

**Parshat Kedoshom:
Abraham, the Beatles, and Love in the Age of Coronavirus**

Sometime in early 1967, the BBC began publicizing an upcoming live television event that would "for the first time ever link five continents and bring people face to face with humankind, in places as far apart as Canberra and Cape Kennedy, Moscow and Montreal, Samarkand and Soderfors, Takamatsu and Tunis." This ambitious program would be entitled "Our World," all made possible by linking satellites orbiting the earth. The Beatles were slated to headline this world-wide event which expected an audience in the hundreds of millions.

It was the summer of love and Paul McCartney and John Lennon teamed up to write a fitting song for the occasion, entitled "All You Need is Love". The message that they offered for the occasion is that love can transform the world. As the Beatles put it: *Nothing you can make that can't be made, no one you can save that can't be saved. All you need is love!*

I remember that concert on television and being mesmerized by the thought that I was sharing a worldwide moment, and there were the Beatles preaching the gospel to my generation. It was the day after my Bar Mitzvah. Yes, I thought at the grand age of 13, all you need is love, love is all you need.

More than a half century later I look back and wish that it was only so simple!

This past week, I had the privilege of speaking with one of Israel's most important thinkers, Yossi Klein Halevi, on a Zoom broadcast. One of the points that he made in our conversation was that the Coronavirus pandemic has brought the world together in a way that none of us have ever experienced; not through the technology of a satellite, or by music from famous rock musicians, but by a deadly, microscopic virus. We are paying attention to what takes place in places like Wuhan, China, or Rome, Italy, or London, or South Korea. Yesterday in Israel, it was announced that Covid 19 has been halted. We are paying attention to drug research and methodologies to fight the disease: China versus Sweden, quarantine or herd? We are experiencing a very different "Our World" happening under the shadow of this world pandemic. If there was ever a time when we need to "come together", as the Beatles would say, it is now.

Shouldn't love be enough to carry us through this dark moment and transform our world into a more trusting, cooperative, caring place? With apologies to Paul, John, George and Ringo, the Yiddish word that comes to mind is *Halevi* – if only.

I am no longer a thirteen-year-old boy but a Rabbi in his 60s. So, the question that naturally comes to mind is: How our tradition would respond to this question of whether love is enough depends on whether we classify love as a noun or a verb!

Our Torah reading this morning contains one of the best-known statements in the entire Torah: *V'ahavta L'reicha Kamocha*. Love your neighbor as yourself. The verse is the crescendo of what we refer to as the holiness code, Parshat Kodashim. It begins with God's words to the entire household of Israel: *Kedoshim Tihyu, ke kadosh ani Adonai elocheichem*. *You will be Holy for I the Lord Your God am Holy*. What follows is not a list of ritual commandments, not an order of sacrifice, but a code of ethical behavior.

Do not put a stumbling block in front of the Blind

Do not curse the deaf

Leave the corners of your fields for the poor

Do not cheat

Use honest weights and measures

And then the encapsulating verse, the essence of a truly holy society: *Love your neighbor as yourself*.

But is it really possible to love someone else as much as you love yourself?

This morning, I want to share with you a teaching by Rambam, Maimonides. He was a magisterial figure, interpreter of law, one of the great physicians of his time, a philosopher and a bold leader of our people. In his revolutionary work on Jewish law, the Mishnah Torah, Maimonides writes of the ethical practices required of a Jew, of a member of an Am Kadosh. Fittingly, he builds his understanding around the seminal verse in our Torah reading: *V'ahavta L'reicha Kamocha*.

It is a positive commandment of Rabbinic origin to visit the sick, comfort mourners, to prepare for a funeral, prepare a bride, accompany guests, attend to all the needs of a burial... and also to bring joy to a bride and groom and help them in all their needs. These are deeds of kindness that one carries out with his very person that have no limit.

Although all these mitzvot are of Rabbinic origin, they are included in the Scriptural commandment Leviticus 19:18: "Love your neighbor as yourself." That charge implies that whatever you would like other people to do for you, you should do for your comrade in the Torah and mitzvot.

