

Rosh HaShanah Evening 2019 / 5780
Rabbi Mark Cohn
Love: It's all you need.

A number of years ago, a benefactor at my alma mater for rabbinical school, the Hebrew Union College, convinced our rather tiny athletic department to create a crew team. In an effort to feel welcomed to the rowing community, the newly minted HUC Crew Team was invited to the famous Charles Regatta in Boston on the Charles River where crew teams have been rowing for longer than bialys have been made on the Lower East Side.

The HUC team showed horribly in their debut among the Ivy League veterans but it wasn't for the reasons you might suspect. After all, schlepping around volumes of Talmud and practicing lifting the Torah for hagbah is great for upper body strength.

When the benefactor reprimanded the coach for such an embarrassing display of rowing talent, he demanded an explanation. "Silverman, how do you explain yourself?" "I think we did things opposite. All the other teams won because in all the other boats, they had eight rowers rowing and only one person yelling."

It is the yiddishe kup that leads to disagreement and an expectation and acceptance of disagreement.

It is the rabbinic mind that says there are 70 faces to the Torah. It is the Talmud that discusses how to encourage and actually demands a diversity of opinion while maintaining and expecting civil discourse. In the Talmud, we learn that for any given topic there are 49 views to show that a matter could be pure and 49 reasons why that same matter could be impure. Moshe Rabbeinu beseeched the Holy One of Blessing, "Master of the Universe, when will we know the truth for clarification of the matter that holds 49 views in favor and 49 views opposed? God said to Moses: Go according to the majority. If the majority rules it is impure - it is impure, if the majority rules it is pure - it is pure.

Go according to the majority.

Clearly our ancestors knew not of the Electoral College though they might have appreciated a 2nd round of elections when you can't make a coalition.

But our ancestors knew of the value of diverse views and living with a multiplicity of views but maintaining coexistence, shared living, and loving commitment to a cause greater than any one individual or opinion.

Last year, the HHDs kicked off a year of finding ways to understand and have civil discourse. This year, my goal is to find ways to step behind, beneath, and within the discourse and move into the intention behind our actions and our words. First, we had to learn to speak with one another, now maybe we can move toward doing things in concert - especially if we disagree. And this idea is for us to take not just within these walls - but just as importantly into a world around us that is desperately in need of assistance.

As you may well have seen in my writings leading up to this night, I have been talking about love. Let me be clear: I am not talking about red hearts and pretty flowers. I am basing my discussion this HHD season on love as we uncover in the Torah, where love is not solely emotional. Love is an active verb. "Love your neighbor as yourself" speaks not to feeling but about how you are to treat people. "Love Adonai your God" is not about taking God to God's favorite restaurant and ordering a fancy bottle of wine, it is about living a life of doing the commandments. "Love the stranger" is about responsibility for the other and finding our commonality as humans. Especially when we disagree.

If love is only emotional, then romantic get-aways are all you need. But love is about action, which is why feeding your baby in the middle of the night proves to that child and to yourself that you love - and will remain loyal to - that child.

If love is only emotional, then beautiful poetry and dreamy nights leave you breathless. But love is about doing, which is why active, attentive listening and then behaving appropriately and thoughtfully in light of what your partner, child, sibling, parent (fill in the blank) said proves to the other party this is a loving relationship.

Love has an emotional side to it - and that emotion can run alongside all sorts of feelings: anger, joy, frustration, elation, sorrow, happiness, fulfillment and more. But love is real in the doing. Love is not just all squishy - it's proven with action and when it comes to a Jewish understanding of love - you might as well put the words "be loyal to" or "be obligated unto" where you see the word "love" show up. Loving God, loving your neighbor, loving the stranger - three famous examples of the commandment for love in Torah - are about being in connection, being loyal, and being obligated to the other.

God, quite frankly, could care less how you feel about God. God wants you doing the mitzvot: afflicting your souls for Yom Kippur, not cooking a kid in its mother's milk, providing for your brother who is in need, considering the stranger in your midst as a citizen, relentlessly pursuing

justice, binding the words of Torah as a sign on your arm and between your eyes, guarding and serving the Garden of Creation.

LOVE IS ABOUT THE DOING.
LOVE IS AN ACTION.
LOVE IS A VERB.

But if we are yelling at each other all the time - like the eight rowers in the HUC scull, then we will never get anywhere. We will appear like what used to be funny on Jerry Springer and Maury Povich in the 1980s and 90s but now is political reality on Twitter and various news outlets. Yelling at each other has created what economist and writer Albert Brooks calls a culture of contempt and has got us so far beyond civil discourse that there is only one way out of this morass and it is LOVE.

LOVE that is founded and grounded in a sense of obligation and loyalty to the other.

LOVE that is open to accepting and hearing the other.

LOVE that is aware that only in compromise can we find a path to move forward without falling apart entirely.

LOVE that is based on communal well-being.

LOVE that demands a measure of sacrifice for the greater good.

Love requires a sense of safety.

Love requires being seen/heard.

Love requires being embraced - in that order. Safety. Being seen/heard. Being embraced.

Love is about loyalty and determination and it is about not being so angry that you allow that anger to rule your decisions. Love is about sacrifice for the sake of the good. Love is about balance, fairness, equity - we call that tzedek or tzedakah. And we do it because we have to - we are commanded. Not necessarily because we want to.

Tzedakah is not charity.

Charity derives from Christian love for one's fellow. It comes from Latin - carus (holding something dear).

Tzedakah is ground in a commanded seeking of justice which is done because it simply is the right thing to do.

The same holds for love - commanded as the right thing to do. Not because we care. Yes - we should care and yes, love is lovely but it is the way that God instructs us to survive and thrive in this Creation God has willed into being.

