

Klal Gadol B'Torah: A Story of Love and Loss in a Time of Pandemic

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It was one of those human interest stories you read in a newspaper or magazine or even on YouTube and think, “how poignant and touching.” What journalists call “soft news.” For a moment, your faith in humanity is restored.

Earlier this year, I saw a video about an owl that had gotten caught in a soccer goal net. It thrashed about, shaking its wings, all in a hopeless effort to get disentangled. Then these 4 burly construction workers walked over to the imprisoned owl and picked it up. I expected the owl to struggle about even more intensely. That’s not what happened.

Over the next 30 minutes, these brawny men carefully cut away strand after strand of the soccer net. As they moved delicately, the owl remained strangely still.

What accounted for this? Was the owl paralyzed in fright? Or did it understand these human giants were there to help? That’s a mystery I wish I knew an answer for. Seeing its bright yellow eyes fixed on the humans, though, it seemed to me that it understood these bipeds were looking out for it, were there to protect it.

What I can say is that the moment they had freed the bird and set it on the ground, the owl’s stillness turned to motion as it took to flight and rapidly disappeared into the sky.

The truth is, the world is filled with stories like these. When we hear them, we get an emotional charge. Then, as we get on with our day, the story and the emotions it drew up fade into the background. Nonetheless, I have faith a residue of goodness remains with you, changes you, encourages you, supports you through the harder stuff of life.

For some reason, I haven’t been able to forget this story of the owl. And when a rabbi can’t forget a story, well, you know it will eventually end up in a sermon.

Of course what predominates all of our thoughts and emotions is COVID-19. We are as captured and paralyzed by this pandemic as the owl was by the net. I know that for a lucky few, this period of quarantine is a blessing. Kids who found school excruciating experience a sort of joy and freedom from what tormented them. Introverts value time alone to recharge without justifying it. But that's not most of us.

The truth is, most of us feel ensnared by this virus. Clearly, there is plenty of suffering out there. Folks out of work. Individuals worried about making rent or mortgage. High risk people who are terrified of getting infected by Coronavirus. So many have felt the most severe repercussions of this pandemic. The source of their pain is clear and heart-breaking.

Yet what of the people who still have jobs, and food on the shelf? People who have a sufficiently loving home environment? Who feel connected with friends on social media? Who have a generally optimistic view of life? The ones who always seek and find the silver lining? The fortunate ones, in other words. *Why are so many people who seem to have so much going for them still struggling when their basic needs are handled—when far more than just those basic needs are covered? Why do even those fortunate ones who see silver linings feel ill-at-ease?* If we can find the answer to that group's suffering, it may help describe some part of what we are all enduring.

Some of the reasons for our lack of ease are obvious and we all are aware of them:

Older parents who are dwelling in senior living communities that preclude visits from their children or grandchildren.

Family who can't travel to participate in simchas.

Funerals with only a handful of people in attendance because of the restrictions.

Young children stuck at home going stir-crazy from isolation. Parents attempting to balance working from home while monitoring their children's on-line learning.

College graduate who hoped to launch their adult lives but instead find themselves in a holding pattern.

Retirees who feel their precious time ticking away; who understand that even though they worked hard and saved their entire lives so that they could travel and have a few adventures in their golden years, they may never be able to. That a lost year might diminish their mobility and preclude them from the trip of a lifetime.

The monotony of life. The uncertainty of the future.

The restrictions themselves, which many Americans chafe at amid the loss of some precious autonomy.

Yet even when we are aware of all we have lost, we remain disturbed in a way that doesn't quite jibe with what we can identify.

What *else* has changed? What *else* have we lost? If we can figure out just a little of that, perhaps it will help ease the very long path that still lies ahead of us. Perhaps we will be able to extricate ourselves from the ensnaring net of this pandemic? Maybe, just maybe that is the individual and the societal task of teshuvah this year? The heroic spiritual work we are called to do?

That's what is on my mind this Rosh Hashanah and during our Days of Awe.

Do you know what I think we have lost, the missing piece that is getting under all of our skins? Love.

To be clear, I don't mean only the obvious forms of love, like your feelings with your first crush, or the love we hold for our closest friends and family. What I have come to realize is that the world is composed of a trillion invisible strands of love and that countless strands have been torn by the Coronavirus.

