

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
Rosh Hashanah Day 1 5777 / 2016

Who do you love most in the world? Your partner? Your children? Your parents? Yourself? Would God make the top of anyone's list? But aren't we commanded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might?" That first paragraph of the Shema, which we recite every morning and every evening, not to mention at bedtime, does not say, "You shall love your wife or husband with all your heart." It doesn't say you shall love your sons or daughters with all your soul." And it doesn't say "you shall love your parents, your friends, your neighbors, or yourself with all your might."

That love is reserved for God. The Torah, and our tradition by elevating it, make this completely and abundantly clear. But that's not what most of us here actually do. We mostly put human dignity, human love, first, and we put our love of God--the commandments that focus on the relationship between God and us, *בין אדם למקום*--second.

Simply put, God gets the leftovers of our love.

As we'll see, that's ok, and in fact, good. Healthy parents in some sense want their adult children to love their spouses and their own children more than them--the grandparents. Similarly, God wants us to love people--God's other children, more than God, to care more about human dignity than divine dignity. That's why God chastises Jonah at the end of the story when Jonah is upset that the people of Nineveh actually repent.

You may never have thought of it this way, but we don't actually love God exclusively, and we don't want to. And that's one strand of thought in Judaism.

But we know there's another strand, the strand of the Shema, the strand of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. The Shema is with us constantly. And tomorrow we read the paradigmatic story of a parent loving God more than a child, the story of God testing Abraham.

Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac (Genesis 22:2), God commands. Whom. You. Love. And sacrifice him. And Abraham demonstrates his complete and unwavering love for God, a love for God that overwhelms his love for his son, not to mention his love for Sarah, his spouse.

Usually we construct our marriages and relationships with our children as based on love, and a commitment not to love anyone else as much as my spouse or my children.

So when Abraham demonstrates that he loves someone more than his wife or his son, we shouldn't be shocked that he does irreparable harm to his familial relationships. Sarah dies immediately after this story, as a reaction to learning what Abraham's done, according to one legend. And Isaac never speaks to his father again.

For millennia, Jewish tradition has valorized Abraham's love for God, making him the paradigm for what it means to love and obey God, even at the expense of our children, and our spouses.

And it was not long ago at all that Jews—here in America, here in St. Louis, probably even at our legacy congregations, made it clear they loved God more than their children when they sat shiva for children who married non-Jews.

Today, when it comes to intermarriage, we as Conservative Jews are still struggling to balance loving God and loving our children.

A few months ago, I was speaking with a member of the shul whose adult child is dating someone not Jewish. And the congregant was not thrilled about this. But I asked the person if they would rather have their child marry a decent person who would treat their child well, a person their child loved, but who wasn't Jewish, or would they rather that their child never marry. They said what they wanted more than anything was for their child to find the kind of partner that this person had found, to have a long, successful marriage, and not to be lonely.

No one—not this parent, and none of us—want our children to be alone. One of our deepest hopes for our children, that we express in the *mishebeirach*, the blessing, we bless children with at brises and baby namings, and at bnai mitzvah, is that they we may be blessed to raise children לחופה ולמעשים טובים, לתורה, to the Torah, to the chuppah—the wedding canopy, and to a life of ma'asim tovim—good deeds. From our earliest prayers and wishes for children, we pray for them to find a partner in this world.

When we really think about it, in the context of our own children, most of us wind up accepting our children's non-Jewish spouses. Simply put, Conservative Jews don't sit shiva for our children who intermarry anymore.

But just not sitting shiva isn't enough. What about other things, like going to the wedding, thinking about who officiates, whether the wedding can be in the synagogue, and what the wedding looks like, how the synagogue celebrates and acknowledges the engagement and the wedding, the role of the non-Jewish spouse in the synagogue, can he or she be a member, be on committees, be on the board, vote in elections for board members and officers, be on the bima, open the Ark, carry the Torah? Those are a mix of personal and policy decisions.

Then there are other questions that depend not on parents or policy, but on people. Will the happy couple be received warmly, or coldly? Will they get smiles and embraces, or funny looks, and uncomfortable questions?

Speaking of attending weddings, the Standards of Practice of the Rabbinical Assembly, the organization of Conservative rabbis, forbids members to “officiate or attend an intermarriage.”

It is well known that the prohibition on attendance is not enforced, but the ban on officiating is still very much in effect. It's my hope that the Rabbinical Assembly will officially permit rabbis to attend and participate in intermarriages, and eventually, to officiate as well. However, I don't anticipate officiating at intermarriages until the policy officially changes. To be involved in changing the policy, I have to remain a member of the organization.

But when I tell a couple that I cannot officiate at their wedding, what I'm saying, and trust me, what they're hearing, is that in some profound sense, I, their rabbi, or their parents' rabbi, the rabbi of the shul one of them grew up at, is saying they should not be married, that they've chosen a person of the wrong religion, because that's the only reason I won't officiate.

And when we tell them that their wedding cannot be in our shul, in this sanctuary, we are saying, and they are hearing, that they are no longer welcome in the Jewish space and community in which they grew up, that they are no longer welcome on the very bima upon which, perhaps, we blessed them when they were newborns that their parents should raise them to the chuppah.

