

Love Worth Celebrating

Shabbat Yitro 5785

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As a rabbi whose K-12 education was at a school called St. John's, my early theological education came from weekly chapel speakers, most of them Christian clergy, as much as it did from Congregation Beth Israel's religious school. The pastor of Houston's First Baptist Church probably would be surprised that a rabbi would cite his 1974 Valentine's Day chapel message in a sermon fifty-one years later. The pastor said that "the God of the Hebrews" was a God of harsh, unforgiving justice, but that Jesus had come to replace that with God's everlasting love.

I was just a fifth grader, but I knew enough to be offended, and I also doubted that he was correct about the God my family and I worshiped at Temple. I came home and told my parents about it. Not trained in theology, they called our rabbi, who explained that the pastor was wrong about the God of Israel, but also that he was preaching a common Christian teaching. While acknowledging that my Christian clergy friends—largely Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists—don't subscribe to that characterization of the Hebrew Bible these days, the Baptist preacher's view of "the God of the Old Testament" is indeed common among more conservative Christians.

While we call our Bible the תנ"ך (*Tanach*) or the Hebrew Scriptures, conservative Christians refer to it as the Old Testament—or, more to the point "The Law." That's not entirely their fault. The oldest translation of the Torah into Greek mistranslated the word תורה (Torah), using the Greek word meaning "law." Those translators were Jewish, and apparently their Greek was spotty. The word תורה means "teaching," not "law." The mistaken translation leaves the impression that Torah is little more than a rulebook, a lengthy list of "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots."

Then, for Christians, along comes a Jew named Saul, who, after describing a powerful conversion experience, changes his name to Paul, authoring a series of letters that make up a good part of the Christian Scripture or New Testament. Although Paul said that Jews who became Christians continued to be obligated by "the law," he more importantly taught that others who joined themselves to Christian faith did not. They could be enveloped in the redemptive promise of a God, Who, in Christian theology, "loved the world so much that He gave His only son, so that everyone who believes in Him shall not die but shall have eternal life."ⁱ

I am not, of course, here to debate Christian theology, except to the extent that part of some Christians' theology includes maligning Judaism—or worse, the very God that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all worship.

Jews have always understood our God to be both loving and just. Our rabbinic sages taught that God would prefer to be compassionate, dispensing justice tempered by mercy, not in a strict or harsh way. They even imagined that God prays for that, using these words in addressing God's Self: "May it be My will that My mercy will overcome My anger towards Israel for their transgressions, and may My mercy prevail over My other attributes through which Israel is punished, and may I conduct myself toward My children, Israel, with the attribute of mercy, and may I intercede on their behalf beyond the letter of the law."ⁱⁱ

This week's Torah portion includes the Ten Commandments, as we embark on a series of weekly readings in which the מצוות (*mitzvot*) incumbent upon each of us will multiply. The Torah is a teaching, including much more than law, but it is indeed full of commandments.

Judaism understands these commandments as expressions of God's love. God offers us Shabbat, for example, because we need a day of rest, and God graciously insists that we extend that gift to people under our control, such as employees, and even to beasts of burden. God instructs us not to covet because excessive desire for other people's blessings is corrosive to our own souls and psyches.

Our prayers, particularly on the High Holy Days, often compare God to a parent, mercifully forgiving children who have gone astray after correcting their behavior. The comparison to a parent goes further. Parents routinely set limits for their children. While adolescents do not often experience those rules as expressions of love, and some parents are abusive, the majority regulate their children's behavior to keep them safe and in an effort to mold them into healthy, productive, happy, successful adults. In other words, parents, like God, set limits for their children as an act of love.

Two prayers we offer every time we gather for worship directly address the מצוות as expressions of Divine love. We are all familiar with chanting וְאַהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה (V'ahavta et Adonai Eloheicha), "And you shall love Adonai your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." We know what comes next, but we may gloss over it. These words, the continuation of the שמע (Shema) as written in the Torah, go on to tell us **how** to love God, namely by observing מצוות—that is, by living in accordance with the guidelines that God has set for us.

We may view this section of the שמע as a response to the prayer that comes right before it—in the evening, אהבת עולם (*ahavat olam*)—literally, “love for the world;” and in the morning, אהבה רבה (*ahavah rabah*), “great love.” By now, you are doubtless catching the drift, even if you don’t know Hebrew: The word אהבה (*ahavah*) means love, and it is central to our prayer book and to our religion. So how, according to our prayers, does God bestow love upon the world? תורה ומצות לימדת חוקים ומשפטים אותנו (Torah u’mitzvot chukim umishpatim otanu limad’ta), “You have taught us Torah and mitzvot, laws and statutes.” Commandments are God’s love language.

Today, on Valentine’s Day, we celebrate sixty years of Patty and Herb, loving one another and sharing their lives together. We often think of “love” between a couple in very romantic terms. Sometimes, as Patty and Herb can tell you all too well, it’s not all romance. Amorous feelings are not enough to sustain a loving couple across all the seasons of life, with at least as many challenges as celebrations. Patty and Herb, like many of you, have **acted**, caring lovingly for one another, across the years. Compassionate actions are humanity’s love language, our way of expressing our devotion to God and to one another.

I pray that each of us can celebrate love—among couples, between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, and the dearest of friends, whether we are partnered or single. When we are committed to showering kindness on a person we love, and when they care for us, our love is one worth celebrating, on Valentine’s Day and on every day of our lives.

Amen.

ⁱ John 3:16.

ⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, *B’rachot* 7a.