

Kol Nidre 5778 Sermon
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Shir Tikvah Congregation
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Revolutionary Love

I watched in horror, like so many of you, seven weeks ago tonight when a few hundred White Supremacists gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia and marched past Congregation Beth Israel on Shabbat, torches in one hand, Nazi flags in another, chanting, "Jews will not replace us" and "Seig Heil," while frightened congregants prayed inside.

"For half an hour, three men dressed in fatigues and armed with semi-automatic rifles stood across the street from the temple," Alan Zimmerman, the congregation's president wrote.

"Mr. Zimmerman described how he advised congregants to leave the temple through the back door, and that the temple was forced to take the "precautionary step" of removing their Torahs — including a Holocaust-era scroll — from the building."

[<http://www.businessinsider.com/charlottesvilles-synagogue-president-scene-white-nationalists-neo-nazis-2017-8>]

Then, two weeks ago, after yet another jury found another white police officer innocent of killing an African American, and protests filled the streets of St. Louis, the police tear-gassed and pepper sprayed the protestors, dragging a 72 year old woman to the ground. Many marchers sought refuge in our sister synagogue, Central Reform Congregation, where Rabbis Susan Talve and Randy Fleisher, literally provided sanctuary from the police. We call our building "Sukkat Shalom: A Shelter of Peace," the rabbis shared. This is how we live Radical Hospitality. The White Supremacists were offended. Their response on Twitter: #GastheSynagogue.

We are in Minneapolis, but St. Louis and Charlottesville are in my heart tonight.

A year ago on this night, I urged us to find empathy and show compassion for disenfranchised voters—our neighbors who felt invisible—and who believed this president would save them.

But the truth is, I spoke with arrogance and hubris. The compassion was real—is real. But until the night of November 8, I refused to believe our nation would elect such a malignant narcissist to the presidency. I had my political differences with Secretary Clinton, but when I spoke on Kol Nidre a year ago, I was extending compassion to people on the other side of our epic political divide—people I expected to lose the election.

Chatiti l'fanecha. For the sin of arrogance I've committed before you, I am sorry.

The transgression wasn't having compassion—*Chas v'shalom* (God forbid).

My sin was offering compassion to people as if they deserved it because they would lose. It was patronizing compassion. It wasn't compassion born from authentic love.

The essential mitzvah of Jewish life—literally the mitzvah at the physical center of Torah—is *v'ahavta l'reyicha kamocho*—to love our neighbor as ourselves. For centuries, rabbis have called this our most important moral task.

We progressive Jews love this mitzvah—especially when it's intended for people we're predisposed to having empathy for: the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the poor, the vulnerable. Don't get me wrong—I'm glad that we stand up with and for them. We can't be an authentic religious tradition if we don't care about human suffering.

But it's Yom Kippur. I blew it last year. So if I'm really honest with myself and with you, I need to ask, God: I hear from our Jewish text and tradition that you want me to love my neighbors. But you see, we've got this White Supremacist Nazi problem right now and I've got legitimate reasons why I don't like these folks. You want ME—you want US—to love Neo-Nazis?

To borrow a line from Hamilton: You can't be serious.

Divine One! How do YOU love people who marched passed a synagogue and spewed such vile anti-Semitic hatred?

How do we love people who shouted the N-word at members of our African American community, who spit in the faces of refugees, who desecrate the lands of our Native Water Protectors, who taunt Muslim women in hijab, screaming, "Terrorists go home?"

If *these* are our neighbors, how do we love them? When we know—we know—there is a strong likelihood they will never love us back.

It doesn't take too much effort to fall into a vicious cycle: They hate us, so in turn, we hate them, and then we all hate each other. Once we hate them, we don't have to think about them. They aren't our concern. We're indifferent to their lives and concerns; indifference, Elie Wiesel (z"l) defined as the opposite of love. They're White Supremacists—they're wrong, mean-spirited, disgusting... and then other words creep into my mind and out my mouth. I start to dehumanize them. If they aren't really human any more, they aren't really in our moral orbit and then we easily ignore them... And worse.

