

Rabbi Beth H Klafter
Erev Yom Kippur 5778
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Summer of Hate: Year of Love

A child wraps a box in shiny gold paper; the folds are uneven; tape covers the design. The bow is tied awkwardly. And then she presents the gift to her mother, who struggles a bit with the ribbons and the tape. She looks inside the box. "I don't understand, honey, there is nothing in here." "Oh mommy, it's not empty. I blew kisses into the box. I filled it with my love." How many kisses does it take to fill the box? At this season, I wonder, how many boxes of kisses, would it take to fill our world with love?

Last week I spoke about the *Yovel*, the Hebrew word for the hallowed Jubilee year in ancient Israel. On this biblical 'Golden Anniversary,' the land and the people were freed. The instructions for the *Yovel* from Leviticus include these vital words: "*You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants.*" On the eve of Rosh HaShana, I examined a personal, spiritual kind of liberty and freedom for the new year.

The next morning, these same words informed my sermon focusing on the communal and national challenges we are facing. I joined the chorus of Reform rabbis around the country, calling upon our current administration to embrace this message. During services last week I also reflected on this year's 50th anniversary since the Israeli Six-Day War. As promised last week, tonight I would like to reflect on another 50th anniversary.

Where were we as a nation in 1967, 50 years ago?

1967 saw the world's first heart transplant. Minimum wage increased to \$1.40 / hour. "I Love Lucy" and "Gunsmoke" were among the most popular television shows. Thurgood Marshall was confirmed as the first African American Justice on the Supreme Court. In January of '67, US soldiers mounted Operation Cedar Falls in Vietnam; in April, Martin Luther King, Jr., publically denounced the War. Demonstrations, protests, and race riots were held on college campuses and on the streets of our cities throughout that year. Many of the images we witnessed this summer were reminiscent of the events, the photographs and news reports from ½ a century ago.

Reminiscent. But not the same.

This summer has been labeled the "Summer of Hate," a phrase published by a racist website among other references. (Daily Stormer) As a Jewish community, we know, we are witnessing a rise in overt acts of anti-Semitism both locally and nationally.

My colleague, Senior Rabbi Tom Gutherz, at Congregation Beth Israel in Charlottesville, referred to this expression, “the Summer of Hate,” on a call with Reform rabbis just days after the horrific events there. This summer we were barraged with images, posts on Facebook, tweets, speeches and rallies.

I hate that 2017 is being called ‘the Summer of Hate’ because the title is so painfully appropriate.

As I went through my mail one day this summer, I came upon (of all things) the AARP magazine; the art of Peter Max was on the cover – bright swirling colors, stylized faces looking at one another; a figure flying through the air, with open arms. The cover article invites its readers to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the “Summer of Love.” San Francisco in 1967.

Tens of thousands of people gathered in California that summer described as a “cultural revolution on every level.” Music and clothing and communal living; voices raised against the Vietnam War and against government; the causes of civil rights and women’s rights promoted. It may not have been a summer of pure happiness; it was not all bliss and utopia. Yet as [compared to the] “destructive ignorance of this ‘Summer of Hate,’ the ‘Summer of Love’ in America was an optimistic place.” (Andy Leonard of the Huffington Post June 2, 2017) Bob Weir of the Grateful Dead spoke about the pivotal time in rock-and-roll, “But it wasn’t just the music,” he said, “There was a spirit in the air. We figured that if enough of us got together and put our hearts and minds to it, we could make anything happen [during that Summer of Love].”

So where are we now, 50 summers later? Where is that optimism, that spirit of Love?

Last month, we viewed the eclipse of the sun. For many this summer the swirling dark colors of hate eclipsed the vibrant colors of love. “We are living in a constant message of hate which is so easy to internalize and with which to paint everyone we meet. It’s insidious – and becomes a pattern we may repeat without knowing.” (see Anne Lamott)

So often we work to impact the world outside of us; we may not even notice consciously, when the outside world seeps into our homes and hearts too.

About 50 years ago, I was in the second grade. One day I came home to report that the blackboard was a bit fuzzy. I thought that everyone in the last row of desks couldn’t see clearly. I learned the word, myopia, and got my first pair of eyeglasses. My prescription has changed but still I’ve been wearing them ever since. During this high holiday season, especially, I have been changing my focus from the *bema* between being ‘near-sighted’ and ‘far-sighted.’

To borrow a phrase from writer, Anne Lamott, sometimes we need to embrace the ‘blessing of myopia.’

On this sacred night of Yom Kippur let us concern ourselves with the eclipse of light and love as close as our own hearts. I love this wisdom from Rabbi Shlomo Carlbach: "If I had two hearts, I could afford to use one for hate and one for love; but I have only one heart. So I choose love."

Moses pleaded with Pharaoh to let our people go, to release us from the servitude of Egyptian slavery. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened. A hardened heart is one that cannot feel for the other. That type of heart is its own form of slavery. *Al chet sh'chatanu l'fanecha, b'ee'mootz ha'lav*, "For the sin we have committed against You by hardening our hearts," we confessed tonight.

We speak most often about deeds of righteous, justice and truth; and less about the work of our hearts. In doing so we may think that love is less important than justice in Judaism. Judaism is not either / or. We are a religion of 'and'. We are a religion built upon justice and love.

