



## ***God Loves Us***

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman  
*Temple Rodef Shalom, Falls Church, Virginia*  
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This summer, while on vacation, I saw a t-shirt that I wished I owned. Well, actually, it wasn't so much that I wanted to own this shirt, and if I'm honest, I don't think I would ever even wear this t-shirt. I guess you might say that what I wanted was to believe in this t-shirt. Yes, believing in the words on this shirt would have been enough.

The t-shirt was white and on the front in large bright yellow letters it said: "God Loves You!" and on the back in a warm pink it said: "And I Love You Too!"

My first thought was that whatever religion this t-shirt came out of, it was not Judaism. That message: God loves us, has never really rung true for me. For better or for worse, rarely do we think about Judaism as a religion of love. Our faith is a this-worldly religion of justice and action. One of its many strengths is that it is so very rational. We integrate contemporary knowledge with tradition along with the element of individual choice. It just makes good sense!

So why then, was I sitting on the beach pining after this t-shirt? It made me uncomfortable and yet, I was drawn to it. "God Loves You" is not a phrase that comes naturally to me but, sitting there, I realized that I truly did want to believe that. And more, I wanted to be able to join this person in affirming what was written on the back of the shirt. "And I Love You Too!" You, a person I have never met. I love you simply because you are human, as am I; and you are created in the image of God, as am I. Perhaps, if I could embrace this love of God and show it to others, it might help me as I face our uncertain, tragic, often hate-filled, world. Perhaps this love could give me

the hope I need. Without trying to be cynical, or too sappy, or change my religious affiliation – I will tell you that I would like to learn to see the world much more through the lens of love – human love, God's love, Jewish love.

In truth Judaism is actually as immersed in love as any other religion. We might not always be comfortable with it; we might not always seek it out, but the notions of a loving God and the ability for human love are deeply Jewish; they are embedded in our sacred texts, in our liturgy, and even our stories. The V'ahavata comes immediately to mind. (Hebrew) "You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all of your soul and with all of your might." As does the famous phrase from Leviticus: (Hebrew) "Love your neighbor as yourself." Have you heard Jeremiah recounting God's words to our people: "Ahavat olam ahavtich...I have loved you with an everlasting love?" Really there is no shortage of references.

But, I will be honest with you; I will make a confession to you (since today is the day of confessions.) Those texts aren't quite enough for me. I will say them with you today, and I read them regularly during services with great sincerity and desire, but they don't really convince me. They don't make me want to wear that t-shirt that says: "God Loves You... And I Love You Too."

Before I go any further, let me share with you one realization. When we use the words 'love' and 'God' in the same sentence we have plunged into the world of poetry and metaphor. Our Sages recognized this. Maimonides, for instance, warned again and

again that we shouldn't take the words in our Torah and prayer book literally. To say that 'God loves' is not to say that God is a giant person who has the same kinds of feelings and emotions that we do. According to Maimonides we can say nothing definitive about God because it's impossible to define what is Infinite. God cannot be confined by the limits of human imagination. Like so many of you, I am drawn to a large degree to the rational side of Judaism, so it feels a bit scary to venture into the land of poetry and metaphor. This isn't my strong subject. But isn't love to some degree all about taking risks?

So, where can we turn now as we look – poetically of course – for an understanding of love that will change us? – A text, a story, an event that will give us a new lens through which to see the world; a lens that opens our eyes and our hearts to the compassion in God and one another?

Today, Yom Kippur, a day that most of us probably connect with sin and forgiveness, is in fact very much about intimacy and love. On the one hand it's about shedding our armor and pretenses and standing honestly before the mirror, and asking ourselves what is in our hearts, who do we love and how have we loved them this past year? But there is another dimension of the love we connect to and that is God's love. Looking through the prayers and texts of this day we cannot help but to see the message... in big yellow letters – God Loves Us.

Consider one of the most famous texts of this day. We say it before the open ark: "Adonai, Adonai, el rachum v'chanun... Eternal One, you are merciful and gracious, endlessly patient, true and loving..." meaning forever ready to forgive our failures, always eager to meet our sincere attempts at teshuvah with an unconditional pardon. And even closer to our hearts - Avinu Malkaynu. To God, our eternal Parent, we say "chohnanu" which the prayer book translates as "be gracious to us." Yes, *chen* means grace. Grace – the word that our Christians neighbors so comfortably use to mean God's unconditional love. This is our

word as well, a biblical word, and, as hard as it is to grasp, it does mean – God's unconditional love.

Avinu Malkaynu, our God is the eternal and unconditional parent. This model is very close to us. Each of us is someone's child and many of us are, or someday may be, parents. We know that we yearn for this dynamic relationship. For some of us, our parents are no longer alive; for others our parents may never have been able to fulfill the role we needed from them. We all want to be loved – not only by another – but by that protective and encouraging mother, that accepting and supportive father.

