

**Hesed v'emet/Love and Truth**  
**Rosh Hashana Sermon 5759/2018**  
**Tikkun v'Or, Ithaca New York**  
**Rabbi Brian Walt**

Gut Yontif! Shana Tova!

It is so wonderful to be together again. What a miracle we are all here ready to celebrate our lives, our community and the promise of a new year. Each and every one of us plays a part in making this special community. Thank you for showing up, for saying **Hineni**, Here I am tonight, and in so many different ways over the year. Take a moment to be fully here. Take a moment to feel gratitude for being alive at this moment. Take a moment to notice your intention to stand up and say Hineyni to your life, all of it.

**Hineni here I am!**  
**Hinenynu Here we are!**

Blessed is the One who has given us the gift of life, sustained us and brought us to this moment.

Today we have the opportunity to reflect on our lives and how we can bring more joy, love, compassion and sweetness into our lives. Today we have the opportunity to renew our commitment to do all we can to bring justice and peace into the life of our country, in Israel/Palestine and to take urgent action to sustain our planet. We are truly blessed by this possibility for teshuva and renewal.

Rosh Hashana is a celebration of the creation of the world. The rabbis tell the following midrash/legend about the creation of human beings.

Rabbi Shimon said: When God was about to create human beings, the angels formed themselves into opposing factions. One faction was very excited and encouraged God to proceed. Others argued, what are you thinking? Bad idea, don't create Human Beings!

Thus it is written in Psalms 85:11. Love and truth (Hesed v'emet) fought with one another, justice and peace combated each other.

Hesed/Love said: Create Humans because they will do so many acts of love and kindness.

Emet/Truth said: Don't create them because humans will be full of lies.

Tzedek/Justice said: Create them because they will act justly.

Peace says: Don't create them because they will be consumed by fighting.

What did God do? As the different factions of angels were arguing with one another. God thought, human beings are very good, as it is written on the sixth day of creation, after God created humans:

*Vayar Elohim et kol asher asah v'hiney tov meod.*

And God saw all that God had made and it was very good!

While the angels were talking and debating with one another, God created human beings anyway and then turned to the angels and said. What are you arguing about? I am done. I just created them while you were arguing!

This midrash offers us a window into the rabbi's profound wisdom about the nature of human beings. We are loving and we are just, and we lie and we are violent. We have a yetzer hatov and yetzer hara, a good inclination and an evil inclination. Our capacity for good is enormous; as is our capacity for lies, cruelty and violence.

This midrash seems to be particularly relevant this year. Given the planetary crisis, the hatred, racism, misogyny, greed and lies that dominate our life as a nation, I imagine that some of us can understand the faction of angels who argued against the creation of human beings. Maybe at this moment, the angels of justice and peace who argued against the creation of humanity are gloating on high over those angels who pointed to the goodness of humanity. "Told you so, just look at what they have done."

The other side of the coin is that we as human beings have enormous potential for good as is reflected in God's action. The midrash points out that God looked at the created world after the creation of Adam and said it was very good. It is interesting that God didn't argue with the contrarian angels, God saw that the creation was very good. One could understand this in many ways but I see God as acknowledging that humans lie and make war but that humans are inherently and essentially good.

### **The Besht and Kotzer Rebbe**

The tension in the midrash between love and truth, justice and peace, is a theme that runs through centuries of Jewish spiritual life and thought. Close to 2,000 years after the midrash was written, this tension between hesed/love and emet/truth was reflected in the divergent teachings of two Hasidic rebbes: **the Baal Shem Tov, the Besht, the founder of Hasidism, and the Kotzker rebbe**. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, 20th century Jewish scholar and theologian, wrote about these two rebbes in his book about the Kotzker rebbe, *A Passion for Truth*.

Originally, Rabbi Heschel had worked for many years on book about the Baal Shem Tov. His father came from the town of Mezbizh, the town of the Baal Shem Tov, and he was named after his grandfather, Abraham Joshua Heschel (Apter Rav) who was the last great rebbe of Mezbizh. The Apter Rav was buried right next to the Baal Shem Tov, in Mezbizh.

