

All you need is love
All you need is love
All you need is love, love
Love is all you need

I have been thinking: maybe Judaism needs a new theme song for Love, or a new marketing campaign about Love as a core tenet of our religion. Today, on Rosh Hashanah, as we stand at the threshold of a new year, I want to speak about the kind of love that changes us. The kind of love that demands something of us. The kind of love that protects, corrects, forgives, stretches, and sometimes says no.

People often critique Judaism for not speaking enough about love. They say Judaism is too concerned with law, ritual, obligation, and commandments. They say our sermons do not tell us how to love more.

But I think Judaism talks about love all the time. 46 times in our Torah, according to most scholars.

Maybe these concepts are being lost in translation.

Because in Judaism, one person's "law" may be another person's love.

Perhaps Judaism just needs a better slogan for its love campaign. "Moses love you"
In 2024, the Ad Council and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration launched a public awareness campaign called "Love Protects," developed by Leo Burnett, reminding parents and caregivers that making sure children are in the right car seat or booster seat is an act of love. The campaign's message was simple and powerful: love is not only what we feel for our children. Love is what we do to protect them, even when they resist, complain, cry, negotiate, or give us that look.

Any parent, grandparent, teacher, or caregiver knows this truth. Love says, "Buckle your seatbelt." Love says, "No, you may not have unlimited screen time or have candy for dinner." Love says, "You may not hurt your sibling." Love is not indulgence. Love is not the absence of limits. It challenges us to be our best selves.

Sometimes love is a rule. The rules we give our children are the architecture of their future happiness. We are creating a structure that will help them grow and flourish.

Sometimes love is a Mitzvah, a commandment—a law.

Rabbi Shai Held writes, "For all its insistent focus on the deed, and for all its impassioned commitment to the life of the mind, Judaism is also, profoundly, a religion of the heart." And then he says something extraordinary: "God loves before God commands."

And that may be Judaism's most radical teaching about love: love is not merely an emotion. Love is a practice. Love is a discipline. Love is a way of building a life and a society where people can flourish.

God loves before God commands.

The commandments are not the *opposite* of love. They are *born* from love.

We hear this in morning services before the Shema; in colloquial terms, it is referred to as a "love sandwich" in the blessing Ahavah Rabbah, "With great love You have loved us." And what is the proof of that love? Torah. Mitzvot. Laws. Precepts. Teachings. Boundaries. A path. We then sing the Shema and follow it with the V'ahavta, where we express how we will show our love through our devotion at all times of day and in all our actions. This liturgical tool expresses God's love for us, and our Love for God. It is a practice that is there for us no matter what we feel in the moment. Whether we're struggling or joyful; whether we're full of sorrow or gratitude, that love is the structure that surrounds us. It's the architecture of Jewish life.

As Rabbi Angela Buchdahl beautifully teaches, God's love language for Jews is mitzvot, commandments and we receive 613 of them.

Judaism has been misunderstood for centuries as a religion of law, as though law and love are opposites. But Judaism insists that law can be love. Not every law, of course. Laws can be unjust. Laws can be misused. Laws can be cruel. But at their holiest, commandments are driven by love. They teach us how to protect the vulnerable, restrain our worst impulses, honor the dignity of others, and become more than we might become on our own.

When God says, "Do not murder," God is saying: human life is sacred.

When God says, "Do not steal," God is saying: your neighbor's dignity matters.

When God says, "Do not put a stumbling block before the blind," God is saying: do not exploit someone else's vulnerability.

When God says, "Leave the corners of your field for the poor and the stranger," God is saying: your abundance was never meant to belong only to you. It's a gift, and you must share it.

When God says, "Pay workers on time," God is saying: love includes economic justice.

When God says, "Keep Shabbat," God is saying: you are not a machine. Your worth is not measured by your productivity.

This is love legislated into life. Like the love of a parent, it is always there. It reminds us to be our best selves: generous, kind, just.

The love at the center of Judaism is the love that God has for the Jewish people. It's a love that God has for each of us. It's a constant force. It's a practice whether we feel it tonight or not. God loves *us* even when we don't feel worthy. Even when we struggle to accept that love. Even if sometimes we're not sure it exists, we have our mitzvot to hold up the proof and practice of this love.

Our laws are complex. Our commentaries are rich with argument, but the principle of love that unites them is simple. In a famous story, Rabbi Hillel is asked to explain the entire Torah while standing on one foot. And he gladly does, by reciting the line we find in the center of the torah.

V'ahavta l'reiacha kamocha, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

What if the very center of the Torah became the center of our lives? What if we loved our neighbors as we loved ourselves? Not just a passing spark of generosity—but a constant practice, a structure for our lives, not just at things we say, but a thing we do.

What if every decision we made, every budget we passed, every conversation we had, every policy we supported, every email we sent, every family argument we entered, every communal disagreement we navigated, started from the core value: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Not what would make me look good.

Not what would protect my ego.

Not what would avoid discomfort.

But how do I "Love my neighbor as yourself"

That question could change a marriage. It could change a congregation. It could change a nation.

But the verse is not only "Love your neighbor." It is "Love your neighbor as yourself."

This love that extends to our neighbors, it begins from the inside. Because how can we love our neighbor as ourselves if we do not love ourselves? How can we bring this divine architecture into our lives if we don't feel worthy of it?

Noa, my 12-year-old daughter, approached me after the first week of middle school, hysterical that her curls were not behaving, that the ends of her hair were sticking straight. And she was so upset, calling her hair names and being rather cruel. I asked, "Would you say that to one of your best friends?" Of course not. Then don't say it about yourself. We all need to be reminded of this, often. We must love ourselves, and show ourselves respect and grace and kindness, or we will end up treating ourselves and others badly.