Might you consider that person who gave you, or gives you now, that unique unqualified love we all so desperately need. Maybe, your mom who loved you even when you let her down. Perhaps, your grandfather to whom you knew you could confess your greatest fears. A teacher? Your closest friend?

For me, I was able to see the depth of the love my parents gave to me after my own children were born. Accepting them unconditionally, as they are, I realized that I too had been accepted, nurtured, embraced for whom I am. It's easier now to identify this love and it's so much more meaningful to give it. Like a parent, Avinu Malkaynu, God is right here, waiting for us open armed, we only have to walk through the door.

And equally importantly, Yom Kippur reminds us that God's love extends beyond those of us who come here to pray. We know this from the text we read tomorrow/this afternoon – some of you know it's one of my favorite narratives. The message is so powerful, so clear; it's about God's universal love – it is, of course, the Book of Jonah.

This is the story of how God tells Jonah to go to the land of Nineveh to pronounce judgment upon the people there for their wicked behavior. But Jonah runs away. He knows that when Ninevites hear God's judgment they will repent, and God will most certainly forgive them and Jonah can't accept that. But God commands Jonah a second time

to deliver the message, and Jonah begrudgingly does so. Lo and behold, Jonah's worst fears are realized. The people of Nineveh repent their evil ways, they fast in contrition, and God extends forgiveness to them. All the while, Jonah looks on, fuming with raging anger.

Why was he so upset? He explains himself to God saying: "I knew you would do this, God? That is why I ran away! I knew that You were a gracious and compassionate God, filled with unfailing love. I knew how willingly You would cancel your plans for destroying these people." (Jonah 4:2) This tells us the deep, true, reason that Jonah ran from God at the start. It wasn't so much that he was afraid of the Ninevites but that he had walked with God long enough to know the greatness of God's *chen - grace*. This story speaks powerfully of God's character and nature and it points to nothing other than unconditional love. This is the message that we hear as Yom Kippur wanes. Love is only love if it is given to all beings. God's love is universal. The next phrase is implied – our love must be universal too. This truth is obviously directed to us for it is written, after all, in our Bible and read here on this our holiest day of the year.

I love the Jonah story for this message and I am moved by the liturgy of Yom Kippur. I admit though, it remains a challenge for me to absorb this Jewish theology. I am also aware that there are some circumstances such as violence and abuse when love is exceedingly difficult to envision. This is tough stuff; it's so hard to get our heads around these ideas when our world is overflowing with hatred, when tragedy and injustices confront us every day. I know I need to come to this day with more of an open heart than an open mind. If any of us here have come to understand God's unconditional love I would imagine that such understanding came from a personal experience, an event, a relationship – some transformative exchange. The ability to embrace unconditional love doesn't usually come from an article or even from a sermon. The heart needs to experience unconditional love before the head can grasp it.

I learned some time ago that the heart is actually the first organ to develop in the embryo. When we are no more than the size of a kidney bean, our heart is visible, pumping away long before the brain even begins to form. Of course I know that those arteries and vessels are not the place where we truly feel love, but remember we are now in the land of poetry and metaphor.

Many years ago I was given a powerful glimpse at unconditional love from a man with whom I grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia. We belonged to the same Temple; we went to the same summer camp. We both had two professional working parents. We both had two smart siblings. One unique character of his, however was that he was an alcoholic. Although I didn't know this when we were in high school, his alcoholism started when he was 14. In his words: "It began when I came to understand the many expectations that my parents and others had for my social and academic future. The pressure not to fail was enormous and I needed a place where I could get a break from the anxiety of achieving these goals." It would be thirteen years of alcohol and drugs before this friend, who I'll call Jason, found what he needed to overcome his addiction. Sitting together one summer night he shared his experience in rehab and in Alcoholics Anonymous.

"For the first time," he said, "I felt truly accepted for who I am – for my flaws, for my failures, for my limitations along with my strengths and successes. And not just that, when I really messed up, I was still embraced, I was still accepted, the love was unconditional. Maybe I was missing it," he went on to explain, "but it's hard to feel unconditional love when you live in a Jewish upper middle class, professional, success driven family." It broke my heart to hear this. To hear that perhaps our community which so values education and personal achievement, can hurt its members with those same traits. Might our expectations lead to judgments that close us off from acceptance and love?

Since that night, I have read the famous Big Book, which is the Alcoholic's Anonymous Bible. The second and third steps of the AA 12 step program are about opening one's self up to a higher power that for many of us is God. Jason explained to me that when people are able to do this, to accept God as an unconditional source of love, it changes them. They focus less on expectations and more on acceptance. There was yet another insightful lesson my friend had learned from being an alcoholic. He had come to believe that the outcome of his struggle with liquor had yielded a more meaningful life than he ever imagined. Through this realization he learned that we never really know what in our lives will actually be 'good' for us. Therefore, he said: "if I accept that I don't know what is good for me, then I certainly don't know what is good for you. I cannot judge you then, I must simply accept you". Realizing this has shed new light on the openness and even unconditional love that I have been longing to understand. Maybe I will be able to wear that t-shirt someday after all.

