

Yom Kippur Day 5780/2019  
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas  
"All we need is love!"

How far is east from west?

Do you remember the story I told on Rosh Hashanah? Yes? No?

Then let me tell you this story:

A young rabbinical student was hired by a small congregation to be their rabbi for the High Holy Days. Unfortunately by the time Rosh Hashanah had arrived he only succeeded in writing one sermon even though he would be called upon to speak four times. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah he delivered the one sermon he had prepared. But now what was he to do? Well, all those years of talmud study were not for naught, and he ascended the pulpit on day two and began with a question: "How many of you remember the sermon I gave yesterday?" Eager to show they had listened, everyone raised their hand. "Well then, no need for me to repeat it today." And the young rabbi sat down.

When Kol Nidre rolled around the congregants had a chance to prove they weren't fools either so when the rabbi took to the pulpit and asked how many people remembered his sermon from the 1st day of Rosh Hashanah? No one raised their hand. The rabbi paused and said, "well then no need to repeat it today if you will forget it so soon..." and he sat down. Yom Kippur Day and for the last time the young rabbi stands before the congregation - but now they are really ready for him. "How many of you remember my sermon from Rosh Hashanah?" Well prepared for their young rabbi, this time half the congregation raises its hands the other half does not. The rabbi pauses for a second and then says - "Ok -- I will give you a few minutes now and those of you who do remember it can tell it to the ones who don't -- and the rabbi sat down!

So with this story in mind, I began by asking you -- how many of you remember what I said on Rosh Hashanah? But don't get your hopes up -- no matter what you answer, I am not going to sit down - unlike the young rabbinical student. I have more to say.

On the Rosh Hashanah I told you of how a rabbi asked his students: "How far is east from west?" How, some of his students thought it was half-way around the world, some thought it required a trip completely around the world - but ultimately the rabbi tried to teach them it was much simpler - that in order to go from east to west -- all you had to do was turn. If you are facing east and you just turn around you are facing west.

And I ended my comments on Rosh Hashanah by challenging you to use these *aseret y'mai teshuvah* - these Ten Days of Repentance - literally, these Ten Days of Turning to think about what in your life was in need of turning? Was there someone in your life you had turned away from during the past year - because of politics or resentment over a perceived slight? Maybe it was time to turn. I encouraged you to think of one person to whom you needed to turn? Someone to whom you may not have spoken during this past year, someone who you couldn't speak to because of politics, lifestyle differences or values - a friend, a relative, a child. I invited you to use the past 10 days to reach across the divide and talk to them, reach out to them to truly make this a time of turning.

I hope that some of you did. I won't ask for a show of hands -- but I truly hope you did. And if you did, I suspect you found that it was not easy. That, the simple act of turning - is not so simple at all. And to those of you who thought about it - but didn't quite bring yourself to do so -- I understand, I really do - turning is not easy.

How do you move from resentment to acceptance, how do you travel from intolerance to embrace, how does one go from hatred to love? It is not easy; not easy at all. It is not easy to turn to those with whom we disagree, to those who have hurt us, who think they are better than us, who mock us and malign us. No, it is not easy -- but it may be the single most important thing we each need to learn if we are to get ourselves, our country and our world out of the current mess we are in.

I'm afraid that on Rosh Hashanah I might have made it sound easy when I said: "all you need is love." But the truth is that loving someone who has disappointed you, someone who has hurt you or angered you - well - I understand how truly difficult and challenging that can be.

And if you are not sure where to start, you have come to the right place -- for I, your rabbi, am an expert when it comes to love and knowing how to love. And that expertise does not come from any personal experience - surprising as you may find that to be, but from my studies. As a rabbi, I have spent my life studying our sacred texts. And I have learned one simple truth, from all those years of study, that love is the core concept of Judaism.

You thought that was Christianity? You thought they were the religion of love and we were the religion of law? You thought the God of the Old Testament was the God of vengeance while theirs was the God of love? Well, I'm afraid you thought wrong. There are a lot of good reasons you probably thought this -- but, I am here today to set you straight.

2000 years ago, when Rabbi Akiba was asked what Judaism was about - he quoted Leviticus 19:18 - "Love your neighbor..." this is, he said, is *klal gadol batorah* - the fundamental principle of the torah. When Hillel was asked to summarize all of Judaism while standing on one foot what did he say? Yep - "love your neighbor... all the rest is commentary."

