

What's Love Got To do With It?

From Gershon

The ancient rabbis taught: "If you are giving a gift to someone, it is important that you inform them about it" (*Talmud Bav'li, Shabbat 10b*). In other words, by not letting them know that the gift came from you, you deprive them and yourself of the opportunity to deepen a bond, to forge or enrich a connection. The recipient ends up with a gift absent any connection to the wellspring from which it originated, as well as the loving intent of that wellspring. Thus, the commentary of *Tosefot* on that Talmudic passage adds: "and this is referring specifically to a gift that is being given through the intention of love."

Love is rooted in Creator's act of creating. This is first gift, pulling back His All-Selfhood to allow for the possibility of Other. The importance of love is repeated no less than thirty-six times throughout the Torah: relating with compassion, love and equality not only toward your own kind, but also toward the stranger, that is -- the non-Israelite (e.g., Exodus 12:49, Leviticus 19:33-34, Ezekiel 48:22). In fact, the very first time such an injunction is given to us in regard to the non-Israelite, is while we were still in Egypt getting ready to leave. So we have it both as the opening theme of the beginning of the Universe, and the opening theme of the beginning of Israel. And the most important principle of the entire Torah, according to the ancient Pharisees was the injunction in Leviticus 19:18 to "love your fellow as yourself," which they extended to our treatment of animals as well, for they too are our fellow creatures with whom we share the planet (12th-century Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra on Leviticus 19:18).

Deep truth love is learning from and emulating the love demonstrated every millisecond of our lives by the Creator who is keeping our hearts pumping, our lungs delegating, our kidneys filtering, our livers screening and our hunger sated and our thirst quenched, and who is doing the same for the coyote and the roadrunner, for trees and flowers and for the bees in charge of pollinating, and who is keeping the sun shining at us just far enough not to boil us alive and just close enough not to freeze our collective asses; and who is doing all this gratis, and whether you believe or don't believe. In the words of the ancient rabbis: "Have you ever seen it happen that the rains fell upon the fields of the righteous and at the same

time refrained from showering down upon the fields of the wicked? Or that the sun rose and shone upon your country and failed to rise and shine upon the country of your enemy? Of course not! For it is written (Psalms 145:9): *'Hawayah is good to all; Whose compassion extends onto all of Its Creations'* (*Midrash Pesik'ta Rabbati*, folios 195a-b).

The Talmud recounts how the first-century Shim'on the son of Rabban Gamliel the Elder invited Rabbi Zadok, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Eliezer to dinner at his home. Once the guests were seated on their designated cushions, Shimon's father, the elder Rabban Gamliel himself, rose up and began to serve wine to his son's guests. He was about to pour the wine into Rabbi Eliezer's goblet but Rabbi Eliezer declined. He then went to pour wine into Rabbi Yehoshua's goblet and Rabbi Yehoshua gladly accepted.

At which point, Rabbi Eliezer turned to Rabbi Yehoshua and whispered "How could you allow the master to serve you? This is why I declined." Said Rabbi Yehoshua: "Men greater than Rabban Gamliel have served men lesser than we. For one as great as Abraham our Father served the three strangers he presumed were simple vagabonds passing through. So ought we not to allow a man as great as Gamliel to serve us?" Rabbi Zadok, overhearing the conversation of his colleagues turned to them both and said: "How long will we go on and on with examples of mortals, when the Creator of the Universe Himself serves every single creature in every single moment, providing them with sustenance and habitation; causing the wind to blow, the rain to fall, the sun to shine and the earth to sprout, and tends to the needs of every being!" (*Talmud Bav'li, Kiddushin 32b*).

Love is indeed here with us all the time. We are moment to moment recipients of abundant gifts from the Wellspring of Life, but we are often too distracted by all the **Downs** in our lives to notice the far more **Ups**. It takes deliberate effort at times to peer through the layers that impede our appreciation of the moment-to-moment blessings in our lives. And when we are able to do this, we begin to feel not only the love we already have but also enough of it to inspire us to share.

No sooner does David cry "My cup runneth over with God's benevolence" when he implodes with desire to do something in return: "I will be good to myself!" he declares in Psalm 23, "and will practice benevolence toward others. The desire to be in the world this way shall drive me all the days of my life." (12th-century Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra's rendition of Psalm 23:6).

Love is not an emotion. It is a mystery. When we perceive it or interpret it outside its mystery, we end up with a superficial version of it, a here-today-gone-tomorrow version of it; a kind of love that can just as easily turn on its head at the drop of a pin and become a hatred otherwise inconceivable. How many times have we heard or read about people who once professed their love for one another ending up destroying one another with a vengeance? And how often have we seen or even experienced ourselves how deeply hurt we were because we loved so deeply? What good is love, then, if as easily as it fills us it can just as easily drain us?

