

Sermon for Kol Nidre – 16 – On Love and Fear

This past Sunday morning Tami, my wife, turned to me and said something so wise. She said, “There are two ways to look at my day so far. One way is that my husband made me breakfast, my father-in-law went out and brought me my favorite chai tea latte, my in-laws took care of feeding my four boys and getting them bathed and I spent several hours working on a great basement purge. The other way is that I have been pumping water out of my basement since 2 o’clock this morning, I’ve thrown out a bunch of things that got ruined and I am too exhausted or distracted to do any of those other things myself. I guess I’ll try to focus on the first one.”

It is true we had some flooding in our basement courtesy of Matthew. We spent a good portion of Sunday actually cleaning hundreds and hundreds of gallons out of our basement. People would often ask, “Oh you have a finished basement in Ghent? Does it flood?” And I would answer, “Flood? No we sometimes get a little water in the unfinished part of our basement, but never the finished part.” Well, apparently we just hadn’t experienced the right storm. And so Tami and I spent the night executing the Sisyphean task of bailing out water not nearly as quickly as it was coming in. When our fear was about to get the better of us and we thought there was no way we could keep up with the water or prevent major damage to the house, we looked at each other over our his and hers shop-vacs and were able to go on. It wasn’t that we had some great confidence that we were going to be successful, we didn’t and we weren’t, but in looking at each other we were reminded that we would get through this ordeal as we have countless others and that in the long run we would be okay.

What’s our secret? It’s no secret really. The answer is in the traditional Hebrew phrase for courage - *ametz lev*, or strong of heart. So what makes a person’s heart strong? Exercise of course! But not the kind you may be thinking of. It is how we exercise it through love. How we exercise it by giving to the people we care about, because what makes each of us brave in the face of anxiety or tragedy is our caring relationships. As we give to another person our heart grows and strengthens. This act of giving, of sacrificing one’s own needs or resources, is how a strong heart becomes courageous. And that courage is furthered by the hope and belief placed in us by the other side of that relationship. When someone you care about believes in you, you believe in yourself too. That’s the foundation of courage. That’s why Tami and I stayed calm in the water Sunday night, because when we are with the people we love most, the people we have given the most to and who rely on us the most, we find the courage to move forward, whatever the circumstances.

Alan Morinis, a great teacher of Mussar Judaism who will be our Mickey Kramer Tidewater Together Scholar-in-Residence later this year, brings a beautiful story about courage:

In 1918, Bolshevik soldiers burst into the Novardok yeshiva. The commanding officer marched right up to the young man who served as head of the yeshiva, pulled his gun and demanded that the yeshiva be closed immediately. The young man rose from his seat, unbuttoned his shirt and said, “Shoot!” The younger students lined up behind him, unbuttoned their shirts and waited. The soldiers turned and left.

From where did these boys get their courage? From each other and the shared purpose they have of giving their whole lives to the study of Torah. Each one recognized the sacrifice his fellow students were willing to make on behalf of the group and wanted to give the same to them. In a sense, that is what this day of Yom Kippur is all about. It is about recognizing the humanity in all the people we encounter and being generous to them. Today we are called upon to seek forgiveness for our missteps and to grant forgiveness to those who have wronged us – facing our worst selves and our worst moments; that is a courageous act. Perhaps an even more courageous act is granting forgiveness to

those who have wronged us, to face those who have hurt us and give them the opportunity to make amends. Understanding the fallibility of others and letting go of our own anger. These are the brave acts that are demanded of us today and the only possible way we can be up for them is if we can recognize the humanity even in those who have hurt us and fearlessly open ourselves up so that both parties can heal. This holiday is indeed a holiday of bravery, a holiday of the strong hearted, and therefore, it is a holiday of love.

And who teaches us to love? What are the specifics? Who is our model for this generosity to humanity that gives us courage? In the Yom Kippur Selichot prayers we are about to recite we turn to God by referring to God's 13 Attributes of love again and again as we recite, "*Adonai, Adonai El rahum v'hanun, erech apayim v'rav hesed v'emet. Notzeir hesed l'alafim, nosei avon va-fesha v'hatta'ah v'nakkeh.*" Those are God's 13 Attributes of Love – Adonai, Adonai, God merciful and Compassionate, patient, abounding in love and faithfulness, assuring love for thousands of generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and granting pardon." God is our model of love and we are supposed to be putting these same 13 attributes into the world through the way we approach every day and every encounter. That's how we are to express our love for creation. In living according to the 13 Attributes we find our strength of heart. We find our courage.

We are not reciting these attributes of God's love on Yom Kippur in hopes that God will turn those loving attributes to us and forgive us our transgressions. We don't need to pray for God's love – it is always there! That's what love is and what God is! So why recite the 13 attributes of God's love time and again if not to call God's love to us? It is to inspire us. It is to remind us that we too need to approach the world with love, and not in some amorphous touchy-feely way, but in all the concrete ways that God's love is apparent in the world. We mention that God is compassionate to remind us to be compassionate, that God is patient and forgiving and granting pardon and on and on to remind us that we should embody all of those things in the world too. Deuteronomy tells us that we should "walk in God's ways." Operating in the world with love, that is how we walk in God's ways.

