

Rosh Hashanah D'var Torah 5785

Rabbi David Benjamin Fainsilber

Choose LOVE

Beloved community, Shana tova.

Every week, we sing a prayer for peace,
that can be found on your prayer card.

עוֹלָם חֶסֶד יִבָּנֶה

The words עוֹלָם חֶסֶד יִבָּנֶה

originate from Psalm 89:3,

and our translation of these words hinges on the word עוֹלָם,
which can be understood in either time or space.

*G-d's steadfast chesed, G-d's love is established **forever, throughout time,**
or the world—**this space we inhabit**—is built by love.*

I like to think that both are true,
that this world we live in is built on *chesed*—
and it always was, is, and will be.

The founder of Hasidic Judaism, the Baal Shem Tov said that

העולם נבנה ומתקיים על חסד

that the world is built and sustained by *chesed*, which can be understood
as love, kindness, or lovingkindness. (Tzava'at HaRivash, Section 12)

G-d did not have to create the world,

yet did so במידת החסד

*with the attribute of chesed, (Sefer Baal Shem Tov al haTorah, Parashat Vayera),
in order to bestow goodness upon G-d's creations,*

כי כל הבריאה היא חסד

for all of creation is itself kindness.” Keter Shem Tov (Siman 44)

On Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world—

a time to celebrate creation—

this radical teaching describes how

all of creation was made with love,

is sustained by love,

and that creation itself is love.

But as my teacher Rabbi Sam Feinsmith says:

“Don’t take my word for it!”

What do you think?

Does it feel real to you that the world is founded and sustained by love?

And how might your worldview shift if you adopted this orientation?

*What might happen to your relationship to self and others,
to society and to nature?*

*What might happen to our community and society and for future generations
if we all lived with love each day of our lives?*

Starting this new year of 5785,
in the shadows of October 7 and its aftermath,
in the midst of ongoing war and devastating loss and fear in Israel, in Gaza, and in Lebanon,
with rockets raining down from Iran,
with war in Ukraine and in Sudan,
with the rise in antisemitism around the globe,
just after the latest climate disaster in the American southeast,
and on the cusp of one of the most divisive and influential elections in world history—
perhaps you do not feel like this time and space are filled with love.
On the contrary—perhaps you feel unnerved entering this new year.
What will this new year bring with it?
More stress or anxiety? More terror? More death? More division?

Maybe your unease is more personal,
perhaps having lost a loved one recently,
love feels physically distant.
Or you are dealing with depression or anxiety,
or you are just feeling unloved and sad.

Perhaps you hold some recurring feelings of dis-ease
that you simply cannot shake.
And it can feel utterly impossible, or even naïve,
to think that the world is founded on love.

But our tradition emphatically tell us:

עוֹלָם חֶסֶד יִבְנֶה

Chesed, love is the foundation of the world, always.

I bring this powerful teaching *davka*, precisely, this new year,

this very time on earth, to us all,

because, in many ways, it has been such a terrible and sad year,

and thus it has become increasingly hard to keep our hearts open.

What can we do internally, spiritually, emotionally—

with our fear and rage?

How can we move within ourselves

beyond the sadness and hopelessness that is plaguing our society?

Today, right now, these words I'm sharing with you

are a hug from me and our tradition,

to move from these dark emotions towards love,

as I wrap my arms around our community

and give you some love at this time.

Oooof, I know we really need it.

So, try something out with me, something a little funny.

Just as my meditation teacher Rabbi Dorothy Richman

from the Institute for Jewish Spirituality had me do,

talk to yourself lovingly.

Say, "Hi, sweetheart."

Let's say it outloud together. "*Hi, sweetheart.*"

I adopted this practice,

but used this Yiddish word of endearment: Teyere.

Say it with me: "*Teyere.*"

Maybe even put your hand on your heart,

and say: "Hi, sweetheart."

