

Who Wrote the Book of Love?

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As a young girl growing up in America, I learned that Judaism was a religion of law and Christianity was a religion of love. Maybe it was the morning prayers in my public school that taught me this --- we often sang the song “Jesus loves me, this I know, cuz the Bible tells me so.” And since I mostly only went to services for the High Holy Days, the messages that got reinforced were the scarier ones --- you know, the “who shall live and who shall die” ones. Not exactly about love. I thought about that again recently when I read Jay Michaelson’s article in the *Forward* entitled: “Why You Shouldn’t Go to Synagogue on Rosh Hashanah This Year.”

Michaelson argues that you should avoid your local temple because the holiday’s themes and prayer focus on the least believable aspects of Jewish theology -- like the Man in the Sky with the big Book of Life. “Who are we kidding here?” he asks. “Does anyone believe this stuff?... And yet, here we are again, listening to authority figures drone on about them, standing up, sitting down, praying to a deity we don’t believe in. No wonder half of American Jews are leaving the fold — this fold sucks... Whether gross or refined, the Days of Awe overemphasize one aspect of the Jewish experience — and a problematic one at that. Trade it in.”

“Trade it in,” Michaelson says.

Well, I’m not ready to trade it in. There is too much that is meaningful to me about the High Holy Days --- the gathering of family, the opportunity to reflect on the year that has just finished, the possibility of second chances, the music, the powerful sound of the shofar and its echo through our lives.

So, we’re not going to trade it in. Instead, at Emanuel this year, we’ll emphasize a different aspect of Jewish experience --- love. Each of your rabbis will share thoughts about what our tradition teaches us about love, and why it matters. And finally, we’ll answer a question some of you have been wonder, wonder, wondering about --- for a lifetime --- “Who wrote the Book of Love?”

Judaism, contrary to what I learned as a young girl, is a religion of love.

And it starts with Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, or more precisely, the anniversary of the creation of the first human being. You remember the story --- in the metaphoric retelling of the big bang, God said: “Let there be light.” And there was light, and then the chaos moved toward order as the earth, the oceans, the vegetation, and the animals were all created. And after each day, God said it was good. On the sixth day, God created the human being in God’s image, male and female in one creation.

And then, for the first time, God said something was not good: “It is not good for the human to be alone.”

Until that moment, everything about creation is good or very good. The only thing that is not good is to be alone. To be fully human is to be in relationship. That is the beginning of love.

You all know that the *Sh'ma* is the central prayer of Judaism, the watchword of our faith. As a girl, I learned that it was about monotheism, that there is only one God, but now know I know that it is really a prayer about love.

Sh'ma Yisrael – Listen Israel – not the country Israel, but the people Israel – Listen, Jewish people. Pay attention.

Adonai Eloheynu – Adonai, the word we say because we can't pronounce God's name, is our God. *Adonai Echud* – there is only God. In other words, the *Sh'ma* asserts that we are all connected and we are all part of Divinity. While it seems that I, Laura, am different from him, Jonathan, or you, we are actually all One, connected. This connection is the beginning of love.

And just to make sure we get this, the prayer before the *Sh'ma* and the prayer after are both about love. With slight variations in the evening and the morning versions, the prayer before the *Sh'ma* begins: “With an eternal love God loves us.” We didn't do anything to merit the love; we are simply and unambivalently loved. End of story. Like a parent loves a child in a healthy, uncomplicated family. And then the prayer after the *Sh'ma*, the *V'ahavta*, tells us how we show God our love. *B'chol levavcha, b'chol nafshecha, b'chol me'odecha*: With all our heart, with all our soul, with all our might.