Yes, the great Rabbi Hillel told us that the entire Torah was summed up in the teaching, "That which is hateful to you, don't do to anyone."

But certainly we Jews must be more than people who don't hate. What does it mean to love our neighbors? In Torah, love is a commitment, an expression of loyalty. For feminist visionary bell hooks, love is, she claims, the "will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth. [*All About Love: New Visions*. (New York: William Morrow Co., 2000.) p. 4.]. Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg teaches: "The will to extend yourself": To push past your comfort level. To, you know, work really hard. That means to do things you never thought you'd do, and may not particularly want to. But you do them. You stretch and extend, because someone needs you to, so that they can grow."

Several weeks ago, I read a story in the Washington Post about Dr. Ayaz Virgi. Dr. Virgi lives and works in Dawson, Minnesota, a small town of a few thousand people about three hours west of Minneapolis; a stone's throw from South Dakota. People have placed garden gnomes around the Dawson sign and affectionately refer to Dawson as, "Gnometown."

Dr. Virgi is one of three practicing physicians in Dawson. He's Muslim, born of Indian descent in Kenya and raised in Florida. He and his family moved to Dawson three years ago and felt welcomed and embraced by the community.

Then Dr. Virgi woke up on the morning of November 9, 2016. He wondered if there was a place for him in the community that voted 64% for Trump. People tried to rationalize—"We don't believe everything the new president says and we're not against you personally—this is really about rising health care costs..." Dr. Virgi was skeptical. He spoke with his brother in Florida, an investment adviser, who had received a fax after the election that read, "Get the f--- out of my country you Muslim pig," and was moving to Canada. Musarrat [his wife] kept thinking about the time after Sept. 11 when a man had chased her with a baseball bat, yelling about her headscarf."

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/in-a-midwestern-town-that-went-for-trump-a-muslim-doctor-tries-to-understand-his-neighbors/2017/07/01/0ada50c4-5c48-11e7-9fc6-c7ef4bc58d13_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_minnesotamuslim-64opm%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.78ao27e06800

Dr. Virgi and his family decided to stay in Dawson for the time being. He was invited to speak to the community about Islam. People asked all sorts of questions—their version of "Do Jews have horns?" was somewhere between "Do Muslims believe in birth control?" and "Why are so many Muslims terrorists?"

"I'll tell you. After the election, I was angry," he said. "And I was angry at my community for what they did. I was ready to leave... People think I'm a terrorist? I'm outta here... Find somebody else... I'm here because who else is going to do this, if not me?"

I read the article and sobbed. I thought, Dr. Virgi, if you're willing to teach people in rural Minnesota about Islam, if you're willing to stay in the conversation when people say deeply offensive and hurtful things to you, then I better try to figure out what this Jewish commandment means to love my neighbors; your being a faithful Muslim called me to strive to be a faithful Jew. *Shukran*. I'm so honored you're here with us tonight.

This past year, I've spent a lot of time thinking deeply about morality, what it means to be a moral person, to create a morally compassionate and just society. I'm wrestling—obsessing, really—with what to do with a Judaism that demands we love our neighbors when some of our neighbors are not so lovable.

I'm indebted to my friend and teacher, Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer President of the Hartman Institute, whose thinking and leadership has helped shape this work. Kurtzer offers five categories in a moral hierarchy about how we might understand loving our neighbors—or at least, exist with them.

At the bottom of Kurtzer's hierarchy are two categories, "**Reciprocity**" and "**Inevitability**." While subtly distinct, these two categories are rooted in the idea that we ought to love other people and work with them because it might ultimately be useful or good for us to do so. Love your neighbor because you might need to borrow a dozen eggs. Now, I'm a fan of good community relations and coalitions, and I do believe that we need other people, but the thinking here is rather... Feh. That's Yiddish for "morally suspect."

