

The Rabbis of the Talmud teach us that our ideal teshuvah, our turning toward others, and inward, and beyond, should come from our capacity to love. They promise that if we turn from a place of love, we bring healing to the world.

With this teaching in mind, I have been thinking of Ferguson, MO. Ferguson is certainly not the only place that needs healing in our world, but it is our society, and the racial animosity and the violence it has produced is part of our story. Langston Hughes said it well, “I am a part of you as you are a part of me. Me, you, you, me, we two – that’s American.” And I would add that the poet’s way of being himself while dissolving the walls between self and other is also very Jewish.

And so I regret, very much, the way in which the Gaza War has prevented me, and I think the Jewish community generally, from expressing our solidarity with the people of Ferguson, MO. We should have expressed our outrage over the killing of an unarmed Michael Brown and reached out in a human way to his family. We should have denounced the racism that brought about these events and that provoked a militaristic response to peaceful protesters.

I say this with a heavy heart, because I greatly respect police. When we see an officer in uniform, we have to understand that when they put on that uniform, they are telling the world that they will place themselves in harm’s way on our behalf, without a second thought.

And yet, there was one man, Missouri Highway Patrol Captain Ronald Johnson, who was appointed by the Governor to take over managing the riots in Ferguson, who showed that even amid violence, one person can make a difference by drawing on our innate capacity to love. Instead of going in with tear gas and riot gear, Johnson told his officers not to wear gas masks so they wouldn’t threaten the citizens of Ferguson. He removed blockades so people could assemble and protest. He went into the crowd, hugged people, listened, and marched with the protestors.

I want to share some of his words, delivered at a church service a few days later, so that we can better understand his example of teshuvah m’ahavah, teshuvah through love. The whole video is just over 6 minutes, with much of that time taken up with applause and shouts from the crowd.

He began by saying, “I am sorry. I wear this uniform and I should say that I am sorry.”

This short declaration was met with sustained applause. He went on to emphasize that, while wearing a uniform, he was at one with the community:

“This is my neighborhood. You are my family, friends. And I am you. I will stand to protect you. To protect your right to protest.”

He spoke movingly about meeting the family of Michael Brown, and of the hope that his life would inspire everyone to reflect and lift up each other.

“No matter what positive comes out, we still need to get on our knees and pray. We need to thank Mike for his life. We need to thank him for the change that he is going to make in America. I love you, I stand tall with you and I’ll see you out there.”

This example is a living embodiment, I believe of our Rabbis’s promise, that teshuvah through love, amid all of the complexities that surround it, IS healing.

And we know it’s not so simple – we know that often we have to work hard to love people.

There is a Rabbinic story about Aharon the priest being the model of how we do this hard work.

The great sage Hillel said, “Be like the students of Aharon the priest, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving humanity, and drawing them close to Torah.” How do we know that Aharon was such a person? The Torah doesn’t tell us, so the rabbis composed a midrash, a story. When Aharon saw two people were fighting, Aharon he go over to one and say, “Look at how your friend is suffering in his heart and tearing his clothes.” And the person would say, “How can I look up at my friend – I am so embarrassed, as I am the one who caused him so much grief!” And Aharon would sit with the person until the flood of anger and embarrassment passed. And then Aharon would go over to the other person and say and do the same thing – awaken his conscience to the suffering of his friend, and be there as he took it all in. Then the two people, who had been arguing so vehemently, would meet each other, and embrace each other.

This, in itself, is a beautiful story. If only we acted as Aharon – loving people, making people aware of each other’s suffering, comforting and reassuring them.

But there’s more to the story, and it leaves us with a haunting question. The story goes on to comment, “This is why when Aharon died, it is written in the Torah that the people cried in mourning for 30 days. Whereas for Moses, it only says that they cried over him, without emphasizing the 30 days of mourning.” I had never seen this before – Aharon was more beloved by the people than Moses! Why? Because, the Rabbis tell us, Aharon would refrain from judging people and instead engage with them to help them resolve their conflicts, whereas Moses would only rebuke people with harsh words. And so when Moses saw the public display over Aharon’s death, he silently thought to himself, “that is the death that I want.”