At this point, Rambam does something marvelous. In answer to our question as to whether it is actually possible to fulfill this ideal, he offers us the person who was the great exemplar of this type of love. The one who fulfilled the verse. None other than Avraham Avinu:

As Maimonides put it: This is a statute which Abraham our Patriarch instituted and the path of kindness which he would follow. He would feed wayfarers, provide them with drink, and accompany them.

According to Rambam, if you want to fulfill the highest commandment of the Torah, then you must follow the good example of Abraham. It begins with welcoming the stranger, and then providing shelter, food, and drink. It ends with accompanying the traveler as they leave, meaning, of course, providing safe passage. For Rambam, Abraham's actions on behalf of the stranger provide the entire rubric for our ethical tradition.

The man who Rambam understands as being the very embodiment of the *V'ahavta L'Reicha* interpreted *Ahava* as a verb, an action word. For the Torah, for our tradition, for Maimonides, love is not a feeling, an attitude, an emotion, or an inner-life experience. Love is a behavior.

For the Beatles, love was an emotion; for the Torah love is a call to caring, a call to action.

The Great Hasidic master, Moshe Leib of Sasov, once spent a night at an inn and heard a conversation between two peasants drinking at a table near his. One peasant asked the other, "Do you love me?". The other responded immediately and said: "Yes, I love you." The man who asked the question responded: "You say that you

love me, but you don't know what I need; if you loved me you would know." The other man fell silent, he had nothing to say. Moshe Leib of Sasov then commented: "To know the needs of another person and to feel their burden of their sorrow and then to respond to them is to know the love of another person."

V'ahavta L'reicha Kamocha. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Love is not a noun but an action verb, a response to a need that has not been stated!

I think of those who have responded in a manner worthy of Abraham during the time of this Coronavirus with the love that anticipated the need.

Two young New York City residents created a network of over 1,300 volunteers in just 72 hours in order to deliver food and medicine to elderly people in New York and New Jersey.

People in Spain, Ireland, Portugal, and France have coordinated times to applaud healthcare workers who are saving lives on the front lines.

In Canada, the idea of "caremongering," or coming together as a community to provide food, medical supplies, and support to those in need has become widespread.

Volunteers in Iran have turned shuttered mosques into makeshift spaces to sew face masks and prepare food packages for those in need.

US customers have been "paying it forward" by leaving thousands of dollars worth in tips to help restaurant staff during closures. A waitress in Houston received a tip of 9600.00 recently.

In New Jersey, the family of 11-year-old Jayden Perez bought some hand sanitizers in bulk at the end of February, reports [bestlifeonline](#).

"His mother, Ana Rosado, told NorthJersey.com that Jayden 'became concerned that some students didn't have sanitizer because they were selling out everywhere,'" according to the report. "So he decided to donate 1,000 hand sanitizers to his local school district, and an additional 150 to the police station, fire department, and public library."

I think of those in our community who have volunteered to do anything that they could to be of service to others, to reach out and check in with our more senior members; the hundreds of Friday night meals that we have given out made possible because of the generosity of caring individuals.

In 1967, John Lennon was able to write that all you need is love, and an entire generation chose to believe him. In 2020, we know that what we need is to follow the example of Abraham who cared for the stranger without being asked. This is essence of the Jewish understanding of the loftiest idea: Love your neighbor as yourself. Each of these acts are a fulfillment of that ideal. Love is more than a feeling, more than an emotion or a state of mind; love is a call to action.

- The Coronavirus has brought the world together, as it does not respect boundaries
- The Coronavirus has become an equalizer as it does not respect wealth or status
- The Coronavirus has also exposed ethical failures in our society

The question worthy of this moment is, what type of society will we build in the wake of this pandemic? We have the potential of creating a holy society where the spirit of Kedoshim can be felt, where love is an action verb, and where we can see the beginning of the fulfillment of our greatest aspiration: *V'ahavta L'reicha Kamocha*, Love your neighbor as yourself.