For many years, in the old world, Jewish communities were effectively able to discourage intermarriage by excommunicating anyone who married outside the faith. Social and economic pressures were immense and effective.

But nowadays, people will marry regardless of whether I, their rabbi, approves of their fiancée's religion. We're not discouraging any weddings. But we are discouraging people from making this their Jewish home and their Jewish community when we say their marriage can't be celebrated here. We are turning them away from Kol Rinah, from Conservative Judaism, from Jewish community, and ultimately, from Judaism and God.

This is heavy stuff. I think maybe we could all use a nice chasidic story now.

There was once chasidic rebbe who was walking along a cobbled street in an Eastern European shtetl when he heard the cry of a baby coming from his student's house—a cry that pierced the night. He rushed into the house and saw his student enraptured in prayer, swaying in pious devotion. The rabbi walked over to the baby, took her into his arms, sat down, and rocked her to sleep. When the student emerged from his prayers, he was shocked and embarrassed to find his master in his house, holding his baby. "Master," he said, "what are you doing? Why are you here?" "I was walking in the street when I heard crying," he responded, "so I followed it and found her alone." "Master," the student replied, "I was so engrossed in my prayers that I did not hear her." The master replied, "My dear student, if praying makes one deaf to the cries of a child, there is something flawed in the prayer."¹

And I would add, if praying makes one deaf to the cries of a child, there is something flawed in the pray-er too. But now, it's not the infants whose cries we ignore. It's the hurt and pain of our grown children, Jews being rejected by their rabbis and communities at the very moment when they are most happy about finding their soulmate.

This is loving God more than humans, putting God's dignity before human dignity. But what Jonah missed, and what we miss, is that God's dignity is not, ultimately, enhanced by anything that does damage, physically or emotionally to God's creations. If God is *Avinu Malkeinu*, "our Father, our King," God's is everyone's parent, everyone's sovereign, and not only ours. And honoring human dignity is actually the most profound way of honoring God.

It's been said, "There's nothing so practical as a good theory," and much of the theory I'm sharing, as well as the story I just told, today comes from Rabbi Donniel Hartman's aptly-named new book, *Putting God Second*.

In many ways, the Conservative movement has officially and halakhically, rebalanced towards human dignity. Women and men may now participate in Jewish ritual life equally. And we've changed also to become officially and completely accepting and welcoming of people who are gay or lesbian. We've got the L and G down. But the honest truth is that we still have some work to do as a movement when it comes to B, T and Q—bisexual, transgender and queer. But that's for another sermon.

We've made real and important progress on egalitarianism and sexual orientation. But not when it comes to love itself.

I understand the sociological reasons for marrying someone Jewish. And I understand and believe that it is easier to marry someone Jewish. As anyone married knows, marriage is

¹ As told in Rabbi Donniel Hartman, *Putting God Second: How to Save Religion From Itself* (Beacon Press: Boston, 2016), pp. 19-20.

hard enough! I would and do encourage Jews to marry other Jews. And marrying someone Jewish, by the way, includes marrying someone who has chosen to become Jewish—a Jew by choice.

But we all know couples where *one* partner is Jewish. They are our children, our grandchildren, our siblings, our friends. And they are us. I know many families—here at Kol Rinah, where one partner is Jewish and the other is not, and they have raised or are raising amazing Jewish kids.

That's why on Yom Kippur, I want to offer a blessing to all those people who are not Jewish yet who are sacrificing a real part of their own selves and histories by helping to raise Jewish kids. At the end of the Torah reading, we'll invite up all those people who not Jewish who are raising Jewish kids.

I want to make clear that my feelings about this are not rooted in sociology or demographics. This is not about having more members. That's just a convenient side effect. For me, this is about loving and welcoming Jews. It's not about the numbers; it's about the ethics.

This year, there are two areas of focus and study for us. Tomorrow, I'll be talking about Judaism, whiteness, privilege and race, and that's something we'll be studying together this coming year much more.

But we'll also be spending some time thinking about what policies, procedures and programs we as a congregation need to make sure we love people who love any kind of person.

Our Keruv Committee, led by Wendy Love Anderson, is going to be delving into some of the issues, and working through things, bringing them to the appropriate committees, including the membership, facilities, and ritual committees, as well as the board. We'll be studying periodically on these topics on Shabbatot, and I hope over this year, we can work together to make Kol Rinah place that honors God by loving people, whoever they choose to love.

But as individuals, I want to invite you, and challenge to use this time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to do a novel kind of *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, or an accounting of your soul. What were the moments in your life where you loved God more than people, when you put principles before people? And how do you still put love of God before love of and responsibility for your neighbors? To whom do we owe apologies? And what adjustments in our practices do we need to make to prioritize people and their needs?

So how do we love God, with all our heart, all our soul, and all our might? The way we love God, I believe, is precisely by loving, and acting kindly towards people, by caring and bearing responsibly for the people around us.

Shana Tova Umetukah—a good and sweet year.