The third level of moral engagement is based upon the Biblical verse from Genesis, that humanity is created **B'tzelem Elohim**—in the Divine image. Inside every human is a spark of the Divine—and with it, God-given dignity. It strikes me that this is a slippery moral slope: In this context, do we imply we only care about God—not the other human being? It triangulates our responsibility to other people via our relationship with God. If people don't act with a spark of the Divine—if they show up with torches outside a synagogue—have they forfeited their "godliness?" And what does this do to our responsibility to them?

The fourth level of moral engagement is **Universalism**: What obligates me to other people is simply their humanity. This category is best expressed by Law professor, Martha Nussbaum. "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice," Nussbaum writes, "To count people as moral equals is to treat nationality, ethnicity, religion, race, class, and gender as 'morally irrelevant...'" The accident of being born a Sri Lankan, or a Jew, or a female, or an African-American, or a poor person, is just that—an accident of birth. It is not and should not be taken to be a determinant of moral worth. Human personhood... is the source of our moral worth, and this worth is equal." [Martha Nussbaum, ed., "For Love of Country, Debating the Limits of Patriotism, pg. 6].

The risk of universalism is white privilege; washing away differences and pretending we all have the same experience. But the positive has great moral power: We are all worthy of love because we're human—no exceptions.

You might think that this would be the highest level of moral engagement, but Kurtzer aspires for more. He teaches that our highest level of morality is cultivating an instinct, an **Impulse for Moral Good**. He poses the question: Why would human beings put themselves in harms way to help others?

During Hurricane Harvey last month, 13 year old Virgil Smith jumped into action as flood waters rose in his Houston apartment. Smith used an air mattress, going door to door in the apartment building, pulling 17 people to safety—including his parents, young children, and an elderly woman in a wheelchair. Virgil Smith refused to be indifferent to his neighbor's suffering. He responded with immediacy and love. What a mensch!

Saving people in the flood is righteous and important—and there is no legitimate argument against it. Yes, there is a risk to personal safety, but this shouldn't be morally complicated. When we see someone in distress, we help.

I'm going to complicate things here. Because its Yom Kippur and we've got to do some substantial *t'shuvah* work to turn our lives and our community in a direction of mutual affection and respect.

Two summers ago, when Michael and I walked with the Torah in Southern Virginia as part of the NAACP's Justice Summer to increase voter registration and to pressure congress to pass the Voting Rights Act, we met a woman named Keisha Thomas. In 1996, when Ms. Thomas was 18 years old, the KKK came to march on her hometown in Michigan. Ms. Thomas, who is African-American, joined what was to be a peaceful counter protest.

"At one point, a woman with a megaphone shouted, "There's a Klansman in the crowd!" Indeed, a KKK member had crossed the barrier and was now on the counter protestor side of event.

"Thomas, who was still in high school, turned and saw Albert McKeel Jr.—decked in a confederate flag shirt and sporting an SS tattoo—taking off away from the crowd. It wasn't long before mob mentality took over and the crowd had McKeel on the ground.

Thomas was horrified to see the man being kicked and beaten. Her response? She threw herself on top of McKeel to shield him from the blows. Keisha Thomas refused to be indifferent to another human's suffering. http://www.mlive.com/news/ann-arbor/index.ssf/2016/06/saving_man_from_beating_at_kkk.html

How do some people jump into raging waters to rescue others? How do some people use their bodies to protect others—who hate them? This, Kurtzer argues, is our highest moral threshold—I care because I have an instinct, an impulse to care.

Virgil Smith is 13 years old and he didn't ask his neighbors their political or religious beliefs when they were in danger; he rushed to save them. Keisha Thomas was 18 years old when she used her Black body to shield an avowed White Supremacist from being beaten to death. In this highest level of moral engagement, it doesn't matter if they like you or not. Keisha Thomas did NOT endorse Mr. McNeel's racism when she saved his life; she endorsed a vision of humanity that proclaims: My obligations have NOTHING to do with what other people think or look like or what they know about me. I am obligated because inside me, there is an impulse to do the right thing—an impulse to love.