Heschel's own spirituality and theology, that has inspired and informed many contemporary Jews, is rooted in the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. Hasidism was a popular Jewish mystical revival movement that renewed Judaism at a time when it had fallen into legalism, rigidity and obsessive focus on ritual behavior. It was a spirituality that found God in nature, in human life and in joy. When Heschel translated the spirituality of Eastern European Jewry to American Jews, he translated the central teachings of this movement into language that

American Jews could understand. Heschel's emphasis on wonder, awe, mystery and radical amazement as the foundation of Jewish spirituality were all directly connected to the teachings of the Besht. As Rabbi Art Green said, "Heschel's reading of Judaism was a Hasidic one."

What was the Judaism of the Baal Shem Tov?

The Besht taught that the whole world was filled with God. Because the whole world is filled with God's glory, everything is good, everything and everyone is part of God. Most important in the Besht's religious vision was love and joy, love for God, love for human beings and love for the created world. The Shekhina/Divine Presence resides in the hearts and souls of all people. Each person had their unique form of service to which they are called, their own destiny and spiritual goals. Whereas Jews had prayed for the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, the Besht taught that temple in Jerusalem could be rebuilt by every Jew in his/her own soul. Every person could be a holy sanctuary. This vision of Judaism is so inspiring and exciting to me. It is the Judaism I love.

While Heschel intended to write a book about the Baal Shem Tov, all of his notes for the book he planned to write were burned in a fire at the Jewish Theological Seminary. And he ended up writing a book about the Kotzker rebbe who had a very different teaching to that of the Baal Shem Tov. The Kotzker was in many ways the opposite of the Baal Shem Tov. The central teaching of the Kotzker rebbe focused on truth and more specifically the lies of human beings. The Kotzker was stunned by the capacity of human beings to lie, to be indifferent and cruel to one another. He was overwhelmed by the evil urges and actions of humans. While the Besht focussed on hesed/love, the Kotzker focused on emet/truth. What was most important to the Besht was love, what was most important to the Kotzker was truth.

If love and truth are central to Judaism, we now live in a country and world where we have neither. We are witness to an alarming rise in hatred and cruelty and we are awash in lies.

Yet, tonight I am not drawn to join in the choir of those angels who pointed to the dark side of human nature and behavior, nor to the important and challenging teaching of the Kotzker rebbe about truth and integrity.

Tonight I want to join the angels on high who celebrated the human love, caring, the compassion and to the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov about the possibilities of human spirituality and life. This is part of my own spiritual heritage and I believe it is how we must begin our journey these Days of Awe. Let us tonight, begin our work by noticing and appreciating the ways in which we have been loving and caring in our lives, the ways in which we see the Divine image in our family, friends and every human being we encounter, and in the amazing array of living beings in our world. This love and care is at the heart of what it means to be Jewish and is at the heart of what it means to live a spiritual life and to build a spiritual community.

A few weeks ago, I was visiting my sister Annette in Berkeley and took a break to go for a walk with Rabbi Dev Noily, a beloved friend and colleague, who is the rabbi of Kehilla, a congregation that has been an inspiration to me from the beginning of my rabbinic career.

Walking around the Marina in Berkeley, one of my sister's z'l favorite spots, with the beautiful backdrop of the Marina and the San Francisco Bay, I asked her, so what are you doing your community to resist the hatred and cruelty in our country? Her answer was both surprising and wonderful. Instead of starting with a description of all the inspiring organizing that they are doing in relation to racism, immigration, environmental danger, she said, "I think everything we are doing is resistance." Our Shabbat services are resistance, our focus on our individual spiritual lives is resistance, our taking care of our individual spiritual/ethical lives is significant resistance. And all the social justice organizing we are doing is resistance. I resonated deeply with her answer.

Nurturing a spiritual life dedicated to God/ultimate values and building a loving, just and caring spiritual community devoted to Spirit, Justice and Community is itself a powerful act of resistance. Our spiritual lives nurture that part of human nature that is loving, it builds a relationship with and a commitment to something greater than our own individual wants and desires. It is about the we rather than the I. That is what Avodat Hashem/Serving God means. It calls on us to love ourselves, to love our friends, our families, our children. It calls on us to be compassionate to ourselves and everyone else around us. And it calls on us not to place our faith in human leaders but in godly values, that which is of ultimate value.

In the traditional morning service there is a rabbinic passage that we read that points us to these acts of love.

