

#LOVEWINS

Erev Rosh Hashanah, 5776

Back in the spring, I heard a beautiful statement by Bishop Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, and friend to many in our community. He described speaking at a large event in St. Louis, where an 8 year old girl was attending with her parents. When he reached the Q&A, she stood up to ask a question:

“What’s it like to be gay, and what’s the best part about being gay?”

Surprised, Bishop Robinson answered: What’s it like to be gay? Sometimes and earlier on, it was really hard. And it’s really hard to have people feel that negatively toward you and treat you so badly. And how wonderful it is to feel things changing and not to absorb all of that stuff, to let it roll right off your back.

And to her second question – what’s the best part about being gay? He said, “the best part was knowing that I was loved by God just as I am.”

This has stuck with me since I heard it many months ago. And it has made me wonder quite a bit about love, so of course, being me, I turn to Torah. The Torah gives us three separate obligations to love. One known pretty universally, which we’ll read on Yom Kippur afternoon: “*v’ahavta l’rei’akha kamokha*” (Leviticus 19:18), love your neighbor as yourself. Number two: “*va’ahavtem et ha’ger*” (Deuteronomy 10:19) – our obligation to love the stranger. And three, also somewhat familiar because it is part of the Shema – “*v’ahavta et Adonai Elohekha*” (Deuteronomy 6:5), love Adonai your God. Neighbor, stranger, God.

I realized that these three obligations to love match up to our three primary focuses over the course of these High Holy Days – *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*.

Teshuvah, repentance, addresses the day-to-day relationships we develop with our family or friends, with our fellows or neighbors; *tefillah*, prayer, engages our relationship with God, and *tzedakah*, charity, challenges us to be responsible for the vulnerable, the stranger.

We always explore these major themes over the *hagim*, and we will again this year. Between now and *Neilah* at the end of *Yom Kippur* we will reflect on these ideas through their corresponding loves. Tonight I want to specifically talk about the one I think is most difficult, love of God. The one many of you may silently be praying I would avoid. (Irony that is not lost on me.)

One reason this is hard to talk about is because we are community in which the diversity of our beliefs is something in which we take pride. That means that there are some people here who

are deeply and passionately connected with God. Others – perhaps the majority of us – don't know where we stand on the God question. And some people here are staunch atheists who may have even published an article about their atheism just last week. And I am grateful for all of us coming together and being enriched by our differences. But I still want to talk about God, so for the sake of tonight I ask you suspend disbelief if only for a little while. Because I think understanding what our tradition has to say about loving and being loved by God is of real value whether we ultimately believe in God or not.

There is an obvious problem with the commandment to love God. Love is an emotion and it seems absurd and pointless to command a person to feel a particular way. Anyone who has ever been told to “just cheer up” knows this to be true. So what is Deuteronomy chapter 6 and every recitation of the Shema asking of us?

According to the *Sefat Emet*, we all already have a love of God at our core. The work is to unlock that love through our actions.

Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that “Above all, the Torah asks for *love*... All observance is training in the art of love. To forget that love is the purpose of all *mitzvot* is to vitiate their meaning” (*God in Search of Man*, p. 307). So *mitzvot* – *Shabbat*, *kashrut*, *tzedakah*, leaving the corner of your field for the poor, putting a guardrail on your roof – all of these are means of moving toward and expressing our love for God.

As it turns out, not only are we supposed to love God, but this is a reciprocal relationship. God actually loves **you**.

How do we know?

According to Rabbi Akiva, the famous sage of the 1st century, we know God loves us by the simple fact that we exist. In the Mishnah, he says, “it was because of a great love that humans were created in the Divine image” (*Pirkei Avot* 3:14).

Similar to a parent, yes it's a little narcissistic, but the desire to create a mini-me is in fact a sign of love.

Rabbi Akiva continues, “And it was because of an even greater love that it was made known to us that we were created in the Divine image.”

Did Bishop Robinson's answer to that little girl surprise you? Because I didn't expect it. Religion and homosexuality have had a rocky relationship, to put it mildly. Our sacred texts say painful things about us. Our religious institutions have, at best, not known what to do with us, and at worst, vilified and persecuted us. What did this religious gay man mean when he said that the best part about being gay was knowing God loves him just as he is?

I've wondered about this for many months and here is what I came to. For a gay person, our very existence is at stake. In most places beyond our beautiful community here in liberal Los Angeles and some pockets of progressiveness around the country and world, being gay or lesbian, bisexual or transgender is experienced painfully as a deviation from the norm. We are different from what is assumed in society, what is expected and often hoped for by families and by the LGBT person themselves. Our identity is hidden and needs to be revealed over and over again, sometimes feeling like a secret to be confessed.