To believe God loves us is hard for so many of us. We're not clear what it means, or whether we actually believe in God, or even what the words “God loves us” mean. So let's reframe it. Think instead: You are loved. And then think about the times when you felt love. Really. Close your eyes. Think of a person you are close to, maybe a parent or a grandparent, maybe a partner, maybe a close friend, and fill in this sentence: I felt your love when you... How did that feel? What might have changed at that moment or in your life because you felt another person's love? (PAUSE FOR REFLECTION)

I felt your love when you went out late at night to get me Tylenol when I was sick. I felt your love when you read the sixth draft of my sermon. I felt this congregation's love when you gave me the gift of the extraordinary celebration when I became rabbi emerita. I am loved. What a blessing. I am in relationship with so many people who care about me, with whom I feel connected. It is not good to be alone. That is the message of the prayer before the *Sh'ma*. And if I can feel that love from people, might I understand that as a reflection of God's love?

And the message of the *V'ahavta*? When we feel connected to another person we naturally, instinctively, show them love. Remember all the times you did something for someone you love. Remember when I picked you up at the airport really late at night? That was me loving you. Or I think of my son: Remember when you were little and were afraid of elevators and I walked up all those stairs to your dentist appointment carrying your little sister and her carriage and holding

your hand? That was me loving you. Loving you with all my heart, all my soul, and all my might.

Remember when I fill in the blanks. That was me loving you. Close your eyes. Remember. Actually remember. How did you show your love and how did that make you feel? (PAUSE FOR REFLECTION)

Most of us can probably evoke the feeling of being loved by another person. Imagine that love as a reflection of God's love. You are loved. Judaism is a religion of love.

Judaism is a religion of love. Perhaps that's why Rabbi Akiva argued that the most important principle of Torah is: Love your neighbor as yourself. I am Adonai. (Lev. 19:18) So many questions from such a short verse. Who is my neighbor? What does it actually mean to love your neighbor as yourself? What does it mean to love yourself?

Maimonides, in the 12th century explains: "All the things that you would want others to do for you, do for your neighbors." Nachmanides, a century later, has a very different interpretation: "You shall love *for* your *neighbor* what you love for yourself." In other words, loving your neighbor as yourself means wishing for our neighbors what we wish for our own selves.

What do I wish for myself? That I be safe, that I be happy, that I be strong, that I live with ease. In fact, every day I meditate with those words. It is a mediation practice called Metta or lovingkindness, from a Buddhist tradition I learned from my teacher Sylvia Boorstein. It is not an affirmation. I don't say: I am safe. I am happy. It is, instead, an aspiration, a hope, a wish. I want to feel safe. I say: May I feel safe. I want to feel happy. I say: May I feel happy. The meditation calms me down, and helps me look past those dramas of my life that get in the way of feeling safe or happy or strong, that make it hard for me to face whatever is happening with equanimity and patience. Bad things might be happening, but if my mind can stay clear, I can still wish for safety, happiness, strength, and ease. And the clearer and calmer I am, the more I can face those challenges.

Sometimes I translate the practice into a more Jewish idiom. It is actually the same as the Priestly Blessing: May God bless you and guard you; (may you be safe). May you receive the light of God's kindness and grace; (may you be happy and strong). May you see God's favor and goodness and partake of God's peace; (may you live with ease).

So Metta begins with blessing myself. And then the second stage of the practice is a kind of answer to the question: Who is my neighbor?

Who is my neighbor? First, the people I feel closest to – my husband Rich, our children, our extended family, my closest friends. So after I bless myself, I direct my meditation to them and send them blessings. I say: May Rich feel safe. May Rich feel happy. May Rich feel strong. May Rich live with ease. As some of you know, this blessing is especially powerful for me now as Rich wrestles with the unwanted visit of cancer. I know he doesn't feel safe, and living with ease is a challenge, but wishing that for him helps me feel calmer and therefore more present for him.

In the third stage of the meditation, the circle widens to include more distant friends, members of the temple, for example, or “familiar strangers,” the people I interact with regularly but don’t know well, the maintenance staff at temple, the clerk at the dry cleaners. And then the circle extends more broadly to those people I find difficult, and then, in the most challenging part of the practice, to those people who have hurt me. Finally, the circle extends to the rest of the world.