"These are sacred acts that have no set amount: the corner of the field which must be left for the poor, the first fruit, the pilgrimage, acts of kindness and learning Torah. These are the sacred acts whose fruits a person eats in this world but whose essence remains intact for the World to Come, and they are: honoring one's parents, acts of kindness, praying morning and evening, welcoming others into one's home, visiting the sick, providing for a bride, accompanying the dead, absorption in prayer, making peace between people, and the study of Torah is the foundation of them all.

What is striking about this list is that it is a compilation of day to day, ordinary interactions that build a world of love, compassion and justice. And it describes our community and many spiritual communities of faith.

Over this past year,

We have welcomed people into our homes and communities  
We have visited and cared for the sick  
We have accompanied the dead,  
We have rejoiced with couples at their weddings,  
We have made peace and advocated for justice and peace.

The Torah starts with an act of kindness and ends with an act of kindness, both done by God. At the beginning of the Torah, God provides clothes for the naked, at the end God buries Moses.

The rabbis say that this is to teach us that the entire Torah, all of Judaism, is about acts of love.

And these are things we all have done over the past year.

Take a moment to think of how you have brought love and caring into your life and into the life of those close to you over the past year. Celebrate it.

And think of the ways you have served a higher purpose in your work life and home.

And, over this past year, many of us have stepped beyond our comfort zone. For some of us that involved participating in protests to support the rights of women, sensible gun control, protection for the environment. Many of us have dedicated hours to supporting political candidates we believe will promote the greater good for all. Some of us have reached out to people who hold different political opinions. People across our country and the world have taken bold action.

How many of you have done something this past year to promote love, justice and peace that you have never done before?

And, we as a community, have taken bold actions over the last year: We proudly shared our core set of values that articulates the vision of our community, we have build a relationship with other religious communities in Lansing, and we endorsed the Poor People's campaign.

As individuals and as a community we have acted lovingly and joyfully. And we have nurtured a Judaism of love and radical welcome. We have welcomed people into our community.

Tomorrow when we open the ark we will chant the thirteen Divine attributes three times, we will affirm that God is *rav chesed ve'emet*/ abundant in love and truth. **God abounds in love and truth, and so do we.** The attributes of God are our attributes, they are in us.

It is striking that the list of God's attributes pairs love and truth. While *hesed*/love is the foundation we also need truth and I will devote time tomorrow to this. We need love and truth, not one or the other. We need justice and peace, not one or the other. We need judgement and compassion, not one or the other.

## CONCLUSION

Susannah Heschel says that when he died, her father had two books on his bed stand. One was a book of Hasidic teachings and the other was a book about Vietnam.

In our hearts and minds we need both teachings. We need to commit ourselves to nurturing our spiritual life and the spiritual life of our community and we need to be engaged in acting to move our country and our world towards justice, compassion and peace for all. As we begin to reflect on our lives as individuals and community we need both. We need love and truth, not one or the other. We need justice and peace, not one or the other. We need judgement and compassion, not one or the other.

At the beginning of the sermon I taught the midrash about the angels of love and the angels of truth arguing about whether human beings should have been created.

They based their teaching on a verse from Psalms:

*Chesed umishpat nifgashu, tzedek v'shalom nashaku*

They understood this verse as meaning,

*Love and truth collided, justice and peace fought.*

But the word, *nifgashu*, that they read as “collided” is the word for met.

And the word, *nashaku*, that they read as “fought” is the word for kiss.

So one could read the the simple meaning (peshat) of the verse as,

Love and truth met, justice and peace kissed.

In this translation love and truth, justice and peace are not conflicting dualities, they are integrally connected to one another in a very positive way.

In his book on the Kotzker rebbe, Heschel writes God does not need those who praise God when in a state of euphoria. God needs those in love with God when God is in distress, God and ourselves.

This year God is in distress and so are we.

“This is the task: In the darkest night to be certain of the dawn, certain of the power to turn a curse into a blessing, agony into a song”

This is our task in the year ahead!

Let us continue to devote ourselves to our spiritual/ethical lives, to love and compassion for ourselves our families and our communities. And let us continue to step beyond our comfort zone, to take bold action and bring that spiritually based love and compassion to meet the difficult challenges we face.

Shana Tova!

May it be a good year for all!