Love and hate are the two great motivators in life. In our personal lives and in our national life. The Bible tells us: *lo tisna ahicha bilvavecha...v'ahavta l'reyecha k'mocha, ani adonai*. "Don't hate your neighbor in your heart...but you should love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord." There in one powerful verse, the Bible places these two motivating forces one opposite the other: hate and love. You thought Judaism was complicated? 613 commandments - thousands of pages of Bible and Talmud to study? Millennia of history to comprehend. Nope -- Judaism is really very simple: Don't hate, love.

*V'ahavta et adonai elohecha b'chol levavecha, b'chol nafshecha, u'vechol meodecha* - "Love God with all your heart, soul and might."

*V'ahavta l'reyecha k'mocha* - love your neighbor - the people near and dear to you

*V'ahavta et ha ger* - love the stranger - the foreigner in your midst, those who are not like you - the other.

**Love of God, love of those close to you, love of the other - these are the three great loves in Judaism.**

But how rabbi? How do I love? How do I love a God I don't really believe in? How do I love people close to me who have hurt me and disappointed me? How do I love those who are so different from me, those who sometimes seem to threaten me? You say that Judaism commands me to love - but love is a feeling? I can't be commanded to love - not God, not my family, not others - not even myself. Either I feel love or I don't. I can't control my feelings!  
Judaism disagrees.

Rabbi Shai Held suggests that in Judaism love is not an emotion and it is not an action -- it is a posture, a posture that includes both emotions and actions. Love is not about what I feel - but it is first and foremost an orientation, an orientation that we have toward another - how we choose to face each other, how we choose to face God and how we choose to face those who share the world with us.

Nachmanides, the medieval Biblical commentator, suggests that love in Judaism is essentially a generosity of spirit. What is your normal orientation towards others? Nachmanides writes that most of us are fine with someone being successful as long as we see ourselves as *more* successful. It's okay if you are wealthy as long as I am wealthier. And it is ok that you are smart as long as I am smarter. I can even live with you being wealthier if I am smarter and I can live with you being smarter if I am wealthier. As long as I have *more* than you - well then, I can be gracious in my love, generous in my spirit.

But, suggests Nachmanides, Judaism demands more.

*V'ahavta l'reyecha k'mocha* - Love your neighbor as yourself - means you are to try and genuinely want for your neighbor what you want for yourself. If you study the Hebrew closely -- the words say as much. The verse does not command you to love a stranger as much as you love yourself - that would be silly - how could we be expected to love someone else as much as we do ourselves. But that is not what it says - it does not say *v'ahavta ET reyecha* - rather it says: *v'ahavta L'reyecha* - show love for your neighbor, toward your neighbor - wish for them the blessings that you have yourself. Most of us, too many of us - live life doing the opposite. We resent the good fortune of others as if in some way it represents a threat to our good fortune, as if life is a zero sum game: If they come into money - there will be less in the world for me. If they have a child or grandchild - how come I don't have children or grandchildren? I come to resent their happiness because there will be less for me. Me first - them second.

Love in Judaism, means the exact opposite of this way of thinking. Love is thinking of someone else first. But don't worry - if love is thinking of someone else first, being loved means someone else is thinking about you. Let me try and demonstrate how this works. I much prefer when Edy shops for dinner than when I shop for dinner. You see when I shop for dinner, because I love Edy -- I get the kind of soup *she* likes, the kind of side-dishes *she* likes and the kind of chicken *she* likes. But when she shops for dinner, because she loves me - she gets the soup, side-dishes and chicken that I like.  
Ain't love grand?

One of the concepts that frequently go hand in hand with love in Jewish tradition is *hesed* - sometimes translated as loving kindness - *hesed* really is an act of grace. I know you thought grace was a Christian concept as well. Wrong again.  
Here is how Maimonides defines *hesed*: "I owe someone something and I choose to give them more than I owe them or, I owe them nothing and I choose to give to them anyway."