What is love worth if it can in a single moment stab us in the heart deeper and more fatal than the sharpest of knives? That's home-made love, conceived and shaped and defined by our own unresolved issues and traumas, and is more about us than about anyone else we might purport to love, and even to love so much we'd gladly die for them. What do we **really** love? What they can **give** us? What they can **fulfill** in us? What we get out of it? That is human love, and it is as frail and as fragile and as breakable as humans are. For a love which hinges on something, on anything, taught the wrongly-maligned Pharisees, will not hold -- "Once the thing on which it hinges is gone, so is the love. But a love that does **not** hinge on anything will never dissipate --- **ever**" (*Mishnah, Avot 5:16*).

What does such a love entail? Moses taught us, "With all of your hearts" -- both the willingness part of your heart and even the hesitating part. "And with all of your Soul" -- your core essence, the Self that you are in **spite** of yourself. "And with all of your very" -- meaning as far as you can stretch for the other without breaking (Deuteronomy 6:5).

And yes – granted -- Moses was talking about loving **God**, true. But what else did you expect him to say, addressing a motley rabble of men, women, and children of all ages, cultural leanings, social agendas and personal issues? Best way to talk about the components of real love was to talk about them in speakeasy terms like loving this abstract non-entity called God. To talk about it directly, referring to real-live flesh-and-blood people would have been as realistic like addressing a flock of sheep in the art of loving wolves!

Start out learning about love by exercising your capacity to love in the more safe and abstract relationship with God, Moses told us, with someone

who won't talk back at you, won't argue your every point, won't dismiss your feelings, won't roll their eyes and think you are over-reacting, won't throw psychobabble at you like you're being passive-aggressive, or paranoid, or obsessive-compulsive, and so on and on and on and on. Practice, he said, by loving God, who does more for you on a moment to moment basis out of pure love than any mortal can ever do for you over the span of a lifetime. And then you will come to know what love is and how to love and how to receive love and how to know when the love in your life is real. Like the 18th-century Rebbe Ley'vee Yitzchak of Barditchev was once heard lamenting: "How I wish I could love the saint as deeply as God loves the scoundrel."

Obviously, there is more to Love than it's cracked up to be, and certainly more to it than we can possibly fathom from within the finite boundaries of our humanity. Like the wise old Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 9:1 – "Also love, and even hate – the human does not know the all of it even as they are faced with them daily." He also wrote: "Love is as bold as Death" and finally -- "Many waters cannot extinguish Love. And the rushing flow of all the rivers cannot drown it" (Song of Songs 8:6-7).

Really? Yes. Really. But now you understand better what kind of love he was referring to. It wasn't your usual standard operational procedural love. He was talking about the real thing, the love by which the "Ancient of Days" created our world and each and every one of us, and the love we struggle to extrapolate from its encryption in the mystery of Genesis so that we might apply it in our own finite mortal lives.

For as Creator encompasses Creation, Creation in turn encompasses Creator. Existence is then Creator and Creation locked in a complete and loving cosmic embrace. And when we take time to tune into that embrace, we too become a living breathing part of it and are then able to better and more clearly and authentically engage in truly loving Self and Other in ways that **reflect** that embrace.

In the second century, a young couple came to Rabbi Shimon bar Yo'chai with a problem. They had been married for well over a decade and were clearly unable to have children. "I want him to have children," cried the woman, "and I know how much he desires it, and he knows how much I desire this as well, and not knowing which of us is infertile, we have

decided to separate so that he might try with another, and so might I. And so we have come to you requesting that you officiate and arrange for the ritual of our divorce.”

Rabbi Shimon was shocked that two people so deeply in love with one another would be willing to separate in order that either of them might have kids. But who was he to interfere with such passionate choices? “I will help you,” he said to them. “But since you are both in love with one another, it is only fitting that -- as you **began** your marriage with a feast, that you **end** it with one as well. And following the feast, I will arrange the divorce ritual for you.”

And so, the couple prepared a huge banquet for their divorce party in their home and invited friends and family, in fact all of the guests that had graced their wedding celebration years earlier. And, of course, in the midst of all that partying, the man got so drunk he dropped to the floor. His wife knelt by his side and kissed him fondly farewell as she decided this was a good time to make the departure from the home.

But just before passing out, the man whispered in her ear, “Listen, my beloved. Please look around the house and gather whatever it is in the house that is most precious to you and take it with you as you return to your father’s house.” And with that he passed out.

When he awoke the following morning, he was surprised to find himself in his wife’s father’s house, and she sitting beside him. “What?!” he exclaimed in shock. “Where am I? What am I doing here?!” And she explained “Well, before you passed out, you told me to take from the house what was most precious to me. **You** are most precious to me, so I took **you!**”

When Rabbi Shimon heard what happened, he summoned the couple and told them in no uncertain terms will he allow two people whose love for one another is so deep and sacred – to separate. And so they didn’t. And nine months later, they had a kid.

The mystery of Love is larger than life itself and that is because it is the essence and intent behind all. The more we realize this in the context of our relationships the more we begin to discover “what’s love got to do –

got to do with it" -- And it becomes far "more than a second-hand emotion."