Together: "*Hi, sweetheart.*"

Teyere. Together: *Teyere.*

Zisse. Sweet one. Say it with me: *Zisse.*

Or in the words of Rabbi Rami Shapiro,
 even when we are not willing or ready or able to receive love,
 even as we are falling, or despairing, or too weak to hold ourselves up,
we are loved by an unending love.

In Rabbi Shai Held's new book *Judaism is About Love*
 Held writes powerfully on the Torah's foundational principle,
B'tzelem Elohim, being created in G-d's image:
*"We can be attacked or assaulted, humiliated or betrayed—
 and those crimes can leave intense scars, both physical and psychological—
 but no abusive parent or teacher, no political power, no torturer or interrogator,
 can ever strip us of our worth.
 No matter what happens to us,
 regardless of what we accomplish or are forced to endure,
 we matter, and we are loved..." (p.34)
 "not because of what we do,
 but because of what we (always already) are:
 creatures created in the image of G-d." (p.30)*

Simply for being us, we are loved by an unending love.
 And whether or not we believe in G-d,
 we can access that foundation *of love and self-worth*
 inside of us at all times.

As we celebrated our eldest son Adar's Bar Mitzvah this summer,
 what pride and love I felt, like I had never felt before!
 Yet, beyond our pride in his hard work and dedication to Judaism,
 what we wanted to convey most to him, Yonah, and Hersh,
 then and each day, and what I convey to you today—
 is that we are all loved unconditionally, regardless of our actions.

*How might we feel the love,
 and allow more love into our daily life?*

My experience is that it takes practice.

Rabbi Shai Held calls love:
 an “*existential posture, a life orientation....a way of life.*”
 He says it is both “*an emotion and an action.*”
 It is a feeling, but not *only* a feeling.
 It is a muscle to develop, over and over again,
 and it is not an easy task.

Like many of you, I have my moments
 where I get overwhelmed by difficult emotions.
 I have shared before that while on Sabbatical,
 I participated in a 10-day silent meditation retreat.
 I had travelled on a ride share to the retreat with several other strangers.
 In the car, they asked me what I do for a living,
 so I told them I’m a rabbi.
 A couple of days into the retreat,
 I noticed that one of those people had left the retreat.
 Especially at night in the darkness, I started to have paranoid feelings
 that this person was going to come after me—simply because I am Jewish.

Any time that I feel a sense of dark emotion,
 like on that 10-day meditation retreat,
 or when confronting the daily news,
 wherever I can, I try to remind myself to come back to love—
 to choose love over fear.

To be sure, fear has its place.
 And some fears are real and need to be addressed head on with immediacy.
 Whether necessary or not at a meditation retreat,
 every night, I’d lock the door to my room.

But when we are having these feelings,
 and we can actually notice that we are
 in a physically and emotionally safe environment—
 the practice is to come back to love.

This is why I practice meditation every day.
 The practice is founded on lovingkindness.
 As I lose focus, I come back to my breath without judgement.
 If I feel unsettled, I come back to my grounding breath with love.

And wherever I can't come back to love,
 I try to focus on something very tangible in the room I'm in,
 a colour, a sound—something that can take my attention
 away from the fear or anxiety.

And somewhere in the midst of this practice,
 where the more difficult feelings start off like a bolder—
 immovable, permanent—
 over time, the breath is like ocean waves that strike against the bolder,
 slowly, slowly softening the feelings into sand, and...

עולם קטן יבנה

*My world becomes filled with love, sometimes profoundly so—
 even if just for small moments in time.*

And that feeling of love—of feeling supported and held—
 allows me to feel more settled, with an inner strength and calmness,
 and that allows me to better be able to choose to bring more love
 into my interactions with those around me. (pause)

One of the most striking and maybe even controversial statements
 in his book *Judaism is About Love*, Held writes:

*“If someone wanted to, they could presumably
 write a book entitled *Judaism is About Hate*,
 and marshal an abundance of sources to bolster their case.”* (p.17)

The fact is that everywhere you look—
 even in our religion and far beyond—
 we can put our attention on judgement, fear, cynicism, and grievance,
 or we can put it on love and kindness and respect and even joy.

