

Yom Kippur 2009/5770
"Touched by Love"
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

After 20 years of marriage, a couple was lying in bed one evening, when the misses felt her husband caress the back of her head. Surprised by the unusual display of affection she doesn't say anything but just enjoys the attention. Slowly, his hand moved to her back and shoulders, something he had not done in quite some time. But then, as suddenly as he had started, he stopped, rolled over and became silent. Disappointed, the wife was finally moved to say something and she asked, "Honey, that was so wonderful, why did you stop?" "I found the remote," he mumbled.

All of us like to be touched. The fundamental need for human contact is so basic that we often take for granted how important it is – until it is taken away from us.

As the world braces for a second wave of swine flu that first broke out in the spring and resulted in the deaths of more than 2100 people world wide, the disease is altering long-established patters of everyday greeting and the amount of human contact that many of us have become used to. Handshakes have been cut short, kisses aborted. Warm embraces have been supplanted by curt pats on the back. And many of us are left feeling like the wife in my opening story.

The school district in Glen Cove is discouraging students from exchanging high-fives. In Spain, the health minister has urged citizens to forgo the customary peck on both cheeks. And officials from Lebanon to Kuwait called for Muslims celebrating Ramadan, which just ended, not to hug excessively.

As you know, we here at Temple Beth Sholom, wrestled with how this would affect the way we greet each other during these Holy Days and we came up with the policy that led to my announcement on Rosh Hahasnah and last night which was motivated by a desire to find the right balance. We did not want to over react – but when it comes to matters of health, we certainly did not want to under react. We could have recommended absolutely no physical contact for these holidays – but given the nature of the actual health threat and the importance we attach to those fundamental expressions of human concern and affection, we decided not to do that. Instead we tried a balanced approach of encouraging those who did not feel well to stay home and certainly to avoid contact, we encouraged those who were in at risk groups – to similarly avoid contact – but for the rest of us we decided to shake hands and embrace and we made available – as we have today – numerous bottles of hand sanitizer, around the various buildings and have encouraged everyone to make liberal use of them.

As we strive to be responsible, we also strive to maintain some human contact with each other because I believe that being touched is what these High Holy Days are all about. We come here to touch and be touched, by friends and family, by God, by some feeling that there is a reality beyond and above – on these days we want to *feel* it.

In an impersonal world – where we feel more and more isolated, more and more alienated from each other, from all that is real and honest, this place and these days are all about connecting with others, connecting with our tradition, connecting with God. We come here not to *think* about God, or *discuss* the reality of Jewish community, or *explore* the meaning of

Jewish tradition – we come here on these sacred days – to *feel* God’s presence, *engage* our tradition, *and embrace* one another. We hear the shofar, we shake our lulav and smell the etrog, we taste the sweetness of honey and apples, the softness of the hallah, we enjoy the feeling of being outdoors in our sukkah, the Hanukkah menorah lights up the darkness on the shortest days of the year – on Pesach we eat, drink and feel liberation from oppression – Judaism is a religion of the senses – and opening our eyes to see, our ears to hear, our mouths to taste, our hands to touch – these are fundamental to everything we have come here today to do.

We could offer a fist-bump or elbow nudge in lieu of a hand shake, an air-kiss in place of a hug – and if things get worse on the flu front – we may just have to do that – nothing is more important than health concerns – but at the same time – we recognize something very significant will be lost. If I can’t embrace you and you can’t embrace me, something very significant will be lost.

If I might be permitted a small aside – I would like to teach what the torah says about the proper way to sneeze. We have all learned from health experts that the best way to sneeze is by using the crook of your elbow – the advantage of this is that it keeps your hands germ free and that is the main way we transmit germs – from hand to hand. But according to Jewish tradition when someone sneezes, we need to say something. Most of us say something like *Gesundheit*, which is from the German, or “Bless you” – which is the English translation. Linguists have traced this back to German Jewish immigrants who came to America at the turn of the last century – you probably thought it was older, me too, and it is yet another in the long list of things that we Jews have contributed to this country. Who knew?