Since my vacation this past summer, I've been talking a lot about love to my colleagues. In these conversations there has been a broad spectrum of opinions shared, but one reality we all agreed upon was that in order to both absorb God's unconditional love and learn to give that same love to others, one must first love oneself. Surely you have heard the famous quote by Rabbi Hillel: "If I am not for myself who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?" Hillel understands that in order to give to others, first we ourselves must be whole. It's easy to love ourselves when things are going great and we're filled with success. It's not so easy to love ourselves when we have made mistakes, when we have not lived up to our own expectations or, worse, transgressed the very truths we each hold dear. Knowing we've sinned makes us feel pretty badly about ourselves. *Al chet she-chatanu* - for the sin we have committed ...those words lodge themselves in the pit of our stomachs where that misstep has been living for a long time. The only way to truly love oneself is to learn

to forgive oneself and this is one of the essential acts of the High Holy Day season.

I would suggest that to experience self-forgiveness we need to find that unconditional Divine love that Jason had discovered. We can forgive others on our own. But in order to forgive ourselves we need to feel measured and accepted by a Power who transcends our limited years and who embodies our higher values. When we wish to wipe the slate clean, to make ourselves whole, we need a sense of something or someone greater than ourselves; something or someone beyond us – *Avinu Malkaynu*, God, our eternal unconditional parent, *chohnenu*, who, with great grace waits for us, accepts us and loves us.

I may be getting closer to embracing God's love and understanding how critical it is to love myself. All of this may help me to feel more at peace, more secure, more hopeful in the world. Surely, though, these ideas about love mean nothing if they only change me, alone, at home. If I am unable to bring these beliefs out into the world – what's the point?

Judaism, perhaps unlike other traditions, would say that if God's love doesn't lead to love of our fellow human beings then there is no point. God's love must flow through us and our actions to the rest of the world. Our rabbis taught: we are God's instruments in the world. We are God's hands, capable of doing justice. We are God's eyes, capable of seeing the Divine image in another person. We are God's mouths, choosing to speak of truth and kindness. God's unconditional love can only come into the world through us.

*Ahava*, love is not a feeling, it is a verb. For us, love means to 'act lovingly.' Loving neighbors in this context does not necessarily imply that warm, cozy feeling. It means to work for our neighbors' well being, even if we don't necessarily like them and they don't like us. We can say as much as we like about loving God and loving our neighbors, but it is not until we do something to help our neighbor that we actually have fulfilled the commandment *ahavta l'reyacha k'mocha*.

This love is unconditional only when we understand that our actions are not options. We cannot stand idly by while our neighbor physically or metaphorically bleeds. We cannot turn our backs on hunger or pain or want. Friend or foe, near or far – it's not about how we feel. Our job is to be unconditionally present – to serve, to care, to provide and to support.

This is often so very difficult. There are road blocks that are a challenge to get around. It is so hard to stop judging our unkempt co-worker long enough to see and respond to her needs. It is scary to push past fear and support someone so different from us – a person whose foreign ideas might actually threaten our own. It is painful to accept our parents after their divorce. They are now so far from perfect; but they still need our love. As do our children, even when they come home having failed a test and our expectations. We have to see beyond all of these temporal circumstances and look to the image of God in each of these individuals. We must act out of love in a loving way because rejection doesn't lead to compassion, only compassion leads to compassion. And neglect doesn't lead to love, only love leads to love. Doing this takes discipline, commitment, practice. As Jews, this is our calling. Love is unfulfilled if it isn't shared with others. Love, as Jonah knows, is incomplete unless it is available to all.

That t-shirt, 'God Loves You ... And I Love You Too,' may never be a perfect fit for me. It is still a challenge to envision myself wearing it on the beach. But through my struggle I have come to see God, myself and the world much more through the lens of love and I feel richer, more appreciative and more hopeful for that. Perhaps there is a t-shirt that I can wear. Perhaps there is a t-shirt that I must wear for absorbing and sharing love is both my privilege and my responsibility. Perhaps written in the blue of a hopeful sky against the grey of an uncertain world I would wear the poetics words of Rabbi Rami Shapiro:

*We are loved by an unending love.*

*We are embraced by arms that find us even when we are hidden from ourselves.*

*We are touched by fingers that soothe us even when we are too proud for soothing.*

*We are counseled by voices that guide us even when we are too embittered to hear.*

*We are loved by an unending love.*

*We are supported by hands that uplift us even in the midst of a fall.*

*We are urged on by eyes that meet us even when we are too weak for meeting.*

*We are loved by an unending love.*

*Embraced, touched, soothed, and counseled.*

*Ours are the arms, the fingers, the voices;*

*Ours are the hands, the eyes, the smiles;*

*We are loved by an unending love. Amen.*