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Erev Yom Kippur

Summoned to Love

"Judaism is about many things, but above all else, Judaism is about love."[1]

So teaches Rabbi Shai Held in his recently-published book, appropriately titled *Judaism is About Love*.

Many of us are conditioned to think that *Christianity* is about love and Judaism is about … well, something else.[2] Perhaps justice, or community, or obligation. While yes, Judaism *is* about all of those things, it is also fundamentally, essentially, and primarily about love.

But don't take my word for it. Consider what we've already said in tonight's service, addressing God and expressing the deepest convictions of this holy day.

"Please forgive [our] failings … in keeping with Your boundless **love**"[3] (p. 20).[4]

"**Love** beyond all space and time —Your **love** enfolds Your people"[5] (p. 26).

"You offer us kindness [and] recall the **loving** deeds of our [ancestors], … acting in **love** for the sake of Your name"[6] (p. 48).

"In Your **love**, Eternal our God, You have given us this Yom Kippur: a day on which our wrongs are forgiven (with **love**)"[7] (p. 62).

"Like the heavens that tower above the earth, Your **love** is powerful for those who revere You"[8] (p. 101).

"*Avinu Malkeinu* … save us through acts of justice and **love**"[9] (p. 115).

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[1] Shai Held, *Judaism is About Love* (Farar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), p. 7.
[2] This is a rephrasing of Held's sentence: "Christianity is about love, we are told, but Judaism is about … something else, like law, or justice, or whatever" (4).
[3] סְלַח נָא לַעֲוֹן הָעָם הַזֶּה כְּגֹדֶל חַסְדֶּךָ
[4] Page citations are for *Mishkan Hanefesh: Yom Kippur* (CCAR Press, 2015). English translations by Rabbi Janet Marder and Rabbi Sheldon Marder.
[5] אַהֲבַת עוֹלָם בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל עַמְּךָ אָהָבְתָּ
[6] גּוֹמֵל חֲסָדִים טוֹבִים וְקוֹנֵה הַכֹּל וְזוֹכֵר חַסְדֵי אָבוֹת וְאִמָּהוֹת וּמֵבִיא גְּאֻלָּה לִבְנֵי בְנֵיהֶם לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ בְּאַהֲבָה
[7] וַתִּתֶּן לָנוּ יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּאַהֲבָה אֶת יוֹם הַכִּפֻּרִים הַזֶּה ... וְלִמְחֹל בּוֹ אֶת כָּל עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ (בְּאַהֲבָה)
[8] כִּי כִגְבֹהַּ שָׁמַיִם עַל־הָאָרֶץ גָּבַר חַסְדּוֹ עַל־יְרֵאָיו
[9] אָבִינוּ מַלְכֵּנוּ עֲשֵׂה עִמָּנוּ צְדָקָה וָחֶסֶד וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ

I could go on, but I think you take my point.

In each of these passages, "love" is a translation of one of two Hebrew synonyms: *Ahavah* and *Chesed*. These are also two of the values enshrined in our sanctuary's stained-glass windows, which serve as the basis for my sermons this season.[10]

Jewish texts—from Torah, Tanach, and Talmud; mysticism and modern thought, poetry and prayer and everything in between—concur on this point: God loves us. Indeed, God *yearns* for us, God *needs* us. And God's love is a model for our own love in the world, as we, in turn are commanded:

"You shall love the Eternal your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:5).

"You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:19).

"And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18).

It can be hard to make room for love when our days are filled with anxiety and distress, anger and fear, not to mention preoccupation with family and work and concerns for our health. But we don't have to do it all at once, and we don't have to do it alone. Our tradition gives us step-by-step instructions that help us cultivate a posture of love in both our hearts and our deeds. [11]

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And it starts with the Law of the Baby.

