**Rosh Hashanah 5785 -Day One**

**“The World Lives By Kindness”**

**By Rabbi Joel Mishkin**

To understand what the Israelites had, and what they lost when it came to the destruction of their sacred Temple, we have to hear from historian Shaye Cohen. He explains its meaning for the Israelite people. “The Temple was more than a building and more than the home of the sacrificial cult. It was the sacred center of the cosmos, the place where heaven and earth meet, the visible symbol of God’s love for Israel.” And so, when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, all of that disappeared. Imagine, the trauma must have been unfathomable. The center of the world had been, quite literally razed to the ground. No longer did Judaism have a sacred center, a temple, a priesthood, and a sacrificial cult. With the Temple gone, much of Jewish life lay shattered and in ruins.

One of the Temple’s most significant functions was that those who had transgressed could go there and atone for their sins. In a world without the Temple, people must have thought that atonement was no longer available. That reconciliation with God was no longer possible? However, to this question the rabbis offered a startling response through a story:

Once as Rabban Yohanah ben Zakkai was coming forth from Jerusalem, Rabbi Joshua followed after him and beheld the Temple in ruins. “Woe to us!” cried Rabbi Joshua, “that this place, the place where the iniquities of Israel were atoned for, is laid waste!” “My son,” Rabbi Yohanan said to him, “be not grieved; for we have another atonement that is just like it. And what is it? It is acts of lovingkindness, acts of hesed, as it is said in the words of the Prophets, God declares, “For I desire lovingkindness and not sacrifice.”

Atonement through sacrifice may no longer be possible, says R. Yohanan, but another equally powerful means of atonement is available: acts of love and kindness can play the same role in the present that sacrifice had played in the past. And in a manner of speaking, rabbinic Judaism was born.

Now, let’s fast-forward two thousand or so years from that day to yet another catastrophic event for the Jewish world. On October 7th, 2023, as the festival of Shemini Atzeret coincided with Shabbat, Hamas terrorists waged the deadliest attack on Jews since the Holocaust. They killed infants, they raped women, they burned whole families alive. They took hundreds of innocent civilians hostage. Since October 7, more than 1,200 Israelis have been killed and since that day, the Jewish world has not been the same.

Following this horrific act, just a week after his kibbutz was stormed and his wife and three young children were kidnapped, a forty-one year old man by the name of Avihai Brodutch planted himself on the sidewalk in front of the army headquarters in Tel Aviv. He held a sign scrawled with the words, “My family’s in Gaza,” and then he said that he would not budge until they were brought home. What happened next was hard to believe, even for a country as small and as close-knit as Israel.

As Mr. Brodutch stood with his sign, passers-by stopped to commiserate with him. They spoke with him. They comforted him. They tried to lift his spirits. But they didn’t stop there. They brought him coffee, platters of food and changes of clothing. They invited him into their homes so that he could wash up and get some sleep. As he later said, “It was Israel at its finest. There was a sense of common destiny.”

And as this phenomenon grew in intensity, this one-man sit-in mushroomed in the weeks after the attacks. In fact, the sidewalks outside the military headquarters where Mr. Brodutch stood was no longer sufficient, and so the emerging throngs of people moved a block north in front of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, where a long rectangular table was set for 234 people, and was surrounded by empty chairs to represent the hostages. A side-note - in November of last year, Avichai was fortunate to have his wife and three children returned to him. We know that not all hostages have been that fortunate.

Dear friends, in real-time, the world witnessed the ancient words of Rabbi Joshua fulfilled in the plainest of human terms. What does God want from His people at a time of complete desolation and absolute ruin? Not the sacrifices that took place in the Temple, but love, acts of lovingkindness, “For I desire lovingkindness and not sacrifice.” In fact, rabbinic midrash goes even further - suggesting that lovingkindness is not equal to sacrifice, but superior to it; for hesed can achieve what sacrifice cannot. As a midrash imagines God telling people: “The lovingkindness you do for one another is more precious to me than any sacrifice that Solomon offered before Me.”

Now perhaps you wonder, why would the sages argue that lovingkindness can take the place of sacrifice? Rabbi Shaye Held in his splendid book, “Judaism is About Love; Recovering the Heart of Jewish Life” gives us an answer.

He writes, “The answer is that Jewish tradition has long held that the world rests on three pillars: on the Torah, on the Temple service, and on deeds of lovingkindness. When one of the three was effectively taken away, the other two were relied upon to take its place. In a world where Temple service had become impossible, the study of Torah and deeds of lovingkindness would serve as means of effecting atonement.”

So now that we have the charge for acts of lovingkindness, how do we perform these deeds? Again, the rabbis answer: “We are to walk in God’s ways.” But what does that mean? Can we act like a God who isn’t seen? A Midrash explains: Rabbi Simlai declares” “The beginning of Torah is acts of lovingkindness and the end of Torah is acts of lovingkindness.” At the beginning of the Torah, when Adam and Eve discover their nakedness God clothes them. At the end, when Moses dies, God buries his body. A Midrash goes a step further, insisting that the “beginning of Torah is acts of lovingkindness, the middle of Torah is acts of lovingkindness, and the end of Torah is acts of lovingkindness. For God not only clothes the first couple, and buries the great prophet, God also visits Abraham when he is in need of healing.”

