

To Love Unconditionally, Part 1: When It's Hard to Love

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A couple weeks ago, I told you one of my childhood rabbis has been arrested for attempting to seduce a minor online.

So many Houstonians have reached out to me to say they cannot *fathom* that he is capable of doing something so monstrous.

On the other hand, people have shared their stories with me of being molested as children by trusted figures you would never imagine.

The Torah likens sex crimes to murder.¹ Sexual abuse is about the worst thing one human being can do to another—especially a child.

I picture a little boy or little girl, trapped in a place they did not choose, betrayed and tormented by someone who was supposed to protect them.

It is tragic, demonic, and painfully sad.

I feel deep compassion for the victims.

I cannot pretend to understand the trauma they live with every day, but I know it never goes away.

If you are a victim of child abuse—even if happened decades ago—please tell someone: a rabbi, a therapist, a trusted friend.

You do not have to bear the pain alone. There are people who care about you.

I believe no one would commit such a horrific act against a child unless they were spiritually sick—and maybe a victim themselves.

That's why I wanted to visit my rabbi in jail.

My only goal was to let him know there are people who care about him.

In a way, it was a defining moment for me—about the kind of person I want to be in the world: more compassionate and generous of spirit.

We met by video.

¹ See the discussion at b. Sanhedrin 74a, which identifies murder, sexual crimes, and idolatry as the three cardinal sins of Judaism.

He was dressed in a khaki jumpsuit. Other inmates were milling around behind him.

And yet he looked like the same guy: bushy hair, a graying beard, and the kind of glasses you don't really notice because, well, they've just always been part of his face.

The glasses are what got me. They always do.

There's something about glasses that reveal a person's humanity to me.

They say: *I'm just a person here. I'm imperfect and vulnerable. I'm doing my best, but I can't do this on my own.*

Maybe you think I'm showing him too much sympathy. I get that.

But this is a man I *know*.

Someone who inspired me and *means* something to me.

He pleaded "not guilty" and he hasn't stood trial yet.

But it *is possible* he will be found guilty of horrific crimes that I could never pretend not to see.

If so, he will have to answer to his Creator.

And still, he's a human being. I can never let myself forget that.

I told him I hope justice will be done however it's supposed to be—but I wanted him to know that nothing can take away the good he did as our rabbi.

We prayed together from the Yom Kippur prayer book.

And I read a letter a mutual friend and rabbinic colleague had written to him.

This colleague gave me permission to share that letter with you tonight.

This is what he wrote:

"I cannot begin to imagine how painful [this] is to you.

"I wonder if you worry that you have lost all of your friends.

"You have not. I am your friend.

“Condoning what you are alleged to have attempted to do is not a condition of my friendship. I suspect that I am not alone. People care about you. ...

“I hope that you can believe what you and I have been proclaiming before communities these last four decades: That repentance, prayer, and justice temper the harsh decree.

“That our God is both Almighty and Merciful, holding us to account while remaining able to see us as complex people and eager to receive us in repentance.

“God’s love is unconditional.

“My friendship, too, is unconditional.”

This letter brought my rabbi to tears. And it brought me to tears reading it to him. —

A man who most people, understandably, are apt to view with the utmost contempt and couldn’t care less about his fate.

It may be the most generous act of kindness I have ever witnessed.

The Torah commands us to walk in God’s ways—to emulate God by trying to be compassionate, righteous, and holy.²

We’re supposed to visit the sick, welcome the stranger, and comfort the bereaved.³

But to extend a hand of friendship to someone who might have committed the most hideous of crimes?

Everyone has to be held accountable for their bad deeds, and to love someone unconditionally is not to defend or ignore their actions.

It’s to love them *in spite of* their actions.

Because we are infinitely more than the worst things we’ve ever done.

And because there are still human eyes behind those glasses.

² See Deut. 28:9; *Sefer HaChinukh*, commandment 611.

³ See b. Sotah 14a.

Of course, this is an extreme case.

Most of the people who need our unconditional love and friendship are not charged with terrible crimes.

They're people we might not like being around because they're awkward or rude.

They're people who might rub us the wrong way.

They're people who might even have caused us harm.

Whoever they are, I guarantee you: they are in pain—even if we can't see it.

Some of them have been in agony their whole life. They just don't tell anyone about it.

So, tonight or tomorrow, I want to invite you to reach out to someone you know who needs it—and tell them your love or friendship is unconditional.

Whatever might have transpired, they don't have to bear it alone.

If you've ever been reassured like that, you know the peace and relief it can bring.

We all need compassion, even when we've done nothing to deserve it.

And to give compassion unconditionally is one of the highest acts of *chesed* you can do for another person.

Life is a journey, and we're all trying to get somewhere good.

Only by walking in God's ways, one step at a time, can we ever hope to reach our destination.