Jewish theologian Mara Benjamin coined this term to describe the reordering of her world when she became a parent. Benjamin explains the life-changing experience of becoming truly and profoundly an "obligated self." She even used that as the title of her book, in which she writes, "In my child, I recognized the one person from whom, I felt, I could not walk away."[12] The "law of the baby" demands actions from the parent, actions which are not universal or abstract but rather particular and precise:

> The Law of the Baby was not the Law of Any Baby but rather the Law of This Baby. This Baby had to be woken up throughout the night to eat because she was born small. This Baby responded with great interest to one

[10] The window featuring *Chesed* translates the term as "piety."
[11] Shai Held says love is "a disposition, … an existential posture or a life orientation" (*Judaism is About Love*, 9).
[12] *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* (Indiana University Press, 2018), p. 8.

particular plush toy. This Baby's imperative was to hold her at a certain angle so she would fall asleep for a nap.[13]

In other words, the bond of parent and child creates a series of requirements and obligations not imposed by some authority on high but demanded irrevocably by the object of love. Parents do for their children what they would never do for anyone else, and parents feel for their children emotions reserved only for them – and these expressions of love emerge not out of a manual or book of laws but as the natural consequence of intimate and meaningful relationship. Love claims us and guides our choices, demonstrating the real and lasting power of existential obligation.

I need to clarify two points, each of which deserves a sermon of their own. First, our tradition insists that both biological and adoptive parents construct the same intense bonds with their children, regardless how they came into their role.[14] And second, we see with our own eyes that not every family follows the same model of obligation and love. Our textual tradition outlines moral principles, though our Torah demonstrates with candor that family life can be difficult and fraught. The familial love at the core of Jewish ethics is an ideal for which we can strive but which all of us fail to reach.

Our tradition places love at the center of its vision of family. This is not just a description of the families we want for ourselves and our friends; it's also, as Mara Benjamin puts it, "the foundation of social ethics."[15] The experience of being first a child and then, perhaps, a parent forms the primary paradigm of the obligations of love. Then, as we emerge from the tight confines of the nuclear family, we recognize that every human being is somebody's baby, just as we were, and that every person deserves from someone the absolute devotion we ourselves demanded.

To use Shai Held's turn of phrase, families are "schools of love."[16] We learn in the family the basic principles of concern that underlie morality more broadly. The love we have for parents or children is different in degree from our love for strangers, but they are forms of the same acceptance of responsibility. In other words, love in the family teaches us about love in the world.

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[13] *Ibid*.
[14] See my essay, co-authored with Rabbi Julie Pelc-Adler, "Go and Learn from Abraham and Sarah: Jewish Responses to Facing Infertility," in *The Sacred Encounter: Jewish Perspectives on Sexuality*, ed. Lisa Grushcow, CCAR Press, 2014. Reprinted in *Honoring Tradition, Embracing Modernity: A Reader for the Union for Reform Judaism's Introduction to Judaism Course*, ed. Beth Lieberman and Hara Person, CCAR Press, 2017
[15] *Ibid*. 114.
[16] *Judaism is About Love*, 79.

Rabbi Held offers a helpful model for distinguishing between the kind of love we reserve for those closest to us and the kind of love we owe to the broader community. He writes, "Caring **for** all humanity seems impossible, … but caring *about* [all humanity] need not be."[17] These categories—caring *for* and caring *about*—can help order and organize our circles of obligation. We care *for* those who are intimately close to us, whereas we care *about* a much bigger circle. Caring *for* someone requires tremendous commitment of time, energy, and resources; caring *about* them is more diffuse. We need to do both, though we can run into trouble if we forget which is which.

Sometimes we care *about* people who we really should be caring *for*. We sense the need of a parent or child or sibling or friend but conclude it's really not our place to get involved. We are loath to intrude, to suggest that our loved one can't handle their problems alone, and to stick our noses where they don't belong. Propriety has its place, to be sure, but even the most capable adult might need some hands-on care from time to time. We can honor our loved ones by honestly and sincerely offering our care; and what's more, we can also allow ourselves to receive care from those with whom we're close.

And sometimes, we care *for* people who we really should be caring *about*. We see the perils of the world and, acknowledging our own place of privilege, we seek to dramatically improve the lives of those around us. I've spoken with many of you who feel overwhelmed by the degree of need facing our country and our world, paralyzed by desire to care for those on whom the powerful prey as if they were our own children. Thus we can see ourselves as failures when our care lacks the power to make things right. But caring about others is a manifestation of love, not a desperate battle against the world. We can't let hopelessness trick us into thinking we can't make a difference.