Somewhat like a positive version of that soccer net, most of us have been wrapped up by these filaments of love. They have kept us calmer when we have felt anxious, grounded us when we felt scattered. When your mind

would race away from reality and start imagining all sorts of terrible things, this sort of love would bring you back to your senses, or prevent you from taking a dark flight of fancy in the first place.

So let's talk about love.

1. Let's first examine the theory of love in the Jewish tradition;
2. then figure out how we missed seeing that our world was built upon a particular sort of love that previously we took for granted and which largely disappeared in the pandemic;
3. and finally find the way back to a love-filled life that can help us feel more settled in these unsettling times.

1. Love in the Tradition

Sometimes Jews don't talk enough about love. It gets lost in the mass of rules and customs that are the outer garb of Judaism. Yet it is foundational and undergirds the responsibilities we have to one another. In Leviticus 19:18, we read:

לֹא־תִקֶּם וְלֹא־תִטֹּר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמִוֶּךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

Don't take vengeance or bear a grudge. Love your neighbor like yourself. I am God.

This verse is so important, that Rabbi Akiva called it a “*klal gadol ba'Torah*”—which we can translate as a major rule of the Torah, or as a general rule of the Torah.

What does it mean to say that loving your neighbor is a *klal gadol ba'Torah*?

Kli Yakar is a book written by the 16th century sage, Rabbi Shlomo Luntschitz of Poland. Luntschitz's commentary is often distinguished by keen psychological insight. Many of you know the famous story he uses to illustrate loving your neighbor.

“You shall love your fellow. Our Sages said that this is a great general principle in the Torah. Shabbat (31a) relates that there was once a proselyte who asked Hillel to convert him on condition that he would teach him the entire Torah while he stood on one foot. Hillel taught him the verse,

“You shall love your fellow as yourself” ... It seems that this proselyte was a righteous convert and he was not mocking in jest to propose that Hillel teach him the entire Torah while he literally stood on one foot. Rather, he was requesting Hillel to show him one foundation for all the Torah’s commandments, upon which all the Torah’s commandments stand, so that he will not come to forgetfulness, which is common for a convert who did not learn anything about the Torah’s commandments from his youth ...”

According to the Kli Yakar, this verse is not a major rule, but the general rule from which everything else in the Torah is derived and exemplifies.

“You shall not murder or steal?” An example of love. “You shall have honest weights and measures?” An example of love. “You shall send the mother bird away before snatching her eggs?” Love.

In Judaism, love is the prime directive, the meta-law, the basis of halakhah and a meaningful life.

Moreover, despite atheists like Richard Dawkins who wrote about the selfish gene, this interpretation is a support to those scientists who have studied the altruistic gene to understand just why it is that love helps us survive. Because the best religion has the support of science; and the most meaningful science serves as an explanation of hard-won spiritual truths.

Why Did We All Miss How Much Love Filled the World?

There’s a rabbinic statement that does a good job of explaining how and why the importance of the love that supported us before the pandemic was so often minimized by us or even rendered invisible. In the Talmud we read:

Ain ha-berakhah metzuyah ella b'davar ha-samui min ha-ayin

"God's blessing is normally found in unexpected places hidden from the eye"

(Ta'anis 8b, B. M. 42a)

What this phrase actually means is that there are so many blessings of love constantly surrounding us, that we take them for granted. The most

precious substance on the planet for us mammals is oxygen, air. It is also abundant, cheap, and literally invisible. Yet as the horrific murder of George Floyd reminds us, there is no greater love than our God-given ability and right to breathe. When that simple gift was denied to George Floyd, a fundamental form of love was seized and stolen from him. No wonder our nation is hurting. You can't deny someone the most basic form of love without that pain being felt everywhere. Cruelty is the negation of life-sustaining love.

The same goes for water. Sunlight. Gravity. God's abiding love for us.

Thankfully, God's love for us hasn't been taken away, or we would all be plunged into unimaginable darkness. No, the form of love that was taken from us when this pandemic began was the manifestation of God's blessing of love through the small and constant interactions we have with cashiers and clerks, with people on the bus, or a stranger on the street with whom we shared a few pleasantries. It was the short conversation you'd have with a familiar face in synagogue, which whether you recognized it or not, provided us all with a sense of place and belonging.