Love, in Hebrew, "*Ahava*," is essential. We hear it in one of the prayers we teach to all of our students; it is included in every worship service:

V'ahavta et Adonai elohecha

"You shall love the Lord Your God"

b'chol l'vav'echa u'v'chol naf'she'cha u'v'chol m'o'decha.

with all your mind, with all your strength and with all your being."

This Hebrew has been interpreted with verses of poetry:

So you shall love what is holy

Let the words that have come down

Shine in our words and our actions.

Let the work of your hands speak of goodness

We should love ourselves, for we are of God,

Let love fill our hearts with its clear precious water.

Be quiet and listen to the still small

Voice within that speaks in love

Open to that voice, hear it, need it and work for love.

(adapted Marge Piercy)

These words remind us that our lives have meaning through our deeds. Loving God means living the commandments and ethics of Torah; loving other people means extending our hands and our hearts through our acts of lovingkindness. "One can always find warm hearts - in a glow of emotion - who would like to make the whole world happy; but [perhaps those same people] have never attempted the sober experiment of bringing real blessing to a single human being [standing before them]." (Leo Baeck)

On Yom Kippur the words of the prophet, Ezekiel, declare: “God says, “I will remove your heart of stone and I will give you a heart of flesh.” A ‘heart of flesh’ is both strong and weak; it pumps its blood in and out; it nourishes our souls and the souls of others.

Teacher and author, Marianne Williamson, shares: “Something amazing happens when we surrender and just love. We melt into another world, a realm of power already within us. The world changes when we change. The world softens when we soften. The world loves us when we choose to love the world.”

We have just one heart to fill with love and compassion for ourselves and for the people we encounter in our daily lives.

Hurricane Harvey was the ‘hurricane of heroism,’ as one reporter described it (Jeff Darcy, Cleveland.com). Since Harvey, we have seen more hurricanes and earthquakes; we think especially of those in Puerto Rico. As I saw the filled box trucks heading to Texas, I had the thought that perhaps the enormous outpouring came out of a need to bring kindness and compassion into a world that was so filled with hate this summer. This doesn’t for a moment devalue or minimize the heroics and the outpouring; I simply think it speaks to the human craving for love – given or received.

“Connection is why we are here,” I read in a book by Brene Brown, “We are hardwired to connect with others. It’s what gives purpose and meaning to our lives and without it there is suffering.” (Daring Greatly) We have had enough suffering and hatred this summer and in recent months. As we begin 5778, I wonder how we can to fill our world with love?

The show, “Rent,” tallies that we have 525 thousand, 600 minutes each year to measure our lives in love. It’s time to begin building a year of love, second by second, person by person.

Several years ago, author George Saunders delivered a commencement speech. He described his greatest regret in life – in the seventh grade when a new student joined his class. She was awkward and easily teased at school and in the neighborhood. Often Saunders saw her hanging around alone in her front yard. And then, her family moved away. Saunders said: “Forty-two years later, I am still thinking about [her]. Relative to most of the other kids, I was actually pretty nice to her. But still. It bothers me [that I didn’t say or do more].” “What I regret most in my life,” he confessed to the graduates, “are ‘failures of kindness.’ Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering and I responded sensibly, reservedly. Mildly.” Or perhaps, I would add, ‘not at all.’

Singing group, the Monotones first asked the question decades ago, “Who wrote the Book of Love?” In the new year, we can write our own books: Books of Love; and inscribe on each page our acts of loving-kindness. In Fiddler on the Roof, Golde answers Tevye’s famous question,

“Do you love me?” “Do I love you? For 25 years I’ve washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house. Given you children, milked the cow. After 25 years, why talk about love right now?” In reality, Golde is talking about love; a love that is an alive and breathing heart, moving us to act in this world.

What does love look like?

Think about it: when have you felt truly loved?
Think about a time when you expressed your love
Not just in words, but in your deeds?

Love is when a parent goes out in the middle of the night to pick up a child, afraid to sleep at a friend’s house.

It is when someone comes to sit with us, even though we thought we needed to be alone.

It was when I bought your favorite flavor of ice cream, not mine.

That was me loving you. You loving me.

Henry James wrote, “Three things in human life are important: the first is to be kind; the second is to be kind; and the third is to be kind.” We may not be able to eradicate hate from this world, but we can bring love into our lives.

Danny Siegel, a man who has dedicated his life to living the value of Tzedakah and acts of lovingkindness, composed these words:

*It is the little acts, positioned in the day,
That make us,
the kissing of the fallen book, which doesn’t feel,
Kissing (again) the mezuzah as we pass through the doorways,
Kissing (again) the Torah as they march by.
From these kisses, come justice and humanity,
Lifting the fallen book, we may, just may some day,
Lift the fallen neighbor, the stranger, who feels, with a kiss.*

(adapted from Danny Siegel, “With a Kiss”)

How many kisses does it take to fill a box?

The Psalmist has written, “Olam Chesed Yibaneh,” I will build this world with love. These words were set to a melody shortly after 9/11. (Menachem Creditor) This world will be built by love: ours and God’s. Let us rise up from this “Summer of Hate” to build a “Year of Love.”