



Love

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A rabbi once heard about a preacher who gained notoriety by giving the world's *longest* sermon. Not wanting to duplicate that feat, and, perhaps more importantly, not wanting to put everyone in shul to sleep, the rabbi decided to preach the world's *shortest* sermon instead.

In the weeks leading up to the holidays, he shared the big news with the congregation in e-blasts, social media, and in person. Come to shul – and hear the shortest sermon ever! Sitting down to write, though, he realized the task was harder than it sounded. How to say something meaningful, something impactful, something true, while at the same time making it short? As Rosh Hashanah drew closer and closer, he found himself living iconic mathematician Blaise Pascal's words that he would have written a shorter letter, but he didn't have enough time.

As every day passed, the rabbi worked harder and harder, missing dinners and bedtimes. Everything he thought worthy to say needed more notation, more explanation. Then, one morning, in the quiet hour before sunrise, his youngest child crawled into his bed and cuddled up to him. Suddenly, it clicked.

The morning of Rosh Hashanah, the rabbi stood up before the congregation, cleared his throat, and said, "Love." Then he sat down.

My sermon this morning is longer. But if you want the CliffsNotes version: If someone asks you at lunch what the rabbi talked about this morning, that's it: Love.

I was thinking a lot about this story because it's easy to say there is one true message in life – love. In fact, Rabbi Akiva says something similar: "The greatest principle of the Torah is *V'ahavta L'Re'echa Kamocha*: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

So lilting. So lyrical. Until along come the commentators and ask – “So...what exactly constitutes love?”

Therein lies the rub. Love is both so obvious and SO hard.

A few weeks ago, I had a tough morning. I came into shul carrying an ache that I knew in my head I should shake off, but my heart wouldn't let go. The night before, my 5-year old, Benjamin, had misbehaved in shul, interrupting the service – not once but three times.

The first time I patiently explained to him what was expected from him in this sacred space. The second time, I handed it over to a higher power – my mom, who must have some wisdom because she had clearly figured out how to get me to sit through shul. The third time – three strikes and you're out.

After services, I calmly explained that he would not be returning until I could trust him to behave. At a minimum one month. He was devastated. (If only my teenagers would feel that way about missing services!) He promised he would change. He pleaded with me to give him another chance. I agreed: I would give him another chance – in a month.

The next morning, I awoke to two little eyes staring at me from my bedside. “Ima,” he said mournfully, “I don't feel like you love me.” Way to cut straight to my heart, kid!

No matter how many times I explained that I love him more than he could even begin to fathom – no matter how many times I emphasized that it is BECAUSE I love him that it is my job to teach him how to behave in ways that respect everyone – no matter how many times I cited the Rolling Stones, “You can't always get what you want” – he came right back to, “I don't feel like you love me.” No matter what I said, in his eyes, I was flunking Parenting 101.

By the time I came into shul, I was disheartened. Of course, my head reminded me, it's my job to say no. It's his job to say he doesn't like that. But as we prayed, I kept turning over and over in my heart, “I don't feel like you love me.”

Because this is not just a 5-year old's problem. On some level, it's a universal problem.

Marriages break up – "I don't feel like you love me." Family relationships sour – "I don't feel like you love me." Bullying, stealing, epic courtroom drama, even nations at war – if we believe a long line of therapists from Freud to today, most dysfunction emerges from, "I don't feel like you love me."

Love – how to feel it and how to give it in a way it is felt – is a fundamental challenge at the core of all our lives. There are any number of experts who expound on that challenge. Gary Chapman argues that there are five love languages: receiving gifts, spending time, words of affirmation, acts of service, and physical touch. If one person is speaking one love language and the other can only understand another, we misconnect.

Chapman might argue that my affirmation language, telling my son he was loved, didn't land because he needed to hear the language of action. I needed to walk back the cooling off period and show him love by trusting him to try again.

Dr John Gottman would instead apply the principle of bids for affection. If you see each disruption as a bid for attention and affection, it's obvious – resisting results in resistance.

Harville Hendrix and Helen Hunt might counsel, as they argue in their book, "Giving the Love that Heals," that responding to a fundamental wound with affirmation – that is what someone else feels – without responding on the merits, is the holiest work of healing.

Together in this room we could probably add in countless other sage pieces of advice for alternative paths. Each has wisdom. Each has truth. And this is the point that, as a rabbi, I want to pull out the "gotcha" moment and say, "But the Torah has the ULTIMATE truth! The Torah has the greatest wisdom on relationships."

Then I sit down to the texts we've been reading this past week. Talk about a mess. Forget love languages, forget affirmation, forget bids for affection – the family we read about all Rosh Hashanah long can't even look each other in the eye.

Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac put the “dis” in dysfunction. And they come by it honestly. Our story echoes through time – all the way back to the first brothers. Cain looks at God’s delight at Abel’s offering and disappointment in his and lashes out in an inchoate murderous cry: “I don’t feel like you love me!”

Do you know when the Torah’s first usage of love comes? In our second-day Rosh Hashanah reading, when God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. We’ve spent thousands of years trying to process that one!

If there is one message of the Torah here, it seems to be, “You don’t feel loved? Join the club.”

Thankfully, that is not where our Torah leaves us. Today is called *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Shabbat of return. At the core of that return? Repeated three times in our parasha: *Ahava*/Love. What kind of love? Love shown by action. Again and again, our sacred texts ask us, for all the times we don’t feel loved, don’t stop there – take that pain and use it as motivation to show love to others, to do more for others.

You were left out? Include. You seek forgiveness? Forgive. You were oppressed? Be kind. You were enslaved? Fight for freedom. You were hurt? Do better. Answer a world with too much hate, too much indifference, by creating day by day, deed by deed, a world suffused with love.

How do we create that kind of world?

Author Rafael Zoehler, whose father passed away when he was quite young, left him a box of letters – one for each occasion he could imagine Rafael would encounter without him. The letters guided Raphael through life, including his first teenage fight with his mother when he pulled out the letter that read, “WHEN YOU HAVE THE WORST FIGHT EVER WITH YOUR MOM.”

It said, “Apologize to her. I don’t know why you’re fighting, and I don’t know who’s right. But I know your mother. So, a humble apology is the best way to get over this. I’m talking about a down-on-your-knees apology.

“She’s your mother, kid. She loves you more than anything in this world. Do you know that she went through natural birth because someone told her that it would be the best for you? Have you ever seen a woman giving birth? Do you need a bigger proof of love than that?

“Apologize. She’ll forgive you.”

And of course, she did. And of course, I did.

So, love is not a short sermon. It is a long one that each of us delivers day by day. It is full of rewrites and edits. But it is the most important one any of us will ever give. And ultimately, as this season reminds us, none of us knows how much time we have left to make our love heard – so we’d better start now.

Shabbat Shalom.