The end of this story turns it into a haunting, existential challenge: How do we want to live – what kind of heart and soul do we want to have? Do we want to live in anger and distrust, throwing up walls to protect ourselves from other people? Or do we want to try and soften ourselves, take in other people’s pain so we can understand them, even as they sometimes make our lives challenging, or the world a hostile place?

For the people who make our lives complicated – and we all have those people - at what cost do we hold on to our lingering resentment, no matter how justified we may be?

I have learned so much from people who for decades recognized how their parents fell short or wronged them. And then, at some point, they accepted them as people, with their mix of flaws and gifts. I witness these acts of dramatic but private reconciliation in my office, over coffee, over a hospice bed or at a shiva, and I think to myself – this is the kind of person I want to be, the kind of son, husband, and father I want to be. I have a new motto: if my goal is to be disappointed in people, I will be very successful. Instead, I've decided I'm done with judging – I don't need these kinds of successes.

For many years, I have held a teaching close to my heart. It is by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine who died in 1935, and the teaching opens his book, *The Moral Principles*: “The heart must be filled with love for all. The love of all creation comes first, then comes the love for all humankind, and then follows the love for the Jewish people...All these loves are to be expressed in practical action, by pursuing the welfare of those we are bidden to love, and to seek their advancement.”

Like us, Rav Kook knew the world isn't simple. He experienced hatred and pogroms, as well as the petty resentments from rabbis who should have known better. And so, in this luminous, simple imperative to love everyone, Rav Kook includes the difficult and destructive people he knew and we all know.

Rav Kook teaches that while some people may repel us, or frighten us, they still harbor the divine image within them. And he reminds us that the divine spark isn't there just to garner our sympathy. Instead, Rav Kook says that each person has that divine spark within them, so that “**we can love them.**” And that bit of God, while hidden, is actually a more “**authentic**” expression of who they are than the circumstances which bring about the offensive characteristics and behaviors through which we, incorrectly, define them.

But then Rav Kook goes a step further. He challenges us to live in community with those very people who disturb us. He says, “do not hesitate to link yourself with the soul of a people as a whole, even though some people are mean spirited and destructive. This does not diminish in any way the divine light of the good in the people as a whole, and a spark of the divine soul is radiant even in those who are most far gone.”

I think our rabbis understood that we are defined, as Jews, as people, and as a society, by how we choose to meet Rav Kook's challenge, and live with and love the people around us who make our lives difficult. Yom Kippur in this sense is only a temporary refuge. Our real test is what we choose to do after we have this day of fasting, of confronting our own limits and mortality, and pledging to make ourselves into more whole and generous people.

The way the Rabbis say it in the Mishnah is that Yom Kippur effects atonement only between human beings and God. But atonement occurs between people only when one person appeases another. The Hebrew of this charge, *ad sh'yiratzeh et haverov*, gives us

special insight into our work of teshuvah with love. The word “appease,” “y’ratzeh,” is a strange verb form of a word whose more common use, “rotzeh,” means “want” or “desire.” “Y’ratzeh,” the word translated as appease, is more intensive form, and so would seem to mean, “to magnify desire.” So appeasing someone isn’t just about placating them, or making them feel safe. It involves “intensifying desire” in them, re-igniting the spark that would draw them to you again, even after you have hurt them. The **ONLY** way that can happen is if we apologize to each other in a spirit of **real generosity and openness**. And it also means recognizing just as “those difficult people” make our lives complicated, so we make theirs complicated. In the end, Yom Kippur, and teshuvah through love, is about recognizing that **we** are “those difficult people.”

None of us can do teshuvah alone, especially if our goal is to be more like Aharon the Priest, Captain Ronald Johnson, or simply a more generous version of ourselves. We may light the spark, but we also need help. At the end of every Torah service, we quote the Book of Lamentations to say, Hashivenu Adonai – help us to return, and we will. And then it says, “renew our days.” I believe that God works through each of us in these gestures of love. So let us open up to each other, help each other to return, and renew ourselves, our community and our world through our acts of connection and healing.