

Yom Kippur 5777: A Thread of Lovingkindness

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“When I was little,” Shira Reifman writes,

...my mother repeatedly told me that I was beautiful... She told me that I had been "the most beautiful baby in the world" and that the nurse in the hospital had said so too. She repeated this mantra for many years.

When I entered middle school, I met a boy who repeatedly told me I was fat. When I performed in a class play, he told me that the costume made me look fat. When the teacher left the room, he made a joke to the whole class about my weight. Needless to say, this was an extremely painful experience for an adolescent girl.

Thankfully, because of my mother's positive messages, I was able to integrate this boy's negative messages into my psyche without them destroying my self-esteem... I did not feel that my mother had duped me, lied to me or betrayed me, even though I had probably understood for a long time that I didn't look like Cindy Crawford or Christie Brinkley. I was able to take the positive and negative messages about such a personal topic and find a way for the pendulum to end up in the middle.

Imagine what might have happened had my mother told me the truth about my weight for all those years. Had she said repeatedly, "you know Shira, you are fat, those thighs stopped being cute when you were a toddler" then [when this boy confirmed those negative messages] I might have been really crushed...¹

This is not a sermon about sexism, about the ways that women are judged – though, as I follow the US elections, believe me, there are sermons on that topic which I am itching to give. But I want you to listen closely to what Shira says next:

When we educate young children about Israel, might it not be okay to give them positive messages knowing full well that they will get very, very negative messages from so many people in the world -- the UN, the EU, our neighbors in the Middle East? Perhaps our job is to provide the counter-balance so that the pendulum ends up in the middle. I'm not suggesting that we hide any facts or water down the discussion. I just think that nursery school may not be the time or place to introduce the complexity before a deep love and connection is built.

This is not a sermon about Israel – though, like any rabbi, I have sermons to give on that as well. Shira is a colleague of mine in the Wexner community; she made aliyah many years ago and works on Kibbutz Kishorit, the extraordinary community of people with special needs up in the Galilee. She wrote this message in the context of a conversation about Israel, complexity and connection.

So, rabbi, what *is* this sermon about?

Bear with me just a little longer. Shira's words again:

"Love your neighbor as you love yourself." A wise Rabbi once explained to me that this means that you have to love yourself before you can love others. I hope that we are doing everything possible to instill that deep, profound, my-soul-is-tied-up-in-yours love of self and homeland into our youngest children for this is the only way to empower them to love everyone in the long run.

B'ahava [in love], Shira.

Today, I want to talk about compassion. Today, I want to talk about love.

It's a little ironic, that the day the most Jews come to synagogue, is the day we talk about God as judge. But in Jewish tradition, as monotheistic as it is, God is imagined as having two key attributes: Elohim, the God of judgment, and Adonai, the God of compassion. And there is a clear recognition that the world is created with a balance of these two elements – like Shira's pendulum, swinging back and forth:

"The Eternal (Adonai) God (Elohim) made earth and heaven" (Genesis 2:4). A parable of a king who had cups made of delicate glass. The king said: If I pour hot water into them, they will [expand and] burst; if cold water, they will contract [and burst]. What did he do? He mixed hot and cold water, and poured it into them, and so they remained unbroken. Likewise, the Holy One said: If I create the world with the attribute of mercy alone, its sins will be too many; if with justice alone, how could the world be expected to endure? So I will create it with both justice and mercy, and may it endure!ⁱⁱ

"There is a wonderful Midrash," Rabbi Alan Lew writes,

...about a wicked king named Manasha who lived a life full of evil and cruelty and then made sincere, heartfelt repentance on his deathbed. The Angels of Heaven, who knew God would forgive Manasha as soon as God heard his repentance, were outraged at the injustice of it all, and they tried to lock the gates of heaven to block out Manasha's words. But God drilled a hole under the Throne of Glory, heard Manasha's confession, and forgave him immediately. Then God turned to the Angels: Look, God said. It's my business to forgive. This is what I do. This is who I am.ⁱⁱⁱ

Our task, on these Days of Awe, is to move God from the throne of judgment to the throne of mercy, from strict justice to compassion. But just as we have to ask forgiveness of each other before we ask forgiveness of God, so too must we have compassion for each other before we ask God to have compassion for us. So too must we have compassion on ourselves.

