

Class Assignment from August 14, 2024:

“For the next week, do something caring everyday in the direction of someone with whom you have a conflicted or challenging relationship.”

This “homework” was given as part of

a Jewish ethics course I took with Rabbi David Jaffe

this past summer.

Each session focused on developing a particular inner quality,

and we had now reached *rachamim*-compassion.

The homework sounded

absurd to me at first.

Identify someone in our life,

with whom we have a difficult relationship-

someone with whom we don't see eye to eye,

someone who lets us down,

angers us,

or hurts us,

and commit to doing something kind for them every day?

I felt an inner pull that said,

“I don’t want to!”

And though Rabbi Jaffe never used the word forgiveness,

I wondered how I could actively choose to bestow loving-kindness on someone who I most certainly was *not* ready to forgive.

As I looked at the faces of my classmates in their zoom boxes,

I could see that I wasn’t the only one who had reservations.

It sounded uncomfortable at best,

and painful at worst.

Why, for the love of God, would anyone take this assignment on?

Maybe it’s exactly for the love of God,

that we would take this on,

and more specifically, for a God of love.

Because Judaism’s God is a God of love.

If this theology sounds foreign to you
You're not alone.
American Jews have sought to deemphasize
the place of God's love in Judaism
in order to separate themselves from the Christian world around them
which amplifies messages of God's love.¹
More than that,
centuries of Christian hegemony elevated a false idea that
Judaism's God is a God of judgment and vengeance.²
And especially during the High Holy Days,
the only time that many Jews encounter Jewish prayer and theology,
it's easy to see God that way.

As a child,

I was *terrified* of the God I encountered

¹ Judaism is About Love, Shai Held, 5

² Judaism is About Love, Shai Held, 5

on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

During the closing service of Yom Kippur,

I trembled in my seat

racking my brain to remember

any apologies I might have forgotten to make to God.

Allow me to bring this to life for you.

The organ played, “bum bum bum bum bum...”

The choir sang, “God we stand in awe before YOUR deeds,”

while the rabbi shouted, “As the gates begin to close!”

This was not a God of compassion and grace.

This is a God who decides who will be written in the Book of a Life

for another year,

a God who is judging us,

measuring the quality of our repentance and atonement.

A God of retribution.

A God whose love is **conditional**.

Luckily, that's not the only understanding of God
that our tradition offers us.

In his new book on Judaism and love,

Rabbi Shai Held teaches that human existence itself
is proof of God's love,³

that God created us to love us and to *be loved by us*.⁴

We find a beautiful example of God's love

in the writings of the 8th century Prophet Hosea.

God says,

“I fell in love with Israel when he was a child. And I have called him my
son, ever since Egypt.”⁵

God *loved* the people of Israel,

even before they had done anything to deserve that love.

³ Shai Held shares this idea in his book *Judaism is about Love*. He quotes Maimonides, 8

⁴ Shai Held shares this idea in his book *Judaism is about love*. He quotes Joseph Soleveichik, 8

⁵ Hosea 11.1. This idea comes from Rabbi Shai Held's book, *Judaism is about Love*.

In the verses that follow,

God recalls the stubbornness and betrayal of the Israelites,

even saying “they have ignored my healing care.”⁶

Can you hear the sadness in these words?

Do you know the pain of being taken for granted by someone you love?

Through the eyes of Hosea,

Our God is a God who feels hurt and shunned.

This is a God we can know and understand.

This is a God who struggles just like us.

In Hosea,

God’s pain takes on a dimension of anger—but only temporarily.

Yes, in God’s anger, God fantasizes about destroying the Israelites.

But—and this is crucially important to understanding this story—this only lasts a short while before God pulls God’s self together

proclaiming,

⁶ Hosea 11.3

“How can I give you up? **All my tenderness is stirred.** I will not act upon my wrath. I will not come in fury.”

God feels furious,

but *chooses* not to act on the emotion.

God does not want to lose a precious relationship—

God’s relationship with *us*.

With you and me.

God considers God’s relationship with *you* to be too precious to lose.

Just a moment ago we sang,

“Avinu Malkeinu, Choneinu V’aneinu, Avinu Malkeinu, Choneinu va’aneinu ki ein banu maasim...”

Our parent, our ruler, have mercy on us and answer us, for our deeds are insufficient. Deal with us charitably and lovingly and redeem us.”

What do we ask for when we sing this haunting melody?

Though our Machzor doesn’t translate the word *Avinu*,

the prayer calls God our father, our parent.

We ask God to love us the way that a parent loves a child.

I know this kind of love because I feel it
for my own children.

