senator Ted Kennedy, at the funeral of his brother, Robert, said “*we do not have to exaggerate his virtues, nor deny his faults.*” We who would love must not make perfection a requirement for our loving, lest there be neither perfection nor love.

Tomorrow, many of us will be reciting the Yizkor prayers for dear ones who are no longer with us. In most cases, the people we will remember were not famous people. We may be more educated, more sophisticated, or more successful than they were. But we loved them, not in spite of who they were but because of who they were. Even the passage of time does not require that we idealize them. We need not minimize their faults nor magnify their virtues. We don't have to convince God or ourselves that they were remarkable people; that they are deserving of being remembered. It is enough that we love them. That is what love is all about.

Husbands should not have to earn the love of their wives by being great providers. Wives should not have to earn the love of their husbands by being great lovers. Children should not have to earn the love of their parents by bringing home awards. Love is not something that another earns. It is something that we give freely.

I remember a little song we used to sing. You may remember it too: *"Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more."* How important it is for us to love others! How important for us to give our love freely, without reservations to those around us. *"V'ahavta"*, you shall love.

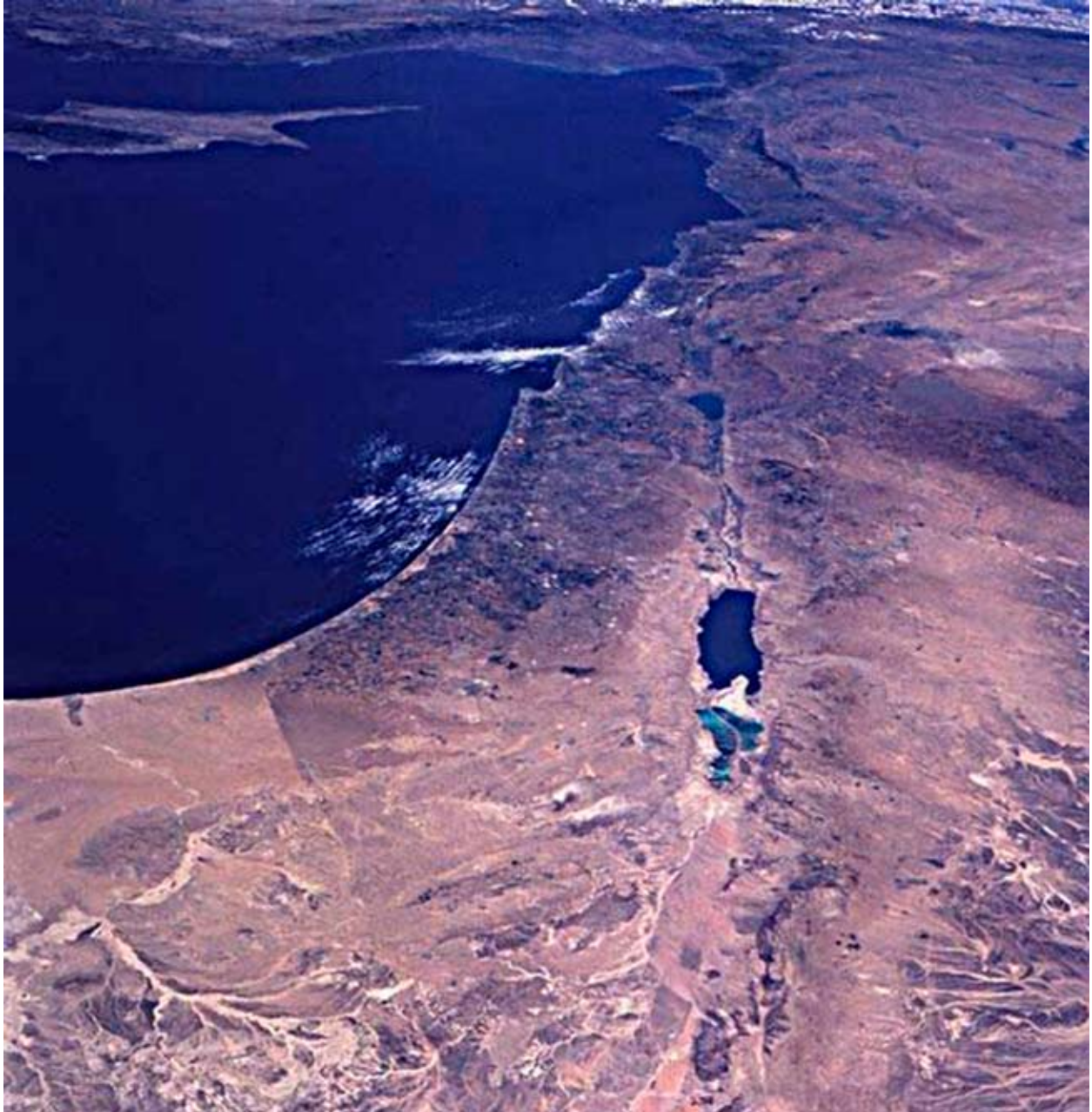
III. THE LOVE OF JUDAISM

To live is to love: to love ourselves, to love others, to love being Jewish. A person who does not have this *ahavat Yisrael*, this love of being Jewish, is not truly living as a Jew. I spoke with you on Rosh Hashanah about being Jewish, about being a liberal Jew. I hope that I was able to express some of my love for Judaism, for the Jewish people, for our heritage. All of us need to have *ahavat Yisrael*, a love for Judaism, for our people and our faith.