Today, let us talk about compassion. Today, let us talk about love.

The Talmud teaches that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed two thousand years ago by *sinat chinam*, by causeless hatred between Jews. In response, Rabbi Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, called for *ahavat chinam*, causeless love. But Rabbi Donniel Hartman, the head of the Hartman Institute where I studied this summer, has a great insight on this. There is no real *sinat chinam*, no real causeless hatred, he says. Everyone can come up with a reason for why they hate. *Sinat chinam* is what we accuse our enemies of; we don't see it in ourselves.

All too often, this is evident in the Jewish world. How is it that we are so concerned about how few Jews there are, and yet we do everything we can to delegitimize each other, and make it so hard to join? I have the utmost respect for my Orthodox rabbinic colleagues, who are fighting two big battles right now: first, for the acceptance of women's leadership, and second, for the acceptance of diaspora conversions in Israel. We as Reform Jews know these struggles well, and the ongoing work for religious pluralism, in Israel, in Europe, and at home – how hard we work not to be second class citizens within our own religion.

But we are only as small as we let others make us. Policy battles are one thing; self-perception is another. Think of the incident of the twelve spies who go to scout out the Promised Land. They come back and report of the land's inhabitants: "They were like giants, and we were like grasshoppers in their sight." If you think you are a grasshopper, you are a grasshopper. For too long, we liberal Jews have seen ourselves like grasshoppers in the eyes of Orthodox giants; we have ceded Jewish authenticity to those who claim tradition as their guide, even when that tradition is frozen artificially in time.

We are doing something this year of which I am very proud. For decades, Temple has been the place to which Jews turn when they want a Jewish funeral and cremation. Since the year 2000, we have had a place in our cemetery for the burial of cremated remains, marked by a single headstone inscribed with multiple names. Eight years or so ago, we started getting requests for burials of such remains, with individual stones. And so, under the leadership of our cemetery co-chairs, Jane Adams and Alan Knopp, we have built a cremation garden in our cemetery on Mount Royal. To our knowledge, this garden will be the only one of its kind in Canada.

Now, you know and I know that cremation is not a traditional Jewish practice – though it's worth noting that Jewish burial customs have changed drastically over the years. Most recently, I saw on the Mount of Olives this summer how the ultra-Orthodox rabbinate has approved multi-level, parking-lot-style burials, creating a change in policy in response to the practical need for space. But we know that the body traditionally is returned to the earth as it came; it is a practice which, both rabbinically and personally, I find very compelling.

So why did we build this garden?

First and foremost, we value individual choice. The original Reform rabbinic statement on cremation goes back to 1891.^{iv} It insists that cremation can be in keeping with dignity for the dead, and that to comfort the mourners is a vital command. "No rabbi," they wrote, one hundred and twenty-five years ago, "even no rabbi who entertains conservative views – has a right to decline," if asked to officiate in such a case. Decades later, after the horrors of the Holocaust, and with more of a turn to tradition, our movement endorsed burial as ideal – but has always remained open to individual choice.^v We do not see cremation as inherently un-Jewish, and we do not see it as a sin. We also believe that whatever the form of the body, burial itself is a mitzvah, giving a resting place for the deceased, and for the families to mourn. Whatever your perspective, I would welcome the conversation with anyone who is considering these decisions, and I would urge you to discuss them with your families.

But there is another value at play, and that value is compassion. When I was a young student rabbi, I travelled to the North Fork of Long Island from every other week from Manhattan, to serve a small congregation. One day I got a call from a member, in his fifties, whose wife had died suddenly of a stroke. She was going to be cremated, he told me; it was what she had always wanted. Would I officiate at the funeral?

Now, I had been raised as a Conservative Jew. I was still wet behind the ears in the Reform movement, and now I was being asked about a cremation? My first instinct was to demur. My second instinct was to educate myself, to look up the Reform movement's stance. But then I stopped, and I listened. This man was heartbroken. This man was in need. The only question was whether I would use whatever ability I had to respond.

And so it was that the first funeral I ever officiated involved cremation. But over the years, I have encountered reasons for cremation that I could never, and would never, contradict. The Holocaust survivor who wants to be cremated, so he can feel united family members, murdered in the ovens of Auschwitz. The young woman, a victim of anorexia, whose grieving parents choose cremation to free her from her body at last. How could we not give them a final resting place? How could we not respond with compassion?