The classic example of the second one is God's creation of the universe. God owes us nothing - and yet - there the world is! The very existence of the universe is an example of an act of divine grace -- the world exists -- you and I -- and none of us did anything to earn it, to deserve it. It is an expression of God's kindness, of *hesed*. Creation in Judaism is an act of divine grace. And by the way - your existence - the very fact that you were born -- that is an act of human grace - it was an act of *hesed* done by your parents. You did nothing to deserve it and yet -- here you are.

So, now that you understand how *ahava* and *hesed*, love and grace, work in Judaism. Now that you understand that as a Jew you are expected to walk in the world with grace and love towards others. Now you are prepared to understand why I, as your rabbi, am so troubled by the current state of things. By the way politics is being practiced; by the way too many religious people are behaving. You now can understand why I am so troubled by the current debates over immigration, abortion, gun safety. Why the politics of Israel is driving me crazy and yes, why our president keeps me up at night. It is all me first. There is no grace, no generosity of spirit, no love - it is anger and resentment as far as the eye can see - and as your rabbi, I have to tell you that just will not do. I have no illusions about my ability to change the world - but you - I expect you to do better.

I read a remarkable book this summer. Its title was "Rising out of Hatred - the awakening of a former White Nationalist" written by Eli Saslow. It is the story of one Derek Black who grew up at the epicenter of white nationalism. His father founded Stormfront, the largest racist community on the Internet. His godfather was David Duke, the Grand Wizard of the KKK. By the time he was 19, he had become an elected politician, had his own daily radio show and was regarded as the "leading light of the next generation of the white nationalist movement." Then he went to college. He had been home-schooled until then and had little, to no, interaction with anyone who thought differently than he. The book is the story of his transformation at college that led to his beginning to question his misguided notions of science, history and the prejudices that were behind his world view. Precisely as white nationalism began to infiltrate the political mainstream, Derek decided to confront the damage his hatred had done. The book is the story of how he migrated from the far-right fringe until he ultimately disavowed everything he was taught to believe - at great cost to himself and his relationships with those he loved.

How did it happen? What caused him to uproot his entire life and everything he believed? It all started with a simple act of *hesed* - an undeserved and unwarranted act of kindness and love. When Derek came to college he didn't tell anyone who he was. He made friends, got involved in college life and then when he was outed - when it was discovered that he was one of the leading white nationalists of our generation -each of his friends had a decision to make. Most chose to cut ties with him, protest his presence on campus and even pressure the university to expel him. But, a few did not. A small group of Jewish students, who had befriended him before they knew of his background did not shut him out rather they invited him to their weekly shabbat dinners. They invited our country's leading white nationalist for *shabbes* dinner! They engaged him, they challenged him and ultimately they convinced him that everything he believed about Jews was wrong. And if he was wrong about Jews... well that began the process that continued until he completely rejects his white nationalist associations. And it all began with an act of *hesed* - an undeserved and unwarranted act of kindness - an invitation to Shabbat dinner. He certainly did not deserve their kindness. But there it was. And their undeserved act of love changed his life. All you need is love.



Derek Black was raised to believe that *we* were the enemy. He believed that Jews were trying to take his money, immigrants were trying to take his job, and blacks were trying to steal his culture. He was righteous in his indignation and fearless in his determination to defend the values he believed in.

Some here today believe that they are coming to take your guns, they want to destroy your Second Amendment rights - and you are righteous in your indignation and determined to defend your values.

Some here today believe that there is an immigration crisis and they are threatening to take over our country and destroy your values - and you are righteous in your indignation and determined to defend your values.

Some here today believe that everyone in the world is out to get what you have - they resent your freedom and your wealth and your success and they want to take that from you -

Some here today believe that others are trying to impose their values on you and restrict your right to make decisions about your own body - and you too are righteous in your indignation and determined to defend your values as you take to the streets in protest.

Some of believe that Israel is unjustly oppressing the Palestinian people, and if you believe that, - well, I guess I understand why you are so angry with Israel.

If you are ultra-Orthodox and you believe that Jews who are trying to hold an egalitarian worship Service at the kotel are not merely trying to worship in the way they are accustomed but trying to destroy your religion - well I guess I understand why you are so angry and defiant.

But maybe you are wrong. Maybe we are all wrong in many of the things we hold to be self-evident. Maybe like Derek Black, until we realize that they - whoever they are - the Jews, the immigrants, the liberals, the conservatives, until we learn that they are not who we thought they were and until we are prepared to confront them not in fear and anger but in love and grace - we will never get out of the mess we are in.