And for a person of faith, of spiritual seeking, there can be a struggle at the core of which is the question: am I okay or is there something fundamentally wrong with me?

This struggle can be experienced by anyone who sees themselves as different than what is normative, whether that difference is because of sexual or gender identity or it is because of something we might have done or that has been had done to us, whether it is because of a struggle with mental illness or any number of other things. I think Bishop Robinson was saying: I am different in a way that could and probably did at some point lead me to think I am of lesser value as a human being. But, as Rabbi Akiva taught, the fact of being created in God's image is an indication of God's love. And if **everyone** is created in God's image, that everyone must include me. Which **MUST** mean that God loves me. Exactly how I am.

And that God loves you, exactly how you are.

What an incredible milestone we were all witness to in June, when the Supreme Court of the United States legalized same-sex marriage in our country and declared the fundamental equality of the heart regardless of who that heart loves. Thank you, God, for a law that sides with dignity, affirming that my love...her love...his love can be just as strong, just as holy as anyone else's. That in the words of President Obama, love is love.

Consider this: the very differences that may cause us to doubt our worth are the very things that make us beautiful and extraordinary. Each of us is like a natural gemstone, whose unique imperfections make it all the more valuable and irreplaceable.

What's incredible about God's love is that God is *yode'a kol ha'nistarot*. God knows everything about us, within us, already.

So those not-so-nice thoughts you have about your friend? God knows already.

That terrible thing you said to your sibling or parent or child and wish like hell you could take back? God was there.

Most debilitating fears? Check.

Deepest longings? Check.

Flaws, mistakes, every source of shame, those parts of ourselves we're terrified will drive away the people we love? God sees that. And guess what? God loves you anyway.

And those parts of you, petty, competitive, vindictive, scared...they don't change your inherent value or diminish from your Divine image.

You may have seen the article in the New York Times back in January called "To Fall in Love with Anyone, Do This." In it, the author, Mandy Len Catron shared a series of 36 questions developed by a psychologist named Dr. Arthur Aron in 1997. She described his study: "a heterosexual man and woman enter the lab through separate doors. They sit face to face and answer a series of increasingly personal questions. Then they stare silently into each other's eyes for four minutes. The most tantalizing detail: Six months later, two participants were married."

Catron describes how she and a co-worker (admittedly one in whom she was already interested) tried this on a date one night and did in fact fall in love, though she doesn't entirely credit the exercise. What kind of questions were these that had the potential to create love even between two strangers?? Well, they were questions about what's most important, like: what has been the greatest accomplishment in your life? Questions about your more difficult memories: If you could change one thing about your childhood, what would it be? Questions about your fears and your secrets: If you died tonight, what would you most regret not telling someone?

What do these questions have to do with love?

Maimonides writes: "A person can only love according to the degree he knows the object of his love. If he knows a little, he can love a little. And if he knows a lot, he can love a lot" (*Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:6).

Within these 36 questions there is an openness and a vulnerability, willingness to share one's essence through stories of growth and of learning and yearning and hope. And then 4 minutes of real seeing and being seen – to the core. We might worry about sharing the fullness of ourselves with others - in romantic relationships but also in friendships or with family. But when we let ourselves be known, we let ourselves be loved.

Anat Hoffman, a leading Israeli voice for human rights, founder of Women of the Wall, and director of the Israel Religious Action Center, spoke to the IKARites who went on our first community trip to Israel in July. Talking about the importance of honesty in relationship with Israel, she said, "love is what's left after all the truth has been uncovered". (She also said that

Israel is too important to be left to the Israelis but I'll leave that one for Rabbi Brous.) Love is what's left after all the truth has been uncovered. I think that's where God is with us. God, who knows us best, fully and completely, loves us unconditionally and unendingly.

Imagine for a moment what it would be like to recognize and accept God's constant and consistent love for you. What risks have you been afraid to take that you would have the courage for if you knew that you'll be loved no matter what, even if you failed spectacularly? In this season of intensive self-inventory, how might you feel about the mistakes you've made, the hurtful words you've said, the goals you haven't reached, if you knew that none of those diminish your worth, but instead are opportunities to stretch and grow?

And consider also how we judge others. Everyone else is loved by God as well – treasured and deliberately created exactly as God intended. How would we honor difference instead of fearing it? How would we speak to one another?

Imagine if love were the starting point and the destination.

What infinite possibility these holy days could bring into our lives. I pray that every one of us is blessed with a season open to reflection and celebration, to introspection and appreciation, during which we move closer to being the person we were singularly and uniquely put in the world to be.

And throughout it all, may we each be blessed to know and to say with conviction that “the best part about being me is that God loves me exactly the way I am. “

Shana tova.