And where did we Jews get it? Well now I’ll teach you something that very few Jews know – but after today you can use to impress your friends and neighbors. I learned this while I was studying in Israel this summer, my good friend and neighbor Rabbi Michael White, the senior rabbi over at Temple Sinai, invited me to attend a lecture that was given by Prof. Michael Marmur, the Vice-President for Academic Affairs at HUC-JIR, he promised it would be worth my while and indeed it was, as this is what we learned. Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz a prominent rabbi and authority born in Prague in the mid 16th century, wrote the following and he was quoting an earlier source, *Pirke D’Rebi Eliezer* that dates all the way back to the 9th century: “a person is obligated to praise God and invoke His blessing whenever someone sneezes. And then he explains why this is so: Once upon a time when people sneezed, they died. Originally, the natural order of things was that when a person sneezed, he died - immediately, on the spot. It didn’t matter where you were, or what you were doing, you might be walking in the market place, or along the road – you sneezed, you die. That’s just the way things were. And they were that way, says this early rabbinic source, until our ancestor Jacob came along. One day, Jacob sneezed, and he immediately realized he was about to die – so he cried out to God – “Wait, God, please, don’t let me die – “*Ribono Shel Olom*, don’t take my soul, not yet, I still have some very important stuff left to do – I have not yet charged my children and grandchildren what to do after I am gone – please, God, let me finish what I have to do.” And because it was Jacob, and because it was God and God knew how important Jacob’s blessings would become in our Bible, God decided to have mercy – not only on Jacob, but on all mankind. And when people heard this everyone became so excited – imagine what it must have been like to live in dread of the sudden sneeze, knowing that at any second you might sneeze and drop dead – people were so excited when they sneezed and didn’t die – they shouted out praise and blessing to God.” And so it is to this day – when someone sneezes –

we say: "God bless you," – and it is not so much a wish as an acknowledgement; not so much God bless you as a hope but as a note of appreciation that God has blessed you and an expression of thanks that your life would continue." Don't you love that story?

So – during these times and subject to review if things get more serious – here is the way we should behave. If you sneeze – cover your mouth with the crook of your elbow, wash your hands frequently and make use of the hand sanitizers when you can't wash. When you are near someone who sneezes – bless God and them – for once upon a time – it would not have been just a sneeze but a life-altering event. And for the rest of us who have gathered here on these sacred days – let us continue to embrace, let us continue to embrace our tradition and each other. Because that sense of touching and being touched is one of the most important things we can do for each other.

Every scientific study shows how important touch is. Skin to skin contact between mother and infant has been shown to be crucial to a baby's development – so much so that it is a basic strategy in neonatal intensive care units of most hospitals – they find the time to take the infants out of the incubator – and just hold them for a period of time each day. They need to be touched.

A study was done in an orphanage where a group of infants were provided with an extra 15 minutes of physical stimulation twice a day - and it was shown that these infants gained significantly more weight, and growth and had fewer illnesses than the control group. Touch reduces stress, relieves pain, helps us cope and improves our general health throughout life.

A recent study of nursing home residents suffering from dementia, like Alzheimer's disease, were made less restless, did not wander as much, did less banging, pacing when therapeutic touch was added to their regimen – and these benefits were seen with just two sessions a day of 5 minutes each. It does not take much – but we need to be touched.

In Rabbinical School they taught us of the importance of making physical contact with those we visit in the hospital. Take their hand, a reassuring pat on the shoulder. How could that be so important? Hospitals do many things well, they save countless lives day in and day out – but there are few places that dehumanize people more than hospitals. The minute we trade our clothes for a hospital gown, it is as if we have stopped being a person and become a patient. We loose control of our dignity, we loose control of our privacy, someone can walk in at any moment, at any hour of the day or night and poke us, prod us, turn us, stick something in our mouth –or other places on our body – and we are completely at their mercy. And God forbid if you are really sick – with tubes and wires going in and coming out of all sorts of places on your body. And even though we can't see ourselves – we see the look on people's faces when they see us – the discomfort, the unease – we feel like a pariah as they are afraid to approach us or touch us – lest they dislodge something vital that is connected to us and machines will start beeping and sirens will go off in some distant control room. And then the rabbi walks in and just by taking our hand, touching our shoulder – brushing a check – he can remind us that we are still human – yes, the power of touch is immeasurable.

One of my favorite stories from the Bible is the one of Jacob struggling with the angel, yes, the same Jacob of sneeze fame. You remember the story don't you? Jacob had done a terrible thing at home and was forced to flee. He left everything he knew, everything that was familiar to him behind and set out on a new and frightening journey alone. One night, many years later,

on his way back home, he dreamed a dream as he slept alone by the riverbank. He had been traveling, and when he had stopped to make his meal and settle down to sleep, the place had seemed safe enough. But it was not so. Jacob awakened to find himself gripped by muscular arms and pinned to the ground. It was so dark that he could not see his enemy, but he could feel his power. Gathering all his strength, he began to struggle to be free. Now Jacob was a very strong man, in the prime of his life, but even using all of his strength, he could not free himself; he could not overcome this enemy. They wrestled for a long time, a very long time - and as the night began to end, and the light of day began to shine, Jacob noticed with astonishment that he had been wrestling with an angel. Now angels, or at least this angel could not be caught in the daylight - so quickly the tables began to turn - the angel had to leave, had to get out of there, but Jacob grabbed on with all the strength he could muster and would not let him depart. "Let me go" the angel told Jacob, "the light has come," but Jacob held him close. "I will not let you go until you bless me" declared Jacob. And so the angel was forced to give Jacob a blessing - but what a strange blessing it was: For as the angel acquiesced to Jacob's demand, he inquired of him, "What is your name..." "Jacob!" "No," said the angel, "your name shall no more be called Jacob, but *Yisrael* - for you have struggled with God and man and prevailed..." And Jacob was wounded in this encounter and left it limping; in fact he limped for the rest of his life.

