

Rabbi Mark Cohn
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Loving your neighbor, your enemy, yourself

When I was in rabbinical school I took a class in NT studies and my teacher - a renowned scholar in NT studies - a rabbi and PhD in NT no less - shared with us the story from the Book of Luke of the Good Samaritan. Before rabbinical school, I had never opened the New Testament - turns out there are Jews in there! And funny that I should go to rabbinical school to explore another tradition's text. Who were the Samaritans and why exactly were there Jews in the NT? Oh, because many of the early Christians were Jews.

A note on terminology: you will hear me use the terms New Testament and Christian Bible. The former actually is problematic from a Jewish perspective because it implies a theory of supersession - as if our tradition is old and a new covenant has taken its place, which while suitable in a Christian format certainly would not hold in ours.

Another time we can get into who the Samaritans were and are but for our purposes right now, the Samaritans and the Jews in the first century CE - the time period of this parable - were like the Hatfields and the McCoys. Jews and Samaritans both claimed a true understanding of Torah and the laws of Judaism and as for their inter-group relations: they were far from neighborly. Another key actor in this story: a rather famous Jewish man of the first century, I believe Jesus was his name. He features prominently in this tale. And no, saying his name in this House of God will not cause our walls to crumble.

I learned the tale of the good Samaritan years ago and I tucked it away. It has resurfaced countless times in my interfaith work, which for me began in earnest only two months after I started working here in Winston-Salem. 9/11 happened and I was thrust into interviews, meetings, prayer gatherings, and teachings with Christian and Muslim colleagues. And since those days - I have tried to understand one of the hardest commandments of our Torah:

Love your neighbor as yourself, which shows up in that parable of the good Samaritan.

The commandment to love comes three times in our Torah:

Love your neighbor as yourself. (Lev. 19:18)

Love the stranger as yourself. (Lev. 19:34)

Love Adonai your God with all your heart, soul, and might. (Deut 6:5)

And there seems a fourth command - it is implied in the first and second: love your neighbor **as yourself**; love the stranger **as yourself**. Love of self is part of the package. It is surely where we need to start - but sometimes we only get to self through others. Maybe. Dangerously, potentially.

I want to call up that line in our morning liturgy which I taught earlier this morning - it is one of the first things we say each and every day. In some communities of Jewish life, it is recited before you even enter the synagogue to pray:

הריני מקבל עלי את מצוות הבורא ואהבת לרעך כמוך.

Hareini m'kabeil alai et mitzvat ha-borei v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho.

Behold, I am ready to accept upon myself the commandment of the Creator to love your neighbor as yourself.

Maybe our ancestors came up with those words to remind us that regardless of who we meet inside the synagogue and the stories and histories we have within our community - love your neighbor as yourself. Don't forget - you are in relationship, connection, covenant, commitment with your neighbor and with yourself.

Beginning our day with such a line tells us a lot about what we - as Jews - hold dear. But we have not always held onto that ideal. And it is presented in that Christian Bible story.

I bring it to you today with a bit of hesitation and discomfort because we don't normally think of the Christian Scriptures as a source of finding personal meaning. 2,000 years ago however, this parable was a Jewish teaching. When it became popularized in the Christian world, we Jews stopped talking about it to distinguish ourselves from our Christian neighbors. And in fact, in the Christian world, this story became a source of anti-semitism and the tale was spun against us.

But the idea embedded in this tale is authentically and originally Jewish and I am reclaiming it as ours this morning. While I am uncomfortable on the one hand - I am literally hand-picking this tale out of the larger book (and books) because it, quite simply, is a great story and a profound teaching. And if we can take words that have been used against us and hear the beautiful (and Jewish) teaching as our own - is that not a symbol of what is possible when we listen to one another?

First a read through, and then I will open it up.

25 And look, an expert in the law stood up; testing Jesus, he says, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 "What is written in the Law?" he/Jesus replied. "How do you read it?" 27 He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind/intention'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." 29 But he (the lawyer) wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and

when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came near where the man was; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.

35 The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" 37 The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Let's open that text up a little bit.

25 And look, an expert in the law stood up; testing Jesus, he says, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" {Interesting note: Jews already by the first century assume a concept of resurrection or eternal life.}

26 Jesus replied: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" {Typical of a Jew to answer a question with a question. Jesus wants to set the lawyer up for showing his intellect. Note: it is not only what is WRITTEN but how it is READ. Reading and interpreting are critical - it's how we read a text and understand it that matters.