Caring about the wider world is enough—*dayenu*, to borrow from another holiday—especially when our modest acts of love and care help us reserve motivation and strength. The obligations of love put many demands on us, and we must practice self-compassion to know that we must do some, but we can't do it all.

Our emotions, which include the thoughts of our minds and the sensations of our bodies, can clue us in to whether we're practicing the right balance of caring *for* and caring *about*. Love has an emotional dimension, and when we're acting genuinely from a place of love, we should be able to feel it.

And so we can develop a habit of asking ourselves: When we notice trouble and seek to respond, what emotions stir in our hearts? We hope to find there love, though other feelings are appropriate as well. Anger, for instance, is often called-for; after all, throughout the Bible, God responds to injustice with anger and fury and rage. Sadness

[17] *Ibid.* 126, bold added. I also removed the hyphen in Held's phrase "caring-about."

and alarm are needed as well to stir our empathy and disrupt our sense of comfort. But hatred? That our tradition forbids. The command to love our neighbor sits next to the mitzvah not to bear hatred in our heart (Lev. 19:17). And despair as well is sadness taken too far. As dark and dangerous as the world gets, our people are at root אֲסִירֵי הַתִּקְוָה, "prisoners of Hope" (Zechariah 9:12).

So a heart sinking in dread or shrinking in fear could be a sign that we're out of balance. We reach too far, try to accomplish too much, hold ourselves to a standard no person could really reach. Our tradition wants us to act, let me be clear, but does not expect us to do it all. And Judaism encourages us to hone our emotional life, to pay attention and respond to our inner feelings, so that we don't get in our own way.

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Now, I wish I had the perfect recipe for how much time we're supposed to spend caring for those who are close to us and caring about the world at large. I wish I knew precisely how long it was appropriate to remain angry at the news before taking a deep breath, settling our hearts, and getting back to work. And I wish I could offer words of wisdom that would both inspire activism and quell despair. But I don't and I can't.

What I can do is try to draw us closer to the insights of our ancestors, who perceived in the image of God a model for how to conduct ourselves. When the *Aleinu* prayer enjoins us לְתַקֵּן עוֹלָם בְּמַלְכוּת שַׁדַּי, "To repair the world in partnership with the power of God," it teaches us two opposed yet complementary truths. On the one hand, we can't fix the world ourselves, so we anticipate divine intervention, paving the way and hoping for the day when God's power will bring peace to earth. But on the other hand, God *has* no power on earth but through God's creatures; the metaphor of a perfect and all-loving God is meant to inspire *human* action, as flawed and frail as it might be, while invigorating our faith that betterment and even perfection are, even distantly, within reach. As Shai Held teaches:

> Do we wait for God or imitate God? The answer, I think, is both: we wait by imitating. We wait for God by manifesting love and kindness and compassion in the world. We wait for God by conducting our lives as if human dignity were a fact rather than an ever-deferred dream. We wait for God, I'd venture to say, by making it seem less crazy and less implausible to believe in God.[18]

"Belief in God" can mean a lot of things, but if Rabbi Held is right, it certainly means bringing more love into the world. Whatever Judaism stands for, it also stands for love – and so we who join in the spirit of Yom Kippur stand for love as well.

[18] *Ibid*. 261.

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Friends, *Chesed* and *Ahavah*, our twin terms for love, are not pipe-dreams. They are animating principles that have guided our congregation for generations and our people for millennia. Love is central to Jewish conceptions of justice and faith, an emotion we strive to cultivate and a posture with which we strive to face the world. We care for those who are close, while never forgetting as well to care about everything else; and in caring about people and animals and the earth itself, we manifest the sacred image of the divine, whose power animates all life.

This is the moment, and this is the day, when we can attune ourselves to the power and the possibility of love. Our pleas to be forgiven for the failings of our will inspire us to forgive others as well, banishing hatred from our heart as we recall the inherent dignity of every—yes, *every* person on earth. "You shall love your neighbor" the Torah says, and we respond "Yes, yes, I will. At least, I will try." This Day of Days, where the strivings of our souls reach their highest peak and our commitment to community is the strongest of the year, this is the time to resolve ourselves to love. Let us say with a clear voice:

Today I commit myself to care.

I make space in my heart for repair.

And I turn my ear to the still small voice I hear summoning me to love.