If we deploy a LOVE embedded with loyalty, sacrifice, obligation, concern, care, engaged attention, active listening, considerate responding - we have a chance at disassembling a culture of contempt. If we fail to bring in LOVE as an action then the yelling, the screaming, the nonsensical tweeting, the fighting, the temperature outside and its ill effects, the violence, the hate, the ignorance, the walls, the isolation, the childish/destructive/cruel/bullying/reprehensible behavior will only continue and grow.

Eight rowers on a crew team can only get the boat going the right direction in a successful way because they listened to the one voice that actually could see where they were going! God is our coxswain trying to set us up for success and when God says to love - God is not fooling around. As Jews, of course all the rowers are allowed multiple opinions. And in fact, are expected to have multiple opinions. But they need to row together based on a commitment to one another and a sense of loyalty to get the boat moving forward in one direction. No matter what team or group or club you may have been in before - from your school days to your professional life, being an active, contributing member of any team takes sacrifice. No scull ever won a race without significant sacrifice along the way by the individuals but at some point, everyone had to get in the boat and row well, together, in love.

Rabbi David Hartman in his book, "A Heart of Many Rooms" offers a sophisticated approach to living with differences of opinions or multiple truths. Rabbi Hartman was writing about faith but it works well in exploring this idea of love among community, earth, Israel, and neighbors, which is where we will be going over these holidays.

Rabbi Hartman calls on us "to open our hearts to a multiplicity of views and truth. We must internalize two contradictory points of view and at the same time find one way to act, always haunted by the uncertainty that there is another way to live."

Notice that Hartman concludes: we must "find one way to act." Appreciating the value of different opinions doesn't mean we should be paralyzed and formulate no opinion. When the Talmud ultimately decides between Hillel and Shammai it concludes, "both are the words of God, both approaches are holy and valid. But we rule in favor of Hillel. Not because Hillel was right in an ultimate sense but because he was humble and respectful. Unlike Shammai, he

quoted the minority opinion as well as his own, thus honoring those with whom he disagreed. We could stand to learn from Hillel. We could use a heart of many rooms.

Whether it is David Hartman speaking on faith or Abraham Lincoln speaking on slavery, we know that a house divided cannot stand. We, as Jews, are well accustomed to varying opinions and approaches but without a common, stabilizing denominator of action grounded in love, division will tear our world asunder.

And, friends, it already is.

When people on both sides of an issue decry the other side as ruining the world and the source of all that is wrong, the CULTURE OF CONTEMPT has become pervasive.

There is contempt among the left for the right and the right for the left. Red, blue, purple, white, black, brown, pink, ... our rainbow coalition beautifully constructed by God has become soiled and muddied and needs a love cleanser.

Love begins at home.
It begins actually in our hearts.
One person at a time.

But it starts here.
In this house.
Over these HHDs, I will explore love of Creation, love of Israel, love of self/neighbor/enemy.
But tonight - I invite you to consider how we love in this House of God. How we, as Temple Emanuel love each other - where obligation rules our decisions.

When we show up with brownies or kugel or stay to set up tables after Oneg for a classmate's bar mitzvah, we are building from love.

When we come to help make a minyan at the cemetery or in a shiva house even though we don't know the deceased, we are building from love.

When we volunteer on Mitzvah Day even though we already do all sorts of service work elsewhere during the year, we are building from love.

When we accept a request to serve on the Board or a Committee knowing that there is nothing easy about the task at hand, we are building from love.

When we light candles, build a sukkah, teach dreidl, take work off for Yom Kippur, enroll our kids in religious school, make a trip to Israel, visit a synagogue while on vacation in another city, sit down to share a story with our temple president, we are building from love.

When we stuff envelopes, repair a broken computer, come to Shabbat, participate in a lifelong learning event, give to the Tradition of Giving Campaign, bring a meal for or make a phone call to someone who is sick or healing - we are building from love ... a LOVE based in obligation and loyalty.

It is that sense of love that we need to take to one another by creating safety in relationships and make sure we genuinely see and listen to one another. That we embrace one another - especially with our differences and find a way to move forward where we accept the other, repair what is wrong, and change our behavior so everyone and everything can move forward in a healthy way and no one will be filled with hate, anger, vitriol, and contempt - and making decisions from that point of view.

For this to work, everyone has to buy into the program. And you may think I'm being pollyanna about this - but I have to believe that if we dedicate ourselves to a course of action based in LOVE then we can actually turn this tide of contempt that exists in our politics and in our families, in how the earth surely looks upon our behavior and in our connections with Israel, in our feelings about other people and in our attitudes even toward ourselves.

What's love got to do with it?
Everything. And it is a spiritual enterprise.

George Yeoman Pocock - one of the finest and most influential rowing boat makers of the 20th century said of rowing: "What is the spiritual value of rowing? The losing of self entirely to the cooperative effort of the crew as a whole (p. 353 of Boys in the Boat)."

Spoiler alert: There was no HUC crew team. But that joke about 8 Jews yelling and only one rowing was too good to pass up. And the truth is: look at our people's name: Yisrael / God-strugglers. And whether you translate God as Jewish tradition or Torah, a force for goodness in the universe or a power that undergirds all of Creation - we have a distinct command to love - and it begins in this House which is our Home. In the words of one of today's great teachers, Rabbi Art Green, "... to be a religious person is to cultivate a heart open enough to receive ...love (given to us by God) and to reprocess it into love for those around us."

Our work is clear. Our task is great.

“We are not obligated to complete the task but we are not free to desist from it either,” as the rabbis instruct us.

So may we begin in this house and take it to the streets - living a life and building a world with a love that is based on creating a beloved community that is connected, loyal, safe, accepting, engaged, sacrificing, embracing.