Since our earliest Biblical days through the Talmudic era, through the Maimonidean Middle Ages, through the Enlightenment, until today, Jews have wrestled with the ethics of love, morality, and justice. We've attempted to distinguish and distill a voice of moral clarity, an aspiration of moral justice.

Yom Kippur is a day to cultivate and animate the rabbinic vision of a moral revolution for doing good; inside each of us is the capacity to see our fellow human beings as worthy of deep transformation and love. How do we cultivate and curate this impulse for love inside of us, this call to do good for our fellow human beings?

As we head into these hours of deep *t'shuvah*, it is worthy of us as a spiritual community to critically examine our work, our motivations, and our moral responsibility towards others.

Judaism's purpose isn't to make us more Jewish; its to make us more human. We are tribal, not to serve the self, but to serve humanity.

What does love look like in the year ahead?

Love is each of us stretching beyond the boundaries of the possible, being more generous, more kind, working harder, smarter and more strategically than we ever have before to build a world of compassion and dignity and decency—because if we don't, who will? If we want a moral revolution—if we want to make revolutionary love real—then it is up to us to create it.

We may never be able to change *them*. So, I'm asking you to join me and together, let's build on love. Let's build a beloved community. Let's cultivate and curate an impulse for love. I'm asking each of you—every single one—to make a real time commitment this year to love our neighbors more. On your seats is a commitment card that we're asking you to fill out now. You can express your love by making the commitment to show up,

to work with our Sanctuary Immigrant Justice Team, our Climate Justice Minyan, which includes relief efforts for those devastated by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria; on Racial Justice and Incarceration Reform, with our Muslim community partnership, in our partnership with El Colegio School. Take 36 seconds now and fill out the cards. In a moment, members of these various Justice teams will come through the aisles to collect them—and they will be in touch with you very soon.

There's good reason why Torah commands us to "Love our neighbors" and "Love the stranger." And it sure isn't because they are easy mitzvot. Good God they're difficult! Because it is an ultimate religious act to love people, even if they never love us back—even if we don't want them to love us back. In Torah, love is loyalty: a determined and persistent connection to other human beings and to God. Judaism is a moral revolution of love: Defiant, hopeful, resilient, broken, aching love.

Those White Supremacists in Charlottesville and St. Louis and in the White House?

I don't imagine they're going away soon—though we must do everything in our power to speak out against their atrocious beliefs, behavior, and policies. There will always be people whose fears consume their hope, whose rage suffocates their compassion, whose hatred threatens their humanity.

We Jews are called the People of the Book but in reality, we are the People of Revolutionary Love and Compassion, a people obsessed with concern for strangers and human decency.

Let us meet every ignorant claim with facts of love, every outrageous statement of falsehood with compassionate truth, every undignified outrage with moral abundance and dignity.

"My dear Reb Pinchas," a famous rabbi once mused, "if I had two hearts, I could use one to love and one to hate. But I only have one heart ... so I use it to love!"

I don't know if I will ever be able to love those awful White Supremacists in Charlottesville, nor will I argue that you should either.

I don't know that I will ever be as courageous as Virgil Smith or Keisha Thomas or as wise as Dr. Ayaz Virgi.

But I know if I permit myself to hate people who despise us and threaten us with harm, I—we—God forbid—could become them.

Love is not simply a feeling. Love is a decision to see the humanity in other human beings, to be morally implicated in them.

Love is the determination to act humanely, even when others fail to do so. Especially when others fail to do so.

We have only one heart: Revolutionary love in abundance.

G'mar Chatima Tovah.

With abundant gratitude to my beloved Michael Simon, my brilliant chevruta Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, and my dear colleague, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg.