

Love: The Force That Binds us

Rosh HaShanah 5779

By the beginning of Act II of *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye is aware that the world he knows, celebrates, and feels so settled in is crumbling. A new force has invaded his life of continuity, meaning, and tradition. Yet, what is about to change his life forever is not the incessant pogrom or the boiling Bolshevik revolution or the secular education insinuating itself into his family's life. It is a force far more powerful and close at hand.

Shaken, Tevye stumbles into the sanctuary of his home. Stunned by the events unfolding at his very doorstep, he turns to his wife Golde and confesses unfamiliarity with what's happening in the world. "It's a new world...A new world," he confesses to her. "It's love." Hoping to explore with her what it all means, he asks her: "Do you love me?"

Golde stares at Tevye, as if he is speaking a foreign language. "For twenty-five years," she exclaims, "I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, given you children, milked the cow." What's this talk about love? Tevye persists with his question. The two of them finally resolve the moment with a sweet duet, each of them concluding, "I suppose I do love you...Though it doesn't change a thing, it's nice to know."

We sigh contentedly at the both the musical resolution and the couple's warm embrace on the stage before us. Yet, Golde's question rings authentic in the traditional Jewish world that Anatevka represents. In that world the purpose of marriage is to uplift family well-being, cement partnership between families, ensure continuity of heritage and tradition. By contrast, Tzeitel's rejection of Lazar Wolf and her embrace of Motel the tailor seem to presage a descent into poverty. Hodel's infatuation with Perchik tears her from the family village and propels her to the far reaches of Siberia, where Perchik's profession of revolution has imprisoned him. While Chava's relationship with the Russian gentile Fyedka constitutes a tearing of family connections that is akin to death.

In the Jewish world of Anatevka, a feeling of personal affection between two people is wonderful; but in that world the primary purpose behind a marriage is its collective benefit to the families and to the community. Indeed, a burning and consuming love between two people, our story tells us, runs the risk of incinerating the social bonds so essential to sustaining a community.

And so, we pick up Golde's question: what is the place and nature of love in Judaism?

Our place in the universe and, consequently, our posture towards one another can be disclosed in the foundation stories that cultures tell about themselves.

One of the earliest creation stories is Enuma Elish, a Babylonian tale dating to about the 18th century B.C.E. It describes a war between two gods, Marduk and Tiamat. Marduk eventually kills Tiamat and forms the world from her corpse. Those lesser gods who had sided with Tiamat are forced into the service of those who were victorious. They are freed only when Marduk kills Tiamat's husband and creates human beings from his blood. In this telling, human beings are a mere afterthought, created to serve those who had prevailed in the war among the gods.

Greek mythology describes the god Erebus emerging out of a void where death dwells. Erebus mates with the goddess Night, and from their offspring eventually emerges Cronus who kills his father and, based on a prophesy that he would be killed by one of his sons, swallows each child as it is born. In Greek mythology the origin of humankind is never fully explained; their purpose, however, is. They are subject to the arbitrary whims, jealousies, and angers of the gods.

Through the powerful impact of Greek culture on Western civilization, the lessons drawn from these early creation myths continue to find some expression today: that life is a fierce battleground with winners and losers; that survival depends on the competitive virtues of strength, toughness, invulnerability, and conquest. Sometimes even our most personal and intimate relationships are infected with such values.

Yet, there is another foundation story. It opens this way: In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. In that telling, divine voice gives form to all of creation, including humankind, which is made in the likeness of God. This, of course, is our story. The Babylonian model described creation as emerging out of war and bloodshed and viewed human beings as mere slaves to the gods. The Greek model emphasized the competitive values of strength, power, and conquest. The Biblical model saw creation as an act of divine grace, humility, and a yearning for companionship; and it presented human beings as ennobled and as partners with God. It is a story about love.