In every moment, we each have a choice,

even when our attention is not on love.

My late father-in-law Gil would often say:

“Be the kindest person in the room.”

Just before he passed away this summer, someone asked him:

“What happens if you can’t be the kindest person in the room?”

He said seriously, though with his typical sense of witty humour: *“Leave the room!”*

Even if it means that we need to
get ourselves out of a situation where we can’t be kind—
we are free to choose.
That in and of itself is an act of love.

We are free to love ourselves in all our beauty and all of our scars.

Teyere. Zisse. Sweetheart.

And we are free to love others for who they are.

The Baal Shem Tov who said that the world is founded on love
also said that we must *“cling to kindness and act with it in the world”*
for we are partners,

helping G-d manifest love on earth. (Keter Shem Tov Siman 44)

This is the meaning of the words of Olam Chesed Yibaneh

by Rabbi Menachem Creditor:

“I will build this world from love,

*And **you** must build this world from love,*

*And **if we** build this world from love,*

***then G-d** will build this world from love.”*

What do these words mean to you?

How do we take them and move into action?

Bringing greater kindness into the world
is what we are always aspiring towards at JCOGS,
where we continually affirm love.

That is why years ago, we renamed our religious school
the **Olam Chesed** Education Centre,

inculcating in the next generations our feelings towards them,
based on our traditions of love.

And it is in the shiva calls and the cards sent when someone passes away.
In our social justice work in the greater community,
with acts of lovingkindness for those most marginalised
with food cards for families in need,
and by supporting the interfaith benevolence fund.

And we surely felt the love at the JCOGS 30th Anniversary Celebration.
Jodi Silverman, co-chair of the event alongside Diana Lloyd, said:
“For me, the biggest takeaway of the night was love.”
And the three words that people felt at the event
were *“warmth, community, and love.”*

We are so lucky to have a 30-year strong community that *is*
עולם חסד יבנה
built on a partnership of love.

As we enter these days of *teshuvah*, or turning and returning,
the practice is to choose to return back to love,
back to self-worth,
back to the people that bring us love,
and back to the notion that the world is founded on love.
In these Ten Days of Teshuvah, we are meant to reflect
on the times when we hardened our hearts,
when we allowed fear or hatred, cynicism or indifference to set in,
and perhaps we hurt ourselves or others in the process.
Now is our time to renew our commitment to *chesed*.

So, let me end with a challenge to enter into a deeper love
with each of us and all of us.

First, join me when the holidays are over,
when I will be leading a book club on *Judaism is About Love*,
coupled with mindfulness practices to sustain that love.
Imagine how our community might grow in love

if many join this book reading.

Second, back by popular demand,
I am asking our community to devote [10-minutes a day](#)
over the next 10-days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur
to the spiritual practice of cultivating love.

You could simply sit and focus on your breath,
lovingly grateful for its gift.
Or journal about the endless love that each of us experience every day—
from the gift of our breath to the food that we eat.
Or spend some time in nature appreciating the bounty of foliage colours.
Or maybe listen to or sing
עוֹלָם חֶסֶד יִבְנֶנָּה
or use the words “*I will build this world from love*” as a mantra.
Or heck, even listen to some lite FM:
“*And **can** you feel the love tonight...*”
Oh, you don’t like that one? How about:
“*And I...will always love you...*”
It doesn’t matter exactly what you do over these 10-days,
as we can bring our loving attention
to almost anything we practise.

And on Yom Kippur,
I’m going to ask you to reflect on and share
your experience of the 10-minute challenge with others.

So, as we sing these words of Olam Chesed Yibaneh,
think about why you would take on
this 10-minute, 10-day practice of returning to love,
and what this practice might be for you.

> **SING OLAM CHESD.**

Shana tova u’metukah,
may we choose to see our world’s foundation as based on love.