

Love Yourself, Love the World

Rosh HaShana Day

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Leyv Ha-Ir~Heart of the City

Welcome to those of you who returned from last night, from last year, welcome to those who are here for the very first time, welcome Leyv Ha-Ir~Heart of the City members and guests, welcome to people here in this room and here on this zoom. I am so glad we are all here, ushering in our New Year, ushering ourselves and each other into this New Year.

Last night I shared that the theme of our Holy Days this year is V'ahavta ~ You Shall Love. These are words that we encounter again and again in Jewish prayer, particularly in the prayer that immediately follows the Shema. So I want to offer a meditation that embeds us in love.

Picture a moment of loving care that you received in your past, one specific moment of care, feel it flow in through your back, right behind your heart, open to it. Maybe from a parent, a teacher, a doctor. Any one moment. Feel that care flow into you, all around you.

Let that care infuse you, warm your heart, enter your cells, fill you with light. Feel yourself held in that loving care. Breathe it in.....

You can notice what that feels like in your body, being filled up.

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Now feel your hands open , your heart open, your gaze open in front of you. Let all that care pour from your heart and whole body into your hands.

Now, Picture one person or place or issue that needs your care and let that flow of love come right through your own hands and heart and head to that one who needs it so much. Just let it pour right in, and fill them up.

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You are a channel of love. From what you were given, you are giving. From what you receive, you give.

(Based on a John McCransky meditation)

From meditation times like this, we can answer an *existential* question with an *experiential* response: what is the purpose of a life journey? Why are we here? One answer from our tradition is: We are here to BE conduits of love. To keep growing as conduits of care. To grow into conduits of mitzvot. We just experienced in that meditation being channels of love.

A conduit or channel connects something to something. What are we connecting? Well, we literally, in our bodies, connect Earth and Heaven, Ha' aretz v'Ha'shamayim, matter and spirit. We humans are the conscious part of nature, so we connect Nature and Ethical Will, and we are also connected in time to our own ancestors and in space to the wide world web of life today. Can you experience your own self as a channel, a conduit, or interconnection in all those ways?

So what does it mean to be on a lifelong journey growing into love? V'ahavta ~ You Shall Love. In the actual V'ahavta prayer that follows the Shema, the prayer says You shall love with all your heart, with all your might and with all your soul. The word Heart is interestingly spelled with a double "vahv," the "v" sound at the end of the word. It would be like spelling Heart, H-e-a-r-t-t.

That's odd isn't it? So of course our sages knew there was a teaching there. They said this points us to the Inner work as well as the Outer work of Love, always intertwined. In the word Heartt, it would be one "T" for the inner work and the second "T" for the outer work.(They also had lots of other interesting interpretations of this anomaly of spelling.)

Have you noticed for yourself that it is a lifelong challenge to love yourself well? Our particular dominant culture in twenty-first century late stage capitalism does not support loving yourself very well. In fact it inculcates self-doubt -- maybe I need a better product or a better vacation or something else that will enrich someone selling something. The dominant culture ranks and rates every person and every thing. Those at the bottom are deprived of dignity and resources, with the Earth at the very bottom of it all. The lowest-ranked people and places are considered throw-away people and throw-away places.

But we all, even privileged high achievers, internalize those messages about being "good enough" about having "enough." Am I smart enough? Useful enough? Beautiful enough? Do I have enough children? Do I have enough friends? Have I saved enough money? My daughter Rosi is traveling around the world doing transformational teaching and healing about our Inner Critics -- she has written an amazing book with her own art about the Inner Critic that she is hoping to publish soon. She named her Inner Critic Sam so that she could get some perspective and healing on Sam. These messages of "not good enough" take up psychic energy, depress and stress us and limit our own capacity for compassion and care for others. Loving yourself, kindness to your own self is a root for living a life of love.

One of the ways that inner compassion and care gets stifled is through the toxic idea that we are each separate individuals who are in it on our own -- stiff upper lip, cope as best as you can, muddle through no matter how much pain you are in. The world is not set up for people to be vulnerable or in need. We learn to fear and control these human realities in ourselves and in others. Even when the external resource ISN'T there for us, because the world is not set up for care, we at least don't have to add to our suffering by the self-judgment that we are "less-than," unworthy, because we are having a hard time.

I learned at a very young age.

I came from a loving, functional family, at least judged by the standards of the mainstream culture. To this day my family members are lifelong friends, people I cherish. And yet I learned some unhelpful messages in my family.