This practice takes a long time, naming individuals, thinking about them as I sit and meditate. The practice is not easy, but it puts me in touch with what my teacher describes as the natural response to the awareness that being a human being is hard. Being connected to other people makes it easier. It is a practice that makes real the Jewish requirement to love our neighbor as our self because God connects us to each other and to Divinity. Because it is not good to be alone.

So yes, Judaism is a religion of love. And out of that love comes obligation. My teacher Rabbi David Hartman taught that to love is to be claimed, to be obligated. I respond to my children’s needs not because I am required by law, but because I love them. Rich makes a claim on me not by demanding a response, but simply because I love him. And my neighbor? My neighbor makes a claim on me as well. Do for your neighbor what you want your neighbor to do for you. Wish for your neighbor what you wish for yourself.

What do I wish for myself, especially now as I am getting older, no longer working full time? I wish for a community of people to be there for me, because I know that it is not good to be alone. A few years ago when we began our temple’s Next Stage initiative, we discovered that boomers like me were afraid of three things: loneliness, becoming invisible, and becoming dependent.

That’s why we, along with Temple Isaiah, created ChaiVillageLA, (www.chaivillageLA.org), part of the rapidly growing Village Movement -- a new social venture of neighbors-helping-neighbors that enables people to continue living in their homes as they get older by providing the programs, services, and resources which enable them to live healthier, more engaged lives. Members of the Village will offer at least four hours a month of services to others in the Village – like driving someone to a doctor, teaching someone how to use a new app, calling someone who is homebound to check in, or bringing a meal to someone who is sick. So we are no longer lonely or invisible, and we understand that our goal is not to be independent, because no one is really ever independent. Our goal is to be interdependent.

Love my neighbor, the neighbor on my block or in my community, and be there for him or her. My neighbor makes a claim on me and I respond. And so I am not alone.

Our tradition extends the definition of “neighbor” beyond this, beyond our families and neighborhood and even beyond our tribe. Remember the last three words of the verse, the less quoted ones: “I am Adonai.” “Love your neighbor as yourself. I am Adonai.” Because there is only Adonai, we are all connected. Every human being is our neighbor, because, like us, every human being is created in the image of God. And so every human being makes a claim on us.

No matter who he is. Even if he is an enemy. How do we know this? It is hidden in the sound of the shofar you will hear tomorrow. We learn in the Talmud that the broken sobbing sound of the shofar is the sound of the mother of our enemy, the Syrian general Sisera, as she realized her son was dead. Our enemy's mother – in the sound of our shofar, the sound that ushers in our new year. Another view is that that broken sound is the sound of our own mother Sarah when she heard that her husband intended to sacrifice their son,

Two different mothers, one the mother of our enemy; the other, our own mother. The tears of both Sarah and the unnamed mother of Sisera are in the sound of the shofar.

Every human being, whether our enemy or our friend, is the child of a parent. Every human being killed, whether enemy or family, leaves a parent sobbing by a window or dying of a broken heart. Every person killed by excessive force from a police officer, every police officer killed in the line of duty, are all children of parents, and because they are like us, they make a claim on us. Every refugee wanting a better life for her family is a child of a parent, and she makes a claim on us. Every human being is like us, and therefore every human being is our neighbor.

“Love your neighbor as yourself; I am Adonai.” The theologian Martin Buber taught that there is a Chasidic interpretation of the last words of this verse: “I am Adonai.” He imagines God saying to us: “You think that I am far away from you, but in your love for your neighbor, you will find Me. He who loves brings God and the world together.” Buber explains: “The meaning of this teaching is: You *yourself* must begin. Existence will remain meaningless for you if you yourself do not penetrate into it with active love For the sake of this, your beginning, God created the world.”

The New Year is waiting – for us to build a world with love.

(Sing *Olam Chesed Yibaneh*ⁱ
“I will build this world with love
You will build this world with love
And if we build this world with love
Then God will build this world with love.”)

So stop wondering who wrote the Book of Love. It is still being written – by us, as we practice our religion of love.

Shana Tova u'metuka. May it be a good and sweet year, filled with love.

ⁱ Music and lyrics by Rabbi Menachem Creditor. Lyrics slighted altered.