And please do not dismiss me as being naive. I know we have enemies. I know that there are those who seek our destruction and no amount of love will change them. I am glad that Israel has one of the strongest armies in the world and I am proud we Americans do as well. I have no illusion that if we invite Iran or ISIS or even the Russians for a Shabbat dinner we will solve all the world's problems. But when we make the jump from the reality that we have enemies to: they are all the enemy! When we no longer trust anyone and believe they are *all* out to get us - well - then we get the current mess we are in. And my friends if you listen to the far right (and sometimes to the "not so far" right) and if you listen to the far left (and sometimes to the "not so far" left) that is precisely what they are selling.

A story - absolutely true. A while ago a few of our members came to me and said they needed to speak to me. They could not understand why I did not love President Trump as much as they did. They could not understand my unwillingness to embrace him and to their credit - they did not walk out or turn their backs on me - they sought me out and requested an opportunity to talk to me - they wanted to understand what to them was incomprehensible. So we met after kiddush one Shabbat. We sat at a table and we talked. But I began by saying to them - rather than have us debate, rather than my telling you why I believe what I believe and you tell me why you believe what you believe.

Let's turn the tables - I will tell you why you like our president and you tell me why you think I have concerns. I went first. And without effort I was able to list in great detail the things they, themselves, would have said. After a couple of minutes they smiled - I had stated their position, their beliefs, precisely. And then I invited them to tell me why they thought I had concerns. And they were able to recite each and every one of my concerns as precisely as I would have.

Look, no minds were changed that day. But each of us realized that the other saw him and that we acknowledged each other and respected each other. I suspect my sermons have remained frustrating to them - but now at least they know that I love them and respect them - -and I hope that they continue to love and respect me. And on this we can build a future.

Love is about memory but it is also about forgetting. Rosh Hashana is called Yom Hazikaron - the Day of Remembrance - as we believe that a strong future is built when we remember and dedicate ourselves to certain values and beliefs. But that was what we did on Rosh Hashanah - -that is not what today is about - today is about the other key ingredient in a successful relationship - the ability to forget. It is as important to forget as to remember.

We come to shul on Yom Kippur and we imagine that we are being judged by God. And we are nervous - as I better than anyone know how much I have fallen short during the past year - and you know you have not been the kind of person you should have, the kind of husband or wife, father or mother, the kind of friend should have been, the kind of rabbi and leader I should have been. And we stand before God here in this Temple and we pray for 25 hours - we apologize, we beat our breast and we express our remorse and our regret -- and then at the end of it all you know what God says? God says: "Oh forget about all that -- just try and do better this year."

The God whom we believe sees everything and knows everything - also knows how to forget - and so should we.

Nations are built on the ability to forget. This great country was founded in 1776 in a bitter dispute with the English. We fought and died by the thousands to establish our country - and then we put it all behind us and today England is one of our closest allies. We had a bloody civil war in this country - north vs south. Over 600,000 people died as a result of that awful chapter in American history - would we ever be able to put that kind of pain behind us and reunite our country?

Permit me to quote the president. President Abraham Lincoln said these words in his second inaugural address March 4, 1865: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Lincoln said that in the very midst of the most bitter war in our nation's history - in a war that pitted brother against brother, Lincoln was able to see beyond the hatred of the moment to envision a better time when we would once again walk together as a nation of brothers and sisters who cared for each other. Truly great leaders have a vision of love and hesed - not fear and hate. We are in need of this kind of greatness today. To remember every slight, to be willing to do battle over every injustice - upon this a nation cannot be built - it will only be built on a vision of love and hesed.

Until and unless Israelis and Palestinians can put aside their long list of grievances we will continue to be locked in an endless battle for what we believe to be our righteous and just cause. Our memories are too well developed. Our memories for each and every outrage, tragedy and insult are too good. We need to learn how to forget. The ability to forget is the key to their future.

Families are also built on the need to forget.