This day of Yom Kippur is not just about how we approach God; that's only half the work. It is about how we approach the world and more importantly how we approach each other. It is undoubtedly calling on us to overcome fear and timidity and conceit and to act instead with compassion and humility and faithfulness. When we do that, we are at our best, as a community, as a society and as individuals. Only when we let our guards down can we build bridges with others, only when we trust that things will be all right can we bring more positivity into the world. That is our task today and every day – to bring more divine love into the world.

Unfortunately, I too often sense a trend in the opposite direction. I sense a failure to only recognize the humanity of a person first and to recognize the differences after, a trend of intolerance, of indifference, of self-absorption. Why? Why do we "otherize" the stranger instead of embracing them as our human brother or sister? What is the emotion that keeps us from encountering other people with love? That is fear, fear born of our failure to be generous to the other, fear born of our focus on our material comfort rather than on the most important thing, human beings.

That is why Judaism tells us time and again that we should not be afraid. At the very moment of our birth as a nation, Moses tells the Israelites at the sea, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today." Was their reason to fear as the Egyptian army was bearing down upon us? Of course! But Moses says that we should not live in that space of fear, rather love and trust in God and each other and in that we can find deliverance. And in the most famous of all the Psalms we are told, "Though I walk through the Valley of Death I will fear no evil." Why not? Why shouldn't we be afraid in the Valley of Death? How can we not be? "Because God is with me, His rod

and his staff they comfort me.” Even in the Valley we are not alone! Time and again we are told by the Bible that we should not approach the world with fear, but rather should trust in God and vis-a-vis God other people. As it says in Deuteronomy, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you.”

“But rabbi,” I hear you thinking, “The world is a scary and troubled place. Surely you are not asking us to let our guards down and be prone.” Actually that is exactly what I am doing. It happens all the time and it is the most important glue holding our society together at the moment. I’ll demonstrate with a story:

There are two police officers in a convenience shop chatting with the owner who is behind the counter. A black woman enters and looks warily at them before walking into the back aisles to get her things. A few seconds later she turns around and sees one of the cops approaching her. Her shoulders droop and she closes her eyes. The officer says, “Wow, it’s a rough day to be either of us isn’t it?” The woman starts to cry and so does he. They embrace, a healing moment shared, and go their separate ways.

The date was July 8th. The day before five Dallas police officers had been targeted and killed by an African-American sniper at an otherwise peaceful Black Lives Matter-organized protest. The protest had been organized as a response to the police shootings of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge and Philando Castile in Minnesota on the previous days.

I remember what those few weeks felt like, I’m sure you do too. They felt like the very fabric of our society was unraveling even as we watched. The violence was horrifying; the mood all around the country was tense. Would there be widespread violence? Would there be riots? It felt like the racial tensions between police and black communities that had been on simmer at least since Ferguson and Baltimore, if not longer, were about to boil over all around the country and the consequences would be dire – violence and lawlessness, being forced to face national demons we have been avoiding for decades. These were a scary few weeks, but amazingly, while tensions have not dissipated and more incidents have followed, we have not seen the explosion that we fear.

I am so grateful for the restraint we have seen and yet, I am also mystified by it. It seems too good to be true. How could all this be going on, all this tension, all these videos and we not see a downward spiral into anarchy and lawlessness. And then I heard the story about the police officer and the African-American woman in the convenience store and I saw the pictures of police officers standing hand-in-hand with citizens of all ethnicities and backgrounds in prayer circles and I remembered that what made the police in Dallas so vulnerable that evening was that they’d shown up to the Black Lives Matter rally in Dallas without their vests and equipment belts. They were there to be with the protesters in their moment of grief and need, to support them, not to control them. Their presence that evening was an act of love, an act of courage, an act of the strong-hearted.

I saw all of this and I remembered the important truth – that the opposite of fear is not bravery; the opposite of fear is love. That is the core of what makes this “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” the recognition of the humanity of all people and the love for all people that the vast majority of our citizens feel. And that is not only a core American value; it is a core Jewish value.

Today, on this day of Yom Kippur we are called upon to live that value, to set aside our fear, our fear of those who are different from us, and to recognize first what is the same. What we share is so much more than what makes us different no matter the ethnicity, religion, nationality – when we meet a fellow human being we are meeting our brother or sister. As we read in the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 4:5), “The Bible relates that God created Adam, a single human being, as the ancestor for all humanity.

This...should make for peace, since no one can say to anyone else, 'My ancestor was greater than your ancestor.'"

When we encounter the other, we are called upon not to fear, not to otherize. We are called upon to bring divine love into the world by treating them with compassion, with patience, with forgiveness not only for them but for their ancestors, just as God does. As we turn to our Kol Nidre Selichot prayers and invoke God's 13 Attributes of Love, let us fulfill the purpose of this holiday by pledging to bring those 13 Attributes more truly into our lives and into how we approach the world. Let us be vessels of God's love in this world by taking care of our fellow human beings. In that way, we make ourselves part of the necessary healing that our nation needs so badly, instead of part of what ails us. May we all experience that sense of God's love in our lives from one another and may we all share it freely and courageously.

Considering exactly how we will do that, we continue our prayers with the cycle of Selichot prayers starting on page...