One time when I was 11, my journalist father was living in London for a couple years, on assignment for the magazine where he worked and he was coming to visit my mother and us five little girls in Washington D.C. We were excited that my father was arriving from London.

My parents were divorced in a friendly way. They stayed with each other at vacation times and when we were all living in the same city we had family dinners several times a week. This day we met my father at Dulles airport and drove home in our station wagon.

As we walked into the house, I suddenly felt extremely weak. I could barely lift a limb. I was flooded with shame. I crawled up the steps, self consciously pretending to play a creeping game and sunk into my bed. Hours later my mother found me there, literally hallucinating with a 104 degree fever.

Now when I remember this story, what I wonder is why didn't I tell anyone I didn't feel well? Why didn't I tell anyone I needed help? Why did I think it wasn't okay to be in need? That it was my fault to be in need?

Somehow I had learned these messages even in my loving home, maybe especially in this loving home where I was identified with my adored mother, and where I wanted to please her and certainly not cause her pain or worry.

The internalized unspoken rule that being vulnerable, needing care, was not okay shaped my response to experiencing violence and sexual transgressions outside my home later. I didn't tell anyone. I thought these experiences were my fault. I thought it was my fault because I was traveling in places with different cultural expectations or because I was disappointing a man who really wanted to have sex with me. I felt ashamed.

It was feminism that gave me a political analysis of power and a liberation movement to join. Feminism freed me, grew me, dried out those places of self-blame and isolation. And it was Judaism that gave me a communal home. But it is taking me a lifetime and multi-generational learning to heal the distress of the toxic dominant culture we all swim in.

I imagine you have stories too of times you did not turn for help when you needed it or times you were not kind to your own self when you needed care. We've all felt the shame of thinking something is our fault, and the loneliness of not having our truth recognized and tended to. Here's the thing: The harder we are on ourselves, the easier it is to be hard-hearted in relation to suffering in the world.

Many of us have learned to call the culture that shapes these realities Patriarchal, Capitalist, White Supremacist culture. It is not serving any of us well. When we take an outer systemic perspective on compassion and care in the world around us, we remember Cornell West's teaching Justice is what Love looks like in Public. Can we guarantee as a global society that every child and every human has enough to eat? Has access to vaccination and other health care? Gets a good education and a livelihood with safety and dignity?

When each of us has absorbed a sense of dehumanization and degradation for our own self when we are vulnerable, it makes it so much easier to tolerate the dehumanization and degradation of others.

Have you noticed that the times when you suffer and bring awareness and kindness to your own self, are the times that your humanity and capacity to be with the pain of others have most deepened? You are growing into your full humanity and that is a lifelong journey.

All of us have places of hurt and fear, often shaped by our experience in the institutions in our lives such as family, school and work. You can probably touch your own places right this minute. It's part of being human.

And we've all also felt the connection that comes from caring for someone who turns to you for help. We've felt - even if just for a moment - the power of meeting the hurting place in another and letting them know that they're worth care and loving. We KNOW the power of offering and receiving love.

To carry us forward on this journey I will share these texts from the Bible:

Contrary to the dominant ideology, which teaches that in times of trouble you need to circle the wagons, protect what you have because the needs of others are a threat, we find Jewish spiritual wisdom in its own idiom, saying, No don't circle the tents, don't *only* take care of number one whether it is yourself, your family, your nation. Instead:

From Isaiah 54:2* (Thank you to Rabbi Avruhm Addison)

Enlarge the site of your tents
Extend the size of your dwellings
Do not stint!*

In other words, open your heart, open those inner gates of the New Year, experience the interbeing of all. Live into Love. And while we are living into Love, Isaiah continues in 54:10

For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken
But the flow of my kindness and my covenant of the whole will never be shaken, said the Source of Loving Compassion.

The key Hebrew words there are Chesed, Rachamam and Shalom.

(In this Haftarah from Isaiah there is also violent and imperialist material but just as historians and statespeople do, we look for a usable past -- we lift up the values and vision that help us meet this moment.)

Judaism teaches that each of us has the capacity for enormous empathy, for enormous generosity, and commitment to being whole and to co-creating a world of wholeness for everyone. That's the spiritual journey of a lifetime, being bigger than hurt, bigger than fear, growing into the conduit of compassion and care for yourself, for your people, for the world that we are each meant to be ~ V'ahavta ~ You Shall Love.

We will carry on with this theme of V'ahavta ~ You Shall Love, on Yom Kippur.