Every parent, without much effort, can probably remember a time when their child said something on the order of - "Mommy I hate you, I don't want you to be my mommy anymore!" Even spoken by a child, the words hurt us, but we did not take them seriously - we knew they were spoken from a place of anger and hurt. And then a few hours later we find that same child sitting in mommy's lap, hugging and kissing her. What about the hate? Forgotten. But she did not want you to be her mommy anymore -- forgotten. And yet every day I deal with adults who find their way to my office and complain about something said or done by a brother, a spouse, a friend twenty years ago and they just can't get past it! Why is your friend not coming to the wedding? Why don't you want to be in the same room with your sister at your mother's funeral? Why are you so angry with your ex-spouse when the divorce was 15 years ago?

How come kids are so good at forgetting and we, so called mature adults - people who should know better, continue to nurse grudges, hatreds and resentments that should have been put aside long ago? Why are kids so much better at this than we adults? I'll tell you.

Because given the choice between being right and being happy - kids will choose happy every time. Given the choice between being right and being happy - we adults choose being right, every single time, and as a result we make ourselves miserable, destroy our most precious relationships, ignore the people we could and should love the most -- all because of our inability to forget.

All you need is love!

Sounds easy -- but in truth it is the hardest thing of all - to love. To love people who do not love me, who believe things I do not understand, who behave in ways that confuse me, disappoint me, anger me. That sister who angered you so long ago, the child or parent who disappointed you, is it really so hard to love them - again?

To love the entire world is a hard thing, but I know where to start.

We start here -- in this room, in this sanctuary -- we start by loving each other.

Look around; look at how different we are from each other. Most in this room are Jews -- but what does that tell you? Not much. In this room are observant Jews, less observant Jews and not at all observant Jews. There are Jews who are Zionists, socialists, capitalists, kibitzers and yentes. Republican Jews and Democrat Jews, bagel and lox Jews, Midge Maisel Jews and Sholom Shtisel Jews, hipster Jews and Brooks Brother Jews, there are professional Jews and blue collar Jews, Jews with advanced degrees some who have won academic prizes and Jews who never went to college. Jews who are crooks and Jews who are generous with their time and money. Some Jews here like the Mets and some Jews here like the Yankees - go figure. There are Long Island Jews and Upper West Side Jews and Upper East Side Jews and even Brooklyn Jews - oh yeah and there are also Jews who live outside of New York Jews- there are Hollywood Jews and Midwest Jews (whom I happen to be partial to). There are kosher deli Jews, kosher style deli Jews and treife Jews - there is a lot of pizza Jews. (I don't believe there are any Chick-fil-A Jews). Nordstrom Jews and HomeGoods Jews - wait those are the same Jews. There are gay Jews and straight Jews, transgender Jews, fluid Jews and solid Jews. There are Reform, Re-constructionist, Humanist, JuBu, secular, Ashkefardic, feminist, Orthoprax, Conservative with an upper case C, conservative and with a lower case c, Jews. Jews who are in labor

unions and Jews who are tech entrepreneurs. Environmentalist Jews, fruity granola Jews, yekke Jews, neo-hasidic Jews and atheist Jews, Chinese food on Christmas Jews, saints and sinner Jews, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem Jews, kibbutzniks, Refusniks, and New York Knicks Jews. Lulav waiving, matzah munching, horah dancing, tefillin donning Jews and Jews who have never put on tefillin. There are rabbi Jews and Jews who don't like the rabbi Jews There are even Jews who don't like Jews, Jews.

But here is my one single simple point: You are all my Jews, I love you all, every single one of you. We need to spend the next year saying that to each other and finding ways to show that to each other. And if we can begin to do that then we can also begin to move outside of this room, to so many others who are also deserving of our love.

All it took was a single act of kindness - they invited someone no one would have blamed them for hating - a white supremacist - they invited him for Shabbat dinner and look what happened. All you need is love.

Rabbi Raphael, one of the Hasidic masters, invited a group of his disciples to share a ride with him in his coach. "But there is not enough room for all of us!" One of the disciples protested, "We will be too crowded." To which the rabbi replied, "Then we shall have to love each other more. If we love each other more, there will be room for all of us."

Abraham Joshua Heschel loved to tell this story because he understood that the entire world is a coach. If we relinquish our respect for others there will not be enough space for us to live together. But if we can learn to love a little more -- there will be room for everyone. Now more than ever, all we need is love.