But even these guideposts remain inadequate to authentically address this subject. Perhaps they are too opaque, and so our rabbis dig deeper and bring us specific principles, applications and advice. They also identify a pattern in the way in which these deeds are represented. If we are to examine those lists of concrete actions the Talmud mandates: clothing the naked, visiting the ill, comforting the bereaved and burying the dead, we notice that each situation mentioned is less open to reversal than the one before.

Let me explain. The naked (the poor) are vulnerable, but their situation is reversible - you can lift an impoverished person out of poverty, at least in theory. The sick are vulnerable, but some - though not all - who are sick can recover. Mourners have suffered an immense and permanent loss, but the way they carry their grief will often evolve and soften over time. The dead are gone and will not be coming back. It is my sense that for many of us the less reversible a situation, the more daunting, the more frightening it is. The prospect of death overwhelms the threat of impoverishment, or a baby who does not understand what we are saying does not frighten us, whereas an Alzheimers patient often does. And when we are afraid, we are tempted to flee. But Judaism’s message is crystal clear -resist the urge to flee. Run towards the very people and place you most want to run away from. If you want to be a religious person, learn to be present for people when they are in pain.

Speaking of people who are or are not religious, you know, whenever I meet folks for the first time, and they find out I’m a rabbi, they often lead with the following words, “You know rabbi, I’m really not a religious person.” So, then I ask them, “would you consider yourself to be a spiritual person, and more often than not, they say, well, yes? And then I ask them, well how do you do that, how do you behave spiritually? And more often than not, there is a stunned silence. Our sages were precise in their explanation spirituality. They tell us, “you really want to be a spiritual person? Here’s how: Learn to be present for other people when they are in pain and when you do that, you discover that being present with a person in pain is an infinitely satisfying spiritual experience for you! You will know it when it happens. You can feel it in your very bones.

But understand, - this is not easy work. Our sages alert us to the fact that this can be intensely difficult. So we are simultaneously pushed - if we are serious about the spiritual life - we have to learn to care more and more deeply about other people and be there for them when they are in need - and gently encouraged to keep at it: learning to be more and more present with people who need comfort and support is the task of a lifetime. It is the heart of religious life. Do that, and everything else will follow.

So if you are doing this work, then most certainly, you really are religious. Don’t sell yourself short. And also, please don’t forget - you do not have to be a rabbi to do this work, and small and large congregations alike, need you as well as the rabbi. No, my friends, you don’t have to be a rabbi. But you do have to be a caring human being. Rabbinical School trains you in sacred texts, homiletical skills, pastoral care, it gives you pedagogical tools. But in reality, anyone can learn how to perform acts of lovingkindness through the living of life.

To that end, I believe with all my heart that Congregation Beth Ohr is a very caring community. I have seen many times over these years when people have reached out to those of our members who are bereft, bereaved, in pain and in need of open arms, requiring comfort. But I have also witnessed times when we inevitably come up short. And understand, I include myself in that appraisal. Sometimes we will drop that ball. But that does not mean that we are not intended to pick it up again. To keep at it. And to do that we need to place lovingkindness at the very center of our lives.

How do we do that? Let’s look deeply at the model presented through the words of the prophet Micah. What does Micah mean when he says the following words? Micah declares, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good and what does the LORD require of you: only to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.” It is crucial for us to acknowledge that this does not mean the same thing as just being a nice person. No, the Bible scholar Kathleen O’Connor gets to the root of the issue. “Micah’s kindness requires a way of living that does not simply do kindness. For Micah the people must love kindness, be devoted to kindness. And to love kindness is to make it a priority, to live committed to it, to act from it fully. But even that is not enough. Micah’s words make it clear that the obligation to love kindness is closely entwined with the mandate, “to walk humbly with your God.”

True kindness does not show itself off or call attention to itself; there’s a reason most of us find people who do an act of kindness and then call a press conference off-putting. On the one hand, Micah implies what we have already seen: kindness can bring us into the presence of God. Yet on other hand he reminds us that love and kindness are unpretentious - if you perform an act of kindness in a self-promoting way, that is not yet walking with God. To walk in God’s ways requires us to couple sincere goodness with genuine humility. Our tradition mandates nothing less.

Dear friends, it’s a New Year. Let’s place kindness and love at the very center of our lives, because the God whom we worship wants us not only to love God, but also, and just as important, to love each other. So do justice, love kindness and walk ever so humbly with your God, and if you only do that in the coming year, you just might discover that YOUR world, and THE world will become a better and more hopeful place. May it be God’s will and to that we say Amen.