Leaving Cleveland to move to Portland meant I had to say good bye to Jimmy, the Italian Catholic barber I trusted with scissors. We discussed our two religions, his gaggle of grandchildren, classical music, and architecture. When I walked out of his shop after my la haircut with him, a deep sense of sadness descended on me. I am so grateful that my family discovered Tera. She's my Portland Jimmy, and an important member of our circle. The conversations you have with the person who cuts your strands of hair are part of this invisible loving support.

3. Finding Our Way Back to Love

Suppose it is true that part of why we are all suffering is because so many strands from this invisible web of love have been cut. What are we to do about it?

If our souls are disquieted, it is because so many of these filaments of love have been snipped. Therefore, the only sensible course of action is first to mourn what we have lost. We each would probably benefit if we were to write down as many of these losses as we can identify, and then sit shivah

for them. The Jewish ways through grief has always been to face loss head on, with open eyes.

Having done that, we rise up and take a walk around the block. Which is to say we all will need to actively recreate this web of concern that supported us. It won't do to "wait for the world to go back to normal." Love is the core. It's the essence, not the outer forms. Waiting for the world to return to normal is to say, "I can live without the web of love. I can endure. What I miss is not love, but the forms it takes." We must find new ways to spin strands of love in our daily lives.

I too hope for the world to return to many of the parts of life we found so precious. But not all of them will be safe, and if I can be frank—some things probably won't come back. This is a time of disruption, an inflection point toward a new normal.

On a massive scale, we all need to build new structures, new rules, new order. This is how we restore the love we lost. On the individual level, I think we have found that creating new habits and structures for ourselves helps us navigate the monotony of being stuck at home. Yet I'd suggest that most of us made some early changes, and probably got into a holding pattern shortly afterwards. We would be well-served to ask ourselves if the structures of love we have built in our new lives are the best we can come up with.

We may be aided in this exercise by a modern commentator named the Chibah Yeteirah, who comments on our verse in Leviticus 19:

Chibbah Yeteirah on Torah, Leviticus 19:18:1

ואהבת לרעך כמוך. אם תגמול חסדים לרעך הקב"ה יגמול לך, כמו שסיים אני ה',
ונמצא שבמה שהיטבת לרעך היטבת גם לעצמך, וזהו כמוך

If you bestow kindness on your neighbor, God will bestow kindness on you. This is why the pasuk ends, "I am God"—for we have discovered that the manner in which you have made it better for your neighbor, it in turn is made better for you. This is the meaning of the word "kamokha."

This might sound a bit like rabbinic mumbo-jumbo. “How on earth can one honestly believe that all the kindness we perform in the world returns to us. Rabbi, life doesn’t seem like that.”

But that may be the deepest lesson of the Pandemic.

Ain ha-berakhah metzuyah ella b'davar ha-samui min ha-ayin

"God's blessing is found in the places hidden from the eye."

From the eye, it is hidden, but not from the heart. That’s what this pandemic has taught us. That the blessings of love were constant and everywhere, carried in what we imagined were a hundred inconsequential interactions. Whether we knew it or not, we were constantly pouring out our love into the world, and it returned to us, over and over.

That feedback mechanism is partially broken now. Which is ok, because we are the people who believe in *tikkun*. We can fix it by finding new ways to love our neighbors like ourselves. The more we do so, the better we will feel, because with love, what you give is what you get.

Here then is my charge, my challenge to all of us. May you recognize and have the courage to act on the facts that:

We are all entangled in an invisible net.

Whether the net ensnares us or supports us depends on how we approach it.

We have all lost a lot of hidden love, and we are all living with a broken heart.

We need to sit shivah for the love that was lost.

We need to weave a new web of rules that reflect the love we want in our world.

We can do this fearlessly, because in the economy of love, we get what we give.

May this indeed be a year of sweetness for all of us. May we increasingly feel a sense of *shleimut*, of fullness and well-being. And may we work to make it so.

Shanah tovah tikateivu.