

28 September 2011

I was sitting in a waiting room doing what all rabbis do in September. No, not ironing my robe. No, not updating my fantasy football roster. I was reviewing my High Holiday sermons.

The red pen was in my hand. The anxiety was in my veins. The countdown was on to *Erev Rosh Hashana*, this night, right now, as the sun sets on one year, and rises on another, and we gather in our sanctuary and we thank God for where we have been and we pray for a semblance of peace and contentment as we now embark on 5772.

A young girl took a seat next to me in the waiting room. As I read through the sermon my own daughter played on the floor in front of us. The girl now sitting beside me wore hearing aids. She must have been thirteen years old. And as I looked up I caught her reading over my shoulder.

She asked me what it was. I told her what it was. I said: I'm a rabbi and in a few weeks we will celebrate Rosh Hashanah, this holiday that....

I know what Rosh Hashanah is, she said.

She asked me what exactly the sermon is about. I thought about that for a minute. I said: It's a sermon about love. She said: What do you mean? I said: It's a sermon about the fact that we all want to show our love for others but no one knows how.

She said: What do you mean?

I said: I think to be a person of faith, and specifically to be a good Jew, is to be able to love. And that a big part of being able to love is being able to express that love to the people in our lives.

She said: I'm not following.

I glanced at my daughter now immersed in a book. I said: We all so want to convey to those in our lives that they matter to us. That's why we buy them things and say I love you over and over.

And that doesn't convey love? She asked.

I don't know, I said. I'm not totally sure that words, let alone things, always do justice to how we really feel.

I said: How can we genuinely show people that they are important to us? How can we somehow show what is deeply buried in our heart, all of that need and connection and history, all of that feeling? In an age of such distance and disillusionment, how do you show people you love them? When it comes to your kids, your parents, your friends, how do you do it? Those are Rosh Hashanah questions.

She was reading my lips. And now she was nodding along in agreement.

Then she thought for a minute. Where were *her parents*, I wondered. She seemed so tired and ragged. Who had driven her here? She had the look of so many other Bar and Bat Mitzvah aged students, the young people who mean everything to us, just trying to figure out who they are and where they are in this world that is so complex and daunting, those young people we all want to reach and reassure.

It was a look of uncertainty and anxiety behind eyes that wake up each morning to this vexing age that we live in, all of us, eyes that wonder if today will bring more misunderstanding or hurt or tragedy or will it perhaps be a good day.

Then she said, and she said this very slowly to be sure I got it: The way you *show people you love them...*

And at this she was called into the doctor's office. But she was looking at me and didn't notice. Again her name was called. Was it Angel that the nurse was saying or was I imagining that?

I motioned toward the nurse. And with this she finally stood up and she looked back at me and she said: The way you show people you love them is by hearing them.

And off she went.

My daughter climbed into my lap and people passed through the waiting room in slow motion. Other names were called. Someone turned the channel on the TV in the corner. We sat there in the waiting room. Every one of us, waiting. We were all waiting.

We are all waiting, waiting to be loved, and with that waiting to be appreciated, acknowledged, waiting to be recognized and embraced, that yes I have a voice, that yes you hear me, no matter our age, maybe teens especially, but really all of us, parents and grandparents, near and far, that yes on this planet of six billion, I exist. In all of my imperfect, awesome humanity. I exist. Hear me.

Hineni, Moses, says. Here I am. If we try we can almost hear that angst in his voice, all these years later.

I waited with that idea all day that day and every day since. I came back again and again to the same question: Is she right?

And I soon realized that she had managed to capture an entire tradition's worth of thinking. She spoke as a teenager. She looked like a teenager. How many had cast her off as nothing but a teenager? Did anyone ever hear her?

Our greatest leaders, from Adam to Abraham, Rachel to Ruth, they were the best siblings and parents and spouses and partners and *Jews* when they took the time to truly hear others. Abraham hearing the desperate cry of Ishmael his son. Ruth hearing the pained call of her mother-in-law Naomi.

It had taken one girl in one waiting room on one late summer afternoon to teach me, and perhaps teach all of us, the essence of Judaism.

We have so many books and movies and cards and songs about love, more than at any other time ever. Is it because now more than ever we struggle when it comes to love? Is it because of all of our stress? Are relationships more complicated now than they once were? Maybe.

Is it because technology has stilted our ability to relate? Has the sheer pace of our days robbed us of our ability to look someone in the eye and just be present?