And so we built this cremation garden knowing we are meeting a need, and without making excuses for our non-traditional approach. I believe we are fulfilling the Jewish teachings of choice and of compassion. Other Jews, other synagogues, will make different decisions. So be it. There is room enough for all of us; there is need enough for us all. Let us have more confidence in our own choices. Let us not be so quick to judge.

Today, let us choose compassion. Today, let us choose love.

We started with a story of a mother's compassion for her daughter; we moved to compassion for others' choices; now we bring it back home, with a different story of compassion between, and within, human beings. Last year around this time, there was a post that went viral: it was from a boudoir photographer, asked to take pictures of a woman for her husband. The woman asked the photographer to erase all her stretch marks, all her cellulite, all her wrinkles. Three days after the woman gave her husband the album, he sent a message to the photographer:

I am writing to you because I recently received an album containing images you took of my wife. I don't want you to think that I am in any way upset with you... but I have some food for thought...

I have been with my wife since we were 18 years old, and we have two beautiful children together. We have had many ups and downs over the years, and I think... well, actually I KNOW that my wife did these pictures for me to "spice things up". She sometimes complains that I must not find her attractive, that she wouldn't blame me if I ever found someone younger.

When I opened the album that she gave to me, my heart sank. These pictures... while they are beautiful and you are clearly a very talented photographer... they are not my wife. You made every one of her "flaws" disappear... and while I'm sure this is exactly

what she asked you to do, it took away everything that makes up our life. When you took away her stretch marks, you took away the documentation of my children. When you took away her wrinkles, you took away over two decades of our laughter, and our worries. When you took away her cellulite, you took away her love of baking and all the goodies we have eaten over the years.

... I am actually writing you to thank you. Seeing these images made me realize that I honestly do not tell my wife enough how much I LOVE her and adore her just as she is. She hears it so seldom, that she actually thought these photoshopped images are what I wanted and needed her to look like. I have to do better, and for the rest of my days I am going to celebrate her in all her imperfectness. Thanks for the reminder.^{vi}

The husband needed a reminder to love his wife; the wife needed a reminder to love herself. This is an issue for women in particular; but it is not only an issue for women. This year, I spoke with a man who had been through serious surgery. He had made a complete recovery, but he was having trouble with his scar. Every day, he would see this scar in the mirror and be faced with how close to death he had come. He would be faced with his mortality, with his body's imperfection.

And yet, to know someone is to know their scars. To love someone is to love their scars, and the stories that go with. There is no country that is perfect; there is no community that is perfect; there is no person that is perfect. Yet here we are, in all our imperfection, striving to love one another, struggling to love ourselves.

Now, I am not a kabbalah kinda rabbi. But I learned a Jewish mystical text this summer, and there is one image that moved me so much that I want to share it, to close. It is a passage describing rabbis who are studying in the middle of the night. They are mourning the destruction of Jerusalem, and the exile of God's presence, the Shekhina – in other words, the scarring moments of our past. Then, they imagine the moment when a new day breaks. At that precise moment, they say, *pitchei harachamim niftachim*, the gates of compassion are opened, and God, sitting on a throne, inscribes us in a book, and *chut shel chesed*, a thread of lovingkindness, is drawn between heaven and earth.^{vii}

In our most intimate moments, and in the face we show to the world; in our everyday interactions, and on this holiest of days; may that thread of lovingkindness connect us.

Today, let us go forward with compassion. Today, let us go forward with love.

ⁱ Shira Reifman, personal correspondence, shared by permission. May 17, 2016.

ⁱⁱ Genesis Rabbah 12:15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alan Lew, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared* (Boston: 2003), p.135.

^{iv} "Cremation from the Jewish Standpoint," *American Reform Responsa* (1891).

<http://www.ccarnet.org/responsa/arr-341-348/>.

^v "When a Parent Requests Cremation," CCAR Responsa Committee (Not Yet Published, 5766).

<http://www.ccarnet.org/responsa/nyp-no-5766-2/>.

^{vi} <http://globalnews.ca/news/2280900/husband-wins-over-women-with-his-reply-to-photoshopped-boudoir-photos/>.

^{vii} Assembly of Israel, Zohar III:20b-22b, as taught by Melila Hellner Eshed, Shalom Hartman Institute, July 18, 2016.