27 He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind/intention"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

{The Shema (with a Luke insertion re: mind/intention) is a central part of our prayers and theology + a teaching according to Akiva, killed by the same Romans who would kill Jesus ... just 100 years later ... - love of neighbor is the greatest principle in the entire torah. By invoking Lev 19:18 - he actually referenced the entire chapter which is a rephrasing of the 10 commandments and a whole bunch more. Indeed - we learn in Lev 19, as we read this morning, LOVE IS MADE REAL WITH DOING/ACTION.}

28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." {Notice - Jesus did not answer the lawyer's question. The lawyer wanted to know about eternal life and Jesus answered with a comment on how to behave in the here and now.}

29 But he (the law expert) wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" {justify meaning: make things right - as in "to justify columns" to

understand the borders. Rei-ah (neighbor) implies someone w/in the community, which would explain why later we are told to love the stranger. His question is legitimate - who do I need to love ... how far out must it extend.}

And thus the story/parable/midrash:

30 In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

{First off - anyone who knows the road - that is a rough ride. It is nice today (although steep) but even as recently as 20 years ago - it wasn't as nice ... and certainly 2,000 years ago - that road was brutal terrain to traverse. Anti-Jewish reads on this text have been rough and often anti-semitic and the Jews are made to look bad - after all, the holy representatives of the community - the Temple guys - the Kohein and Levite are walking away from a wounded man. But remember - this is a story created and written by Jews for Jews. The lawyer asked about eternal life - and the concern should be for life right here and now! And the saving of a life supersedes everything else - so what is the matter with these two Jews who avoid their responsibility!? Now, the assumption would be a third party will arise - a general Israelite - and save the day. But no! The point of a parable is to provoke - consistent with Jewish behavior.}

33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came near where the man was; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.

{Amy-Jill Levine, a significant Jewish scholar in NT studies at Vanderbilt, points out - the Jewish audience of the first century may well have said: “I’d rather die than acknowledge that one from that group saved me”; “I do not want to acknowledge that a rapist has a human face”; or “I do not want to recognize that a murderer will be the one to rescue me.” (page 104) In other words - better die on the side of the road than let your enemy - the wicked Samaritans - save you.

35 The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

{Levine says: “loving your neighbor means continual action, not something to check off the to-do list.” In other words - what matters most “... is NOT our motive, but our action!” (113, Levine)

36 “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” 37 The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on

him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” {In other words - you might be an expert in the law but it took this oral teaching/midrash/parable to get you to understand the intent behind the law and our actions!}

Let’s try and understand this story by considering a 21st century version which Amy-Jill Levine closes the teaching of this parable in her book, “Short Stories by Jesus” (see page 114-5).

“Samaria today has various names: the West Bank, Occupied Palestine, Greater Israel. To hear the parable today, we only need to update the identity of the figures. I am an Israeli Jew on my way from Jerusalem to Jericho, and I am attacked by thieves, beaten, stripped, robbed, and left half dead in a ditch. Two people who should have stopped to help pass me by: the first, a Jewish medic from the Israel Defense Forces; the second a member of the Israel/Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian U.S.A. But the person who takes compassion on me and shows me mercy is a Palestinian Muslim whose sympathies lie with Hamas, a political party whose charter not only anticipates Israel’s destruction, but also depicts Jews as subhuman demons responsible for all the world’s problems.

“The parable of the “Good Hamas Member” might be difficult for people in support of Israel’s existence. Were Jesus a Samaritan, we’d today have the parable of the “Good Jew,” told in the streets of Ramallah. If people in the Middle East could picture this, we might have a better vision for choosing life.”

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Compassion we feel in our core, in our gut. It is visceral but is not active externally. Mercy is taking that feeling and turning and adapting it into action with our body.

Mr. Cohen and Mr. Levy may have felt compassion but they expressed no mercy by staying on the opposite side of the road. The IDF medic and the member of the Presbyterian USA mission network in the updated version. Love must be the motivating force to help the wounded person on the side of the road.

Here is a model of compassion and mercy from just this past summer. When the Israeli women’s under-19 lacrosse team was playing a Kenyan team a couple of months ago - and the Israelis won 13-4, they realized they won because the Kenyans had no cleats since the ones they had ordered were all wrong. So the Israeli team went and bought their Kenyan opponents cleats that would fit them. The next match, Israel still won - but on a level-playing field: 11-10.

Our enemy or opponent is wounded or in need for a whole host of reasons. And we have to see the humanity in our enemy or opponent. Something happened to that person and s/he has needs and while we cannot fully heal her - nor should we see it as our task to - we can love her and help accordingly.

We would be wise to ask ourselves: Why are we enemies with a person or idea? Sometimes it is ideology but so too, we become enemies with others often because we are wounded. And providing love of self is desperately needed as well as loving others. Maybe in seeing the other's humanity we can see where we are injured and why we respond with anger.

The enemy in this parable is not healing the injured. He is caring for his wounds. We cannot heal someone else though we can bring medicine to help. Healing of self ultimately comes from within, when we are ready to accept the help and see our wounds and understand what afflicts us and why.