Now my friends - this is no minor story - this is where we, the Jewish people, get our name - we are after all *Yisrael*.

What a strange and bizarre story. It has always left me with many more questions than answers. How could Jacob confuse an angel as an enemy? How could a name change and a wound be a blessing?

How tempting it must have been for Jacob to let the enemy go and just flee as soon as he had the chance - but he didn't. He kept on struggling; he kept on wrestling. And from that struggle we are given our name. We are Jews, we wrestle and we struggle with angels and enemies. We wrestle and struggle with life and with living.

What is clear to me is that wrestling is the very point of this story. When Jacob learned how to wrestle - he became Israel. When we learn how to wrestle, and embrace and struggle and touch - then and only then will we become Jews. For us Jews, life is supposed to be lived up close, for us life is about the embrace, the wrestling.

The modern parent lives in fear of these things - so many germs, so many diseases, so much bad stuff in the world we wish to protect our children from - so we teach them: don't touch, don't breath, don't get involved. And here comes 4000 years of Jewish tradition that is teaching just the opposite - touch, taste, feel, breathe, embrace, wrestle, take it all in, bring it all as close to you as you can. Life is lived in the embrace.

Perhaps the wisdom of this story lies in engaging the life, touching and feeling and breathing in the life you have been given as fully and as courageously as possible and not letting go until you find the unknown blessing that is in everything.

Where can the messiah be found? Asks one midrash. He can be found sitting outside the city gate bandaging the wounds of the leper. That is a strange place for the messiah to be, don't you think? Why would the messiah be found sitting with the lepers? Why would the messiah be

found bandaging their wounds? Maybe he is doing it because we don't. Maybe it is to teach us that we will not find the messiah, until we are prepared to leave our air-conditioned homes, our sanitized offices, our sterile environs and sit with the lepers. When we are prepared to embrace the one's who are most in need of embracing, the ones who need our touch and our caress more than any other – when we are prepared to touch them and hug them and love them and care for them – then and only then will the messiah be found.

And at this *Yizkor* hour and on this Yom Kippur day one more reason that I am speaking to you about touch, about the importance to wrestle and to embrace and make contact with others.

Because soon, too soon, they will be gone and you will not be able to touch them at all, ever again. And that is so very sad. It explains much of the sadness of this *Yizkor* hour.

My mother passed away this year, she was 96. How dare I complain, how dare I protest. She was 96! And she was healthy and of clear mind right up until the very end. I am embarrassed when I know what so many of you have suffered, I who have shared your losses and your pain and your tragedies – how can I express any regret at all for a mother who died at 96? But what can I say? She was my mother, and she's gone and I'll never be able to touch her any more.

Now, right about now, I suspect my wife is smiling. You see we Lucas' don't do touching. We are not overly demonstrative in our affections. I have tried to be better with my children – but I am still very much a work in progress. The Lucas' of my generation and older are not big on holding hands or hugging or kissing – its not that we don't care – we do, very much and very deeply – we just were never big on PDA's – Public Displays of Affection. For that matter we were never that big on Private Displays of Affection. So for me to stand here and talk to you of my loss; that I can't *touch* my mother any more – will ring a little strange to those who know that we didn't touch all that much when we could. But, that is part of my point, the truth is that touch is not a competitive sport. It is not how much you do it – but that you can do it at all

Does 10 hugs show more affection than one? I don't think so. Do a hundred kisses mean more than a single kiss? We each have our own style, our own comfort level, our own way of expressing our love. But while there might not be a big difference between 1 and 10 there is an enormous difference between one and none.

We live in fear of the things we might one day loose.

Many people seek my counsel when they are afraid. "Rabbi, I need your help, my husband is in the final stages of cancer and I don't know what to do, I am so afraid..." Rabbi, my wife is leaving me and I don't know what to do, I am afraid..." In all these instances, life had been so secure and then in the wink of an eye, in the flash of a second – everything changes. One call from the doctor, one confrontation with a spouse, one meeting in the bosses' office and it changes everything – everything you believed in, everything you had built your life on. Your spouse was the one safe place in an otherwise uncertain universe. He or she was the one thing you could depend on – marriage was your refuge and all of a sudden the world is a very different place than you thought it was.