The poets, the songwriters, the rock stars, from the Allman Brothers to Led Zepplin, all their songs, all the books, every single movie we see, at their core I believe they are all about love. Everyone's trying to get it right. And all the time we are left wondering if those words, their words, truly capture my feelings.

I love Suite Judy Blue Eyes. That's a great song. I love Scarlet Begonias. That's a great song. Vienna. Dear Prudence. Where the Streets Have No Name. But do those lyrics, those words, truly capture my feelings when it comes to the love I have for my family, my children, our community.

Couples have stood on this *bima* celebrating sixty years of marriage. Parents have stood here with miracle babies cooing in their arms. Are there words that might somehow harness that dire and sacred and inexplicable love, the bond that they share that is totally theirs and totally precious?

Indeed, Maimonides taught that sometimes there are no words, no words to express our sense of awe and gratitude, whether it be toward God or one another.

And the Torah, as it turns out, supports my young friend's hypothesis. Arguably its two most famous words are '*Shema Yisrael*'. Hear O Israel. It continues just a few lines later: *Vahvta Et Adonai Elohecha*. You shall love the Eternal your God. It is in fact one of the very few times that love is mentioned in the Torah.

The commentators say straight away that the way we love God, and by extension the way we love one another, is through that act of *Shema*. It's not what we say to each other; it's how well we hear each other.

We Jews, we love by living a life of *Shema*. By allowing space for the voice and dignity of the other.

To hear them. Hear them in their joy and in their need to share, in all of their ultra specific pain and longing. Not just waiting to speak. Not half listening and half looking at our phone. Not nodding along and hearing nothing. Not disengaging but engaging.

Hearing those who are so wanting, so *waiting*, for you to be there for them, to just be there, not necessarily needing you to say anything, but to just be there in times that are large and obvious and in times that are seemingly small and trivial but are neither small nor trivial.

It was almost a year ago that a gunman in Tuscon, Arizona came raging out of the crowd and opened fire, killing six, injuring seventeen. Who was killed?

A nine year old girl, for one. The nine year old girl, Christina Taylor Greene, was born amidst a blaze of hatred and fury on September 11, 2001. And who was injured? Among others, U.S. Congresswoman, Gabrielle Giffords, a leader on a litany of social justice issues. But really we were all injured.

And what was said at Christina's funeral? What was said over a life that began on a day of monumental pain and ended on a day of monumental pain?

What could be said over a life that spanned ten years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, ten years of outrage here and abroad, close to a decade of economic turmoil, ten years of blame and doubt and so much cynicism, a need to remember, an inability to forget, ten long winters of ruthless, ridiculous bipartisan politics, ten years of there's no hope, ten years of we've lost our way, ten years of scandals and scares, the Arab Spring, the long nights, all that *mourning*, the suffering, the sadness,

ten years during which we have asked again and again and again if the very possibility of peace and understanding went crumbling to the ground that fateful day with two towers, four planes, and three thousand victims?

What was said? What was said at little Christina's funeral, little Christina who could have been any girl, who could have been anyone, any *angel*, Christina who was in a way all of us. What was said? What could be said?

Among other things, this was said: What matters most is not wealth nor status nor fame but how well we loved.

That's all that Christina's parents can cling to now. We loved our little girl while we could. We did our best to hear her and be with her and respect her and teach her. And, yes, although she has been silenced, we can say that we hear her still.

We hear her innocence. We hear her beauty. We hear her calling out from the grave to turn down the hate and turn up the compassion, to dim the enmity and at last light up our very days with love.

In the end all we have is love. That's all we have. And thank God we do have it. We have love. Because as the Psalm states: When we die we take nothing with us. It's true. We take nothing. But we can leave a lot. We can leave so much. We can leave a legacy of he-was-always-there-for-me. We can leave a legacy of she-always-managed-to-make-time-for-me.

Maybe this is the year we focus on love, on allowing ourselves to love, giving ourselves permission in age of such divisiveness to not judge or scorn, never taking relationships for granted, never assuming, but hearing those in our lives, and thus seeing them in the sacred light that they exist.

And maybe the world does become just a bit less harsh this way.

Ten years after 9/11, as a tribute to the victims, as a tribute to survival, as a tribute to Christina.

And, to close, you have to have faith, you just have to believe, that just as we can indeed hear each other, God does hear us. That, *Shema Koleinu*, God hears our voice and with that all those hopes and dreams and yearnings, all those prayers that are so very much yours and are so very real. That God is hearing you. You, in your seat. You, and your story.

That God is hearing you now and will bless you, and will bless us all, please, with a year of health and happiness, a year we pray of love. Amen.