My blood boils when my daughter screams in my face,
or when my son wakes me up at 4:00am simply to say,
“Ima, I’m bored,”

but despite my anger and frustration,
my love doesn’t waiver.

Over the past year, we have missed the mark
in big and small ways.

We come to God as a child,
asking for God to love us,
despite our failings.

We appeal to the image of God we see in the Book of Hosea saying,
“Even if I don’t deserve your compassion,
please give it to me anyway.”

Earlier in our service we chanted the 13 attributes of God,

“Adonai Adonai el rachum v’chanum erech, al payim, v’rav chesed,
v’emet...

Adonai Adonai, A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger,
abounding in kindness, and faithfulness, extending kindness to the
thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and
granting pardon.”

Why do we recite these words on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?

To remind God to behave this way,

and to remind ourselves that as people who were made in God’s image,

we too have the power to exercise compassion.

We call on God to extend God’s great, never ending compassion,

but are we actually willing to follow suit

in our own relationships?

For many of us it’s all too easy to say that

a person who has wronged us or caused us pain

no longer deserves our kindness,

to distance ourselves from these people
or even label them as “toxic” and completely walk away.

A New York Times article from July
reported on a growing social media trend,
in which some online therapists encourage their clients to
completely cut ties with family members.

When I asked a couple of therapists I know about this trend,
including my own father in law, Len Schmelkin,
I learned that most clinicians view family cutoffs
as a last resort reserved only for the most extreme circumstances.

Yet, one of the online therapists who has gone viral
provides a multiple choice “Toxic Family Test,”
that takes five minutes to fill out
and provides recommendations

that in some cases include estrangement.⁷

Our God of love calls on us to try to remain open-hearted
even towards
difficult people in our lives.

I want to be very clear

that I don't mean to say we should never set boundaries.

Sometimes our own well being depends on it.

I am also **not** talking about open-heartedness

towards someone physically or emotionally abusive.

I am talking about a much grayer area:

The people in our lives

who irritate us, who have slighted us,

who have hurt us, taken advantage of us,

disappointed us, sometimes over and over again.

Perhaps at times these relationships become so strained

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/14/health/therapy-family-estrangement.html>

that we fantasize about shutting the person out entirely.

Who comes to mind for you?

Maybe it's a parent

who is critical about every part of you

they don't recognize in themselves.

Maybe it's your colleague at work who does the bare minimum

causing more work to fall onto your already overly full plate.

Maybe it's your brother who has moved so far to one side

of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

that you feel like you no longer have common ground to stand on.

Maybe it's your cousin

who plans to vote this November for the candidate

whose political stances disturb and terrify you.

Maybe it's your friend who always calls *you* with a problem,

but never asks how you're doing.

What should we do when we find ourselves
in these kinds of relationships?

I want to share a story from a 1st century midrashic tale,
written by our ancient rabbis of 2,000 years ago.

Long ago,

in the days of Rabbi Tanhuma,⁸

the people of Israel experienced a terrible drought.

They came to Rabbi Tanhuma and exclaimed,

“Rabbi, decree a fast!”

The people believed fasting might serve

as adequate repentance.

But after three days of fasting,

the drought did not subside.

Rabbi Tanhuma entered the synagogue with a new idea.

⁸ **Tanhuma bar Abba** (Hebrew: תנחומא בר אבא) was a Jewish *amora* of the 5th generation, one of the foremost *aggadists* of his time.

“My children, fill yourselves with mercy for one another, and the Holy One, blessed be God, will become filled with mercy for you.”

And so, the people of Israel went out into the streets

to distribute charity to the poor.

As they performed their task,

they noticed one of their fellows

giving money to his former wife and not to the needy beggars.

These men snitched to Rabbi Tanhuma immediately.

“Rabbi Tanhuma! We have a sinner among us! We have a sinner among us. We saw one man giving money to his ex-wife!”

Surprised to hear this,

Rabbi Tanhuma decided to speak to the man.

“Who is this woman to you? Why were you giving her money?”

The man replied,

“Rabbi, she’s my ex-wife. I saw that she was in distress, and I became filled with compassion for her.”

Rabbi Tanhuma lifted his face towards heaven and cried out to God,

“Master of the Universe, if this man, who no longer has an obligation to his ex-wife, was filled with such great compassion, then please remember that you are a Gracious and Merciful God...and have mercy on us too!”

Thereupon the rain fell,

and the thirst of the world was quenched.⁹

As a child of divorced parents,
this story resonates deeply with me.

The midrash provides no details about what transpired
between the couple previously,

but I can certainly imagine the bitter feelings
they might have harbored towards one another.