It may sound discordant to speak of Judaism as a religion of love. More familiar may be the language of duty, of obligation, of law: of *mitzvah*. However, Chassidic tradition links the word *mitzvah*, usually translated as commandment, with the word *tzavta*, which means attachment, companionship.

According to Jewish midrashic and mystical traditions, God created the world out of a desire to be known. The foundation of the world described in our sacred literature is not conquest. It is a longing for companionship. It is love.

The model of love described in the Torah is a unique one. It is not the romantic love of two so infatuated with one another that the world is but background to their passions. The love that the Torah presents is covenantal love.

God enters into a *brit*, a covenant with the Jewish people. This is a relationship founded not in conquest and subjugation but in a relationship of affection and mutual benefit between sovereigns. In Deuteronomy we read that God chose to set God's heart on us because God loves us. Yet, covenantal love is one of demanding expectations. It involves a passion that is not about possession or domination. It is a relationship in which each challenges the other to live up to the higher moral expectations of engagement with and knowledge of the other.

The covenantal moment at Mount Sinai, described by our sages as a wedding between God and the people of Israel, is sealed with an exchange of promises. For the Israelites they are in the form of mitzvot, best understood not as laws but as practical and socially responsible ways to express and achieve attachment to the other. Yet, the romance of God and Israel is not a settled and unchanging one. There are moments of distance, lack of focus, and even betrayal. It requires constant attention and reunion.

Our prayer services provide such an opportunity for a rekindling of the flame. Our liturgy is love-saturated one. At the very center of that liturgy is the Sh'ma, our statement affirming the unity of creation and its Source. Immediately preceding the Sh'ma itself is a blessing about love, about God's love for us: *Ahavah rabbah ahavtanu*, "With a great love have you loved us, O God..." Immediately following the Sh'ma is another blessing about love. It is about our love for God: *V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha*, "Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with everything that is you." In between, the words of the Sh'ma itself form a bridge, allowing the two loves to meet and give expression to their unity. Both partners emerge from this experience transformed. Each is delivered from solitude.

Of course, the covenantal love spoken of in the Torah and in our liturgy is not an individualistic one, of one person for another. It describes a collective love, that between God and the people Israel. Yet, how each one of us loves another person can re-enforce this model of sacred love. It requires attention and acknowledgment of the otherness of our partner. Our union can be effected only by respecting our separateness. Caring and compassion requires a passionate insistence on each living up to the highest moral terms of their relationship. A basic guideline to experiencing sacred love is to focus more on what love says about the one bestowing it than on me, the one receiving it.

There is no mitzvah repeated more often in the Torah than "love the stranger." What exactly does this mean? Our tradition encourages us to imagine our ancestors Abraham and Sarah at their tent with its sides wide open, sending forth the message to all sojourners that they were

welcome to rest and revive there. The Jewish people carried that image with them from their early tribal days of encampments on the plains into the centuries of their being a mighty nation state. On the verge of settling in the Promised Land, our ancestors were reminded to never forget their experience as strangers in Egypt. Yet, at some point we became the stranger, as, defeated and stateless, we wandered as exiles from nation to nation. What meaning could that mitzvah have had then?

The spiritual message is that we are to open the doors to the dwelling that each of us is. We need to make ourselves vulnerable to ones we do not know, to those who are strange to us. This is a pathway to a compelling love that will enlarge us, that serves the purpose of a covenantal love that is elevating, connecting, and healing.

Too often we stare at others across a distance and are overcome and frightened by the strangeness we perceive. We protect ourselves by either retreating even further or attacking in the hopes of eliminating the otherness from our presence. When we do that, it is not security we achieve but increased fear, anxiety and solitude.

Both our personal relationships and our civic relationships would be elevated by an embrace of Torah's model of covenantal love and of its guidance to love the stranger. Essential is respecting and honoring the otherness of the one before us. Sacred love is not about seeing yourself in the other. It's about seeing the other in yourself.

It's a new year. L'shanah tovah. And may love prevail.