So many people, including so many of our children and teens, are walking through the world with a voice inside them that is crueler than any voice they would ever use toward another person. They forgive others more readily than they forgive themselves. They notice everyone else's goodness and only their own flaws. They live with a kind of internal harshness that makes love harder to receive and harder to give. Silencing this inner critic is a step towards better mental health, and more love for ourselves.

Judaism does not ask us to worship the self. It does not ask us to become selfish or self-absorbed. But it does ask us to recognize that we, too, are created b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God.

You cannot love your neighbor as yourself, if “yourself” is someone you secretly despise. Even long after our middle school years are behind us, we can find ourselves clinging to self-hatred, putting ourselves down before others can. How do we silence this inner critic? How do we let this love in?

Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav offers an antidote. Find one tiny dot of goodness within yourself, he teaches. Just one. One moment when you did something kind. One time you were brave. One time you told the truth. One time you helped. One time you got up again after falling. The first dot may be the hardest to find. But then another appears, and another, until you string them together into a song, your own *niggun*. A melody at your core: b’tzelem Elohim. A reminder: I’m made in the image of God.

And once you can hear your own song, you become better able to hear the song in someone else. You are accepting that you, like each of us, is deserving of love. Worthy of love. A love that is divine and eternal.

This is the beginning of *teshuvah*. Not self-hatred. Not shame. Not spiritual self-destruction. *Teshuvah* begins with the courage to believe that there is still goodness within us worth returning to.

Love your neighbor as yourself means: learn to speak to yourself in a voice that makes repentance possible.

And then, once we learn to love ourselves with honesty and compassion, Torah commands us to expand the circle.

Love your neighbor.

But Judaism does not stop there. Because loving our neighbor is still, in some ways, easy. Our neighbor may look like us, vote like us, pray like us, live near us, share our story, belong to our community. So Torah pushes further.

Love the stranger.

The Torah repeats the commandment not to wrong, oppress, or mistreat the stranger more than almost any other mitzvah. The Talmud teaches that the Torah warns us about the treatment of the stranger thirty-six times, and some traditions count even more.

Why so many times?

Because Torah understands human nature. We do not need thirty-six reminders to love the people who already feel like ours. We need thirty-six reminders to love the person who feels different.

In Leviticus, Torah moves us through three stages. First: do not wrong the stranger. That is the minimum. Do not harm. Do not exploit. Do not demean.

Then: the stranger shall be to you as one of your citizens. Treat the stranger equally.
And finally: you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Not tolerate the stranger.
Not pity the stranger.
Not use the stranger as a political talking point.
Love the stranger.

This is not sentimental. This is not abstract. This is not a vague feeling of goodwill. Torah turns love into policy, into ethics, into communal responsibility. Love the stranger means creating systems that protect people when they are vulnerable. It means listening to those whose stories unsettle us. It means remembering Egypt not as ancient history, but as a moral memory. We remember the suffering of our past, and we grow from it towards compassion; towards justice; towards a love that moves beyond ourselves.

Love yourself; love your neighbor; love the stranger. Rabbi Sheila Weinberg teaches that these “loves” are connected. We learn to love the people we know by learning to love ourselves. We learn to love the stranger by learning to love the people we know. And we learn to love God by loving the stranger. This is the shape of our tradition—a set of *mitzvot* that teaches us how to love.

Not only through prayer. Not only through ritual. Not only through beautiful music or sacred words, though all of these matter. But through the way we treat the person who has nothing to offer us. The person who makes us uncomfortable. The person whose humanity we are most tempted to overlook. We act on that love even when we don’t *feel* it—when we’re scared or hurt. Our mitzvot help us practice it even when it’s difficult to trust the stranger. Our laws guide us with a love that is a constant beacon. One that connects all of us.

It is a love that is there for us, too, even when we’re disappointed in ourselves. Even when we’ve made mistakes. Even when we’ve drifted away from our best selves. A love that’s there even when prayers don’t come easily.

Some of us come into this new year feeling surrounded by blessing. Some of us come carrying grief. Some carry fear. Some carry exhaustion. Some carry guilt. Some carry a private loneliness no one else can see.

And so tonight we say: even when love is hidden, it is not absent. It’s the structure that surrounds us.

Even when we cannot feel God’s love, we can practice it.
We can put love into the world, and we can be brave enough to receive it.

That is our task this Rosh HaShanah.

To love ourselves enough to return, not to the worst thing we have done, but to the goodness still alive within us. To see that we are worthy of the gifts of Torah and of mitzvot; of this beautiful and wondrous life.

To love our neighbors enough to stop keeping score, to give generously, to receive graciously, to assume humanity before hostility.

To love the stranger enough to build communities where dignity is not reserved only for the familiar.

To love God enough to live as though mitzvot are not burdens, but invitations. Invitations to become more compassionate, more disciplined, more courageous, more just. To trust that our rituals are there to guide us even when our feelings overwhelm us. Our laws teach us love with practice, until it becomes muscle memory, ingrained in our hearts and minds.

Because love is not only what we say. Love is what we *do*. Love is the voice of compassion we offer to ourselves and others. Love is the apology we find the courage to offer. Love is the forgiveness we are brave enough to receive. Love is the room we make for our neighbor. Love is the stranger we stop ignoring, and at last, see. Love is the God we serve by loving God's world.

So as this new year begins, let love be more than a feeling.

Let love be our discipline. Our law. Our return.

Let the love that is the center of the Torah be the center of our lives.

And if we can do that, if we can make our choices from that virtuous triangle then perhaps this year we will build a world we are much happier to live in.

A world with more mercy.

A world with more courage.

A world with more justice.

A world with more God.

A world with more love.

Shanah tovah.