And still, somehow this man saw his ex-wife,
someone whose flaws and failures he knew intimately,
someone who may have caused him tremendous pain,
like God looking down at the Israelites.

⁹ Breishit Rabbah 33.3

His tenderness was stirred.

Perhaps, like me

you've seen or experienced how difficult it is

for two people in this kind of situation

to show even a hint of benevolence towards one another.

And yet, this is exactly what the story charges us to do.

Even if, like me,

you don't believe in a God of reward and punishment,

the midrash contains a profound message for all of us.

The nourishing rains only come when Rabbi Tanhuma tells God

about the man's actions towards his former wife,

as if to say

it is much easier to give charity to someone we don't know,

someone who has never had a chance to hurt or disappoint us,

to make us feel unloved or alone,

someone we don't know enough about to create a counternarrative about why they don't deserve our kindness.

But cultivating compassion in our most fraught, painful, and contentious relationships-

these are the actions that can bring about nourishing waters.

These are the actions that can begin to soften a hardened heart, something we need to do more than we might realize.

How would God have felt if God destroyed the Israelites?

How would the man from the midrashic legend have felt if he saw his ex-wife suffering, and looked the other way?

How do we feel when we unleash our anger on another person, stop reaching out,

or do something to get someone back?

Do we feel better?

Maybe for a moment or two.

But I think for most of us,
the initial satisfaction we feel quickly gives way
to exhaustion, heartache, and regret,
trapping us in a cycle of negativity
from which it can feel nearly impossible to escape.
“Only compassion can free us from the prison of our own anger,”¹⁰

Rabbi Alan Lew teaches.

Showing compassion to people who challenge us
is something we do just as much *for ourselves* as for them,
which brings me back to the class I took this summer.

I agreed,
along with my classmates,
to take on Rabbi Jaffe’s assignment
and perform a caring act

¹⁰ This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared, 235

for someone with whom I was in conflict
everyday for a week.

The actions we took were simple and small-
texting a photo to the person saying, “this made me think of you,”
picking up the person’s favorite snack for them on the way home,
getting out of the car at the airport to give the person a warm hello hug.

A week later, when my classmates and I gathered again on Zoom,
we reflected on how it felt to engage in this practice.

Some of us noticed a strong initial resistance.

We had cold hearts.

But then many of us noticed,
that our hardened hearts warmed up.

We saw the person,
as someone who is bruised and broken,
just like we are,

someone who fails and still needs to be seen and loved,
just like we do.

Despite my initial reluctance,
I came to understand that the goal was not to forgive,
but rather to begin to soften ourselves.
The goal was not for our anger and frustration to disappear,
but to diminish,
so that *we* might feel less weighed down by it.

And to our surprise.

some of us found that treating the other person with compassion,
caused them to soften and show more kindness
towards us in return,
bringing about feelings of mutual love and respect.

So here we are.

Yom Kippur.

The Day of Atonement.

Yom Kippur can be a painful day

because certain relationships that felt most fraught last year,
might feel just as difficult this year.

Maybe we've accepted that these relationships will never be easy,
but we worry that we are Yom Kippur failures
if we haven't yet been able to fully forgive someone we love.

What if forgiveness doesn't have to be our goal?

What if instead our goal is to be more kind, more compassionate,
more loving.

There is so much anger and hatred in the world right now,
especially since the catastrophic events of October 7th.

We feel it from every direction,

and we have little control over the animus and vitriol we witness
on a national and global level.

But what we can control is whether or not compassion and love prevail
in our own tiny corners of the world.

Our homes, our neighborhoods, our communities.

This year,

when anger, pain, and resentment,

begin to overtake us,

let's not allow it to trap us.

When we feel ourselves falling right back into patterns

of conflict and antagonism with someone in our life,

let's pause,

center ourselves,

and ask ourselves if we have any compassion to offer instead.

And when we feel like we are at our breaking point

that this person doesn't deserve any of our emotional energy,

let alone our kindness or care,

we can first have compassion for ourselves,

and then,

we can quietly consider

if the misery that comes with acting on our anger,

the regret we will feel if we walk away,

will hurt us deeply,

for a long time,

maybe even forever.

If the answer is yes,

and I think for most of us it is,

we can choose to challenge our automatic behavior

and act in the direction of rachamim, compassion.

We can do our part to bring about a cleansing and nourishing rain,

a rain that we so desperately need in this new year.

And we can strive to emulate our God of unconditional, unending love-

to walk through the world with a softened heart,
and allow our tenderness to be stirred.