My mother had always been there – I am 58 years old! But I could pick up a phone and call her; I could get on a plane and visit her. She was there, and now she is not. And the world is not as safe, not as loving as it was when she was here.

Our first reaction is to reach out – to try and grab what was once there – to touch it and embrace it and take hold of it once again. How does that saying go? “Denial is not just a river in Egypt.” When confronted with a terrible diagnosis, we seek a second opinion, and a third, a fourth if we think it might help. A spouse when informed that a partner has been unfaithful or is leaving will not untypically respond by promising to try harder, be better, “let’s give it once more chance, one more try – we can make this work, I know we can.” And when one loses their job, again, it is not uncommon to protest: “I’ll work harder, I’ll double my hours – you don’t have to pay me more – just give me another chance to prove that you were wrong about me.”

And we do the strangest things when a loved one dies.

I’ll confess something about me – it is really silly. I still have my mother’s speed dial on my cell phone. It’s been 7 months since she died, her phone is long disconnected – but I can’t, I won’t remove it from my cell phone. Isn’t that silly. It is not that I am in denial – I say *kaddish* twice a day, every day – I *know* she’s gone. But I can’t remove her name, I can’t erase her number – I guess when I get a new phone that will change.

What all of these have in common, death, divorce, disease, job loss – they are all moments that reveal the vulnerability of life. We had thought things were one way and we discover they are another. We thought truth was one thing and we learn it is quite the other. Like Jacob of old, this person, our spouse whom we thought was a friend, has become an enemy, this job we thought secure, this life we thought dependable, this world we thought safe – is not and we do not know what to do, but we know, like Jacob knew, that we are in the struggle of our life. And no matter how much we try and hold on tighter, try to hold on to what was – salvation does not lie in that direction.

Here is what will happen if you seek my counsel. If you come to me for my advice here is what you will hear. I will be patient and listen to you fully, I will not rush you, I will merely listen, I might embrace you as I try and understand the pain of betrayal or loss you must be feeling – but ultimately, inevitably when you are ready I will whisper in your ear the very same message that the angel whispered in Jacob’s ear so long ago: “let go, let go.”

Rabbi, I don’t know what to do, the cancer has gotten so bad and my husband refuses to fight any more, He has lost all interest in watching TV, he barely wants to see anyone, he doesn’t even talk to me much anymore, what should I do?” “Let go – he is letting go and so must you.”

There are moments when we must let go – of our marriages, our jobs, our mothers and fathers, our hopes and dreams, our lives. “*Vhu tzolayla al ye’rayho* And Jacob left the struggle limping...” My friends, there is no protection against the embrace of life. No hand sanitizer, no antibiotic, no vaccine – once you are exposed to life you will not emerge without your share of scars and wounds. But it is only after Jacob begins to limp that he becomes *Yisrael* – the progenitor of all Jews since.

What a very strange sermon this has been. In the first part I taught you that if you touch you might get sick – and then I told you to touch. If you get too close to me, I said, you might catch my germs – and then I told you to come close.

And then when we did get sick, when close contact with a spouse led to a painful betrayal, when total immersion in our work led to trauma when we were fired, when intimate involvement

with a loved when led to the unbearable pain of loss in the face of death – then I told you to let go?!

Rabbi, we could have stayed away in the first place and never got sick. We could have maintained our distance and never been exposed.

But therein lies very point of my message to you this morning. It is at the very place of our vulnerability that we find our humanity. Ironically, God does not protect Jacob from the wound; God merely gives him the strength to transform the wound into a blessing.

Time and time again during these days we say the words, *Zahreynu l'hayyim*...Remember us for life, 'O God." Thus translated it recognizes the fragility of life and serves as a prayer for God's protection. But there is another way of translating these words: *Zachreynu l'hayyim*: Remind us 'O God to live." Remind us to embrace life – to touch the ones we love while we still can, to embrace the ones we love while they are still with us. Remind us to live and give, to share our pain and grief, to reach out to each other, to embrace one another.

If I shake your hand today, embrace you, kiss you – I might get sick. But if I don't touch you, and I don't reach out to you how can I live?

O' Lord help us to open the hands we have clenched in fear, and to extend those hands in love to one another. Help us 'O Lord to learn to embrace life, to live life fully and completely, – and Merciful Father in Heaven help us then to learn life's most important lesson, after we have learned how important is the embrace, help us to learn to let go. We know like father Jacob that it will leave us hurting, but we know it will also leave us blessed. And today, we gather, in pain, to thank you for that blessing. Of being touched by love.