Rabbi Bernard Raskes recounted an incident that took place in his congregation just before Rosh Hashanah. A young couple had come to see the rabbi. They had come to town to attend the local college. They were young, Jewish intellectuals – somewhat anti-establishment. They were dressed the part for the time. You remember: the girl wore black tights and no makeup; the boy had a beard, when beards were not fashionable, Levis and sandals. They wanted to join the congregation, but this is the question they asked the Rabbi: *"How can you preach to people who parade mink coats, ostentatiously drive Cadillacs and Mercedes, and flaunt their wealth?"*

Rabbi Raskes replied, *"I know that some of the members of this congregation have false materialistic values, but you must learn to be patient with people. And if you really want to help them, you must go slowly. Anyway, I love Jews; even with their faults."* The couple apparently accepted his answer.





No sooner had they left when two members of the board of the congregation, who happened to be in the building, approached the rabbi.

“Who were those kooks?” they wanted to know. The rabbi told them that they were young Jewish graduate students. Then they asked the rabbi, *“Why do you waste your time with those rebels who only find fault with organized religion and Jewish life and don’t contribute to anything?”*

Rabbi Raskes replied, *“I know that some young Jewish intellectuals criticize us severely and often without responsibility, but we must learn to be patient with people. And if you really want to help them, you must go slowly. Anyway, I love Jews; even with all their faults.”*

To live Jewishly means to love Jews, even with all their faults. A long time ago, a professor at the

Hebrew Union College told some of his students, “*The most important prerequisite for being a rabbi is that you must love Jews.*” He did not say that love of Judaism or of Jewish learning or of Jewish customs was most important. He said the most important thing is to love Jews. We don’t have to love all their faults. We can try to make them better than they are, but we can never reject them as Jews. Love means concern; the greater the love, the more profound the concern.

We need to love Judaism too, even if it is not perfect. We need to love the institutions, the sacred institutions of our heritage. They are human instruments for the transmission of the word of God, for spiritual enhancement, to keep Judaism alive. And they have done pretty well to this point.

But these institutions, like this congregation, are human instruments. As human beings are imperfect so are their congregations imperfect. People tend to be critical of organizations and institutions to which they belong and to which they give their support. Because they are imperfect, many times the criticisms are justified. But it should always be loving criticism, constructive criticism, aimed at improvement, not at alienation.

Just as this congregation has no right to open its doors only to saints, if we could find them, just as we must be concerned with all kinds of Jews, with all kinds of people, so must we not get caught in the trap of waiting for the perfect congregation to be worthy of our support. Believe me when I say, there is no perfect congregation.

Jews and Judaism and Jewish institutions, these are demanding of our love as they are. Hopefully, if we love them enough, we can make them better.

IV. THE COST OF LOVING

To live is to love. We have spoken this evening about love of self, love of others, love of being Jewish. But I want you to know that as wonderful as love is, as important as it is, this best thing in life – love – is not free. Those of us who have lost loved ones have learned in our sorrow that we pay an enormous price for love. We pay with coins of grief, of longing, of emptiness. Those of us who love know the hurt that love can bring. An unkind word, a thoughtless deed can sting the heart and bruise the soul. When we love, we open ourselves to the possibility of hurt and loss, of disappointment and heartbreak.

And yet, as expensive as love might be, being unloved and unloving costs even more. If we never permit anybody to matter to us, we deny ourselves the greatest joy of all – the joy of loving. Those of us, who know the pain of loss, were we given the chance to ease that pain by never having loved, would, I am convinced, choose the pain because of the joy of love. We would never trade the memories, so precious, so dear, to take away the



pain of our loss. An old Yiddish proverb consoles us in our suffering by reminding us that not to have had pain is not to have been human. We might add, not to have loved is not to have been human. Eventually, somehow, the pain eases and the beautiful memories remain. Loved ones leave us, but having had loved one endures. How much richer we are for having paid the high cost of loving, of living!

V. THE LOVE OF LIFE

Finally, we are obligated to love life. We Jews are commanded to love life, forbidden to sour on it, to give up on the possibilities. The ultimate blasphemy for Jews is to say that life is pointless. It is not. People who demand perfection for themselves, or of others, or of our heritage; people incapable of love, close the doors to the deepest, richest, and most satisfying of life's experiences. "Perfect" means finished, no longer subject to change. That is why people and institutions can never be perfect. As long as they live they are capable of changing, of learning, of growing, of improving. That is why a perfect religion can exist only in a text book. A living religion, like a living person, will always be changing, adjusting to the fact that it is being lived by imperfect people.

One of the messages of this season, especially of this day, is that we must choose. This night, I pray that we may choose to love the imperfect rather than hold out for perfection. May we choose to love and to live, even though we know that sometimes it will be difficult. May we choose to love people, in spite of, - no – because of all their imperfections.

"Zochreinu l'chayim, Remember us unto life," we have prayed throughout this season. Indeed, may we be remembered on this sacred night, on every night and every day for life and for love. And may we remember that only as we love, are we truly alive.

Amen.

I am grateful to my friend and colleague, Rabbi Charles Sherman, for the inspiration his writings provided for this sermon.