When we show love to a neighbor - and even more so an opponent or enemy - we can bring a salve and maybe even salvation. We can throw someone on the back of the donkey and take them to an inn for convalescing. And that action can transform how that enemy may indeed become a friend. "Who is mighty?" the rabbis ask. "The one who turns his enemy into a friend." (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 23)

We can let someone share their story and we can listen. If we listen to people and let them speak of their woes and if they let us do the same - we can lower the volume and realize that we actually share more in common than not. We may have very different ways of getting to the same goal but I bet the majority of Americans, the majority of Palestinians and Israelis, the majority of North Koreans and South Koreans want similar ends. The "why" behind what undergirds our stories is probably very similar but our "how"s get in the way and suddenly we see each other as enemies. Each of us has wounds - deep seated wounds - and only when we heal them (loving ourselves) and acknowledging the wounds in our neighbors can we begin to address what ails our society.

The enemy is not giving up his story and his beliefs. But maybe if the enemy takes time to listen without fixing and teaching and if we take time to share and speak and act from the heart, walls will come down - not go up. In this parable, the Samaritan is deemed 'good' because he is seeing the humanity in the man on the side of the road. All the other Samaritans presumably or by default must be bad - after all, they were the enemy and if you don't see your enemy as human, you can cast a whole group as rapists and murderers, terrorists and killers - or simply: bad.

The Samaritan in this story is there as the foil. When the priest walks by, we are disappointed. And then the Levite as well? A shundah. The Samaritan we would have assumed would walk on by ... but he sees what no one else does: LOVE IS THE ANSWER because without it we will all be sunk. He knows Torah better than we do.

Valarie Kaur, who has created The Revolutionary Love Project and Groundswell says: "If you cringe when you hear those words, 'Love is the answer' ..." - so does she. After all, she is a lawyer. Not a first century lawyer - but a contemporary one. Only she calls for a revolutionary love that is "...more than a rush of feeling. It is sweet labor, fierce, bloody, imperfect, life-giving, and a choice we (must) make over and over again."

She calls upon us to enter into a love for others who do not look like us, for opponents who hurt us, and for ourselves.

Her call comes from a very serious and honest place as a Sikh woman who has seen her community attacked and brutalized since those days of 9/11. A man whom she called uncle - a dear family friend - a Sikh who wore a turban (a sign of their tradition and commitment to faith) - was the first murdered victim resulting from a hate crime in the U.S. after 9/11. She calls for love - an olam chesed yibaneh - a world of loving-kindness to be built because in this era of unbridled rage, revolutionary love (chesed) is what drew 3,000 Americans who did not know her uncle to his funeral. Revolutionary love took the Samaritan to the side of the road to help the Jew.

That is what our ancestors were teaching in that parable of Jesus and it is grounded in today's Torah reading. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Kaur goes on to warn us and teach us:

“If we are loving just ourselves - we are being narcissistic.
If we only love our opponents - we are being self-loathing.
And if we love only our neighbors - we are being ineffective.” Particularly if those neighbors are within the borders of our people, our neighborhood, or our city.

She continues: “When we love others, we see no stranger.
When we love our opponents, we tend to their wounds.
When we love ourselves, we breathe through the fire of pain and refuse to allow it to harden into hate.”

This kind of love is not beyond our reach. After all - in the words of what earlier Reformers of Judaism determined as an alternative Torah reading for Yom Kippur morning, Deuteronomy 30:

This teaching of Torah ... is not in the heavens that we may ask - who will go and get it for us and bring it to us? Nor is it across the sea that we may ask - who will cross the waters and bring it to us? No - this matter is very close to you - it is in your heart and it is in your mouth.

My dear friend, Liam Hooper, with whom I taught about love this past Shabbat, has helped me understand that the heart in antiquity and as our ancestors understood was/is “...the seat of emotion and intention. The heart was the place of thought and higher order processes. So the heart was not just feeling; it was the place of reason, beliefs, information, and processing.”

So to love God with all your heart and to have the words of Torah in your heart is to love God and to live Torah not sentimentally but with your intelligence, thoughtfulness, and reason. Love is about what we do and how we do and shapes - or ought to shape

- how we think thereby creating, motivating, and determining how we operate with each other and ourselves.

הריני מקבל עלי את מצוות הבורא ואהבת לרעך כמוך!

Behold I accept upon myself God's commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. It is a daily determination and commitment and intention and approach. Love is a choice. And love is a verb. And love must determine how we approach our community, our earth, our Israel, our enemies, our neighbors, ourselves.

The very use of that Good Samaritan parable that has been used by those who were once our enemy - is living into the very idea that healing and learning can come sometimes from highly unlikely sources. I know some of my rabbinic colleagues would not use such a text as a proof-text but if AIPAC can invite a speaker whose book is called "Love your enemies" citing the Book of Matthew - I see no reason not to pull from a nearby text in order to prove the very way to do just that! For me to bring this text was me living into this truth - this idea that if I can find meaning in a source once used against us - then I can prepare to sit beside someone and listen, genuinely, attentively, compassionately, and try to find a way to bridge the gaps that are splitting our society.

May we love - with intention and understanding, compassion and kindness and thus we will build a world of loving-kindness from within and far beyond. As we read in Psalm 89: Olam chesed yibaneh.