

Radical Love

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5783

Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

Aiden McCarthy is a two-year-old little boy with curly blond hair, round rosy cheeks, and one of many Jewish little boys who live in Highland Park, Illinois. But in so many ways Aiden is different than all the others, because Aiden is an orphan. His parents, Kevin and Irina, were shot and killed during the festive July 4 parade through downtown Highland Park this past year. Kevin saved his son's life, shielding him under his body, which is exactly where he was rescued. He found his way into the arms of Dana Ring, my camp friend's older sister, someone I've known for 30 years. All Aiden kept asking was "if mom and dad are going to come back soon."

July 4 is meant to be a day of great celebration. We're supposed to celebrate all that is good in our nation, and our founders' dreams to form a more perfect union where we and our posterity can live in domestic tranquility. Central Avenue in Highland Park was the picture of that tranquility until it became the scene of that horrific tragedy. It is a street I have walked down dozens of times. As a kid I used to buy my shoes there. I've eaten hot dogs there, and my family's oldest friend has his office there. As the events of July 4 unfolded, my family members and I began to tell one another who were the friends we knew who were there, who had witnessed the shooting, who had run for their lives, who were shot, who were killed. Like my friend's sister Dana, who now will carry the grief of the unimaginably humane act of kindness she performed for the rest of her life, we carry the pain of that day.

The events of this past July 4 were tragic in so many ways. To see this pain inflicted on what was meant to be a day of celebration adds to the anger and the anguish of its senselessness. Seeing my community torn apart in pain, knowing there was so little I could do to bring comfort to the victims and their families, and knowing that so many more will continue to carry the emotional

Radical Love

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5783

Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

wounds leave me feeling hopeless. As I processed the events of the coming days, that acute hopelessness bled into the general sense that too many of us have been carrying for these past few years: that we have so much to be saddened or angered about that we are tempted to fall into despair. It feels like the world is spinning out of control, that not only are bad things happening, but we are losing our ability to cope, and there is nothing we can do about it.

As Americans, we are taught that we are in control of our destiny. The American dream is one of self-reliance: if we are honest and we work hard, good things will happen. But our Jewish tradition sees it differently. When we read *Unetaneh Tokef* as we did this morning, we are told the decisions of “who will live and who will die,” “who by fire and who by water,” “who will be troubled and who will be tranquil” are beyond our control. Our fates will come whether we like it or not, that the powers of the universe have already decided what our fates will be. When things are going well, we can celebrate. But if we look around and see pain and sadness, death and destruction, the thought that we are incapable of doing much of anything about it can lead us to despair.

The problems that we are facing today are massive, global, interconnected, and compounding. Russia’s attack on Ukraine has killed, displaced, and injured so many, touching off a humanitarian crisis that the world is struggling to manage and raising fears about future calamities. The economic effects of the war have cascaded into the global financial market, compounding already rising inflation, further disrupting a market still reeling from the two years of a global pandemic. This challenge of the last seven months piled on top of the issues of climate change, the rise in violent crime in our cities, renewed legal attacks on bodily autonomy and voting rights, and

Radical Love

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5783

Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

more mass shootings. All the while our Jewish community has seen an all-time high number of

Antisemitic incidents, and a 34% increase from the previous year, with particular focus on Jewish institutions like schools and synagogues.¹

With all of this going on, if someone were to come up to me and ask, “what’s wrong,” my answer very well might be [gestures broadly], that internet gesture to say “everything, in particular.” The exasperation I feel when I consider the state of the world leaves me wondering that even if we wanted to do something about it, where could we possibly begin? Our problems today seem so vast, so widespread, so overwhelming that any rational person might suggest that the proper emotional response to throw up our hands, overwhelmed by the pain and suffering, and despair, simply giving up on the whole thing.

Last night, Rabbi Levin reminded us of the power of hope; despair is the absence of that hope. Despair is tempting because it allows us to numb ourselves in a deep exhale of “Oh well, nothing I can do, so it doesn’t really matter.” Despair can tempt us not to care about the consequences of our actions- good or bad. But this *Rosh HaShanah* reminds us that our actions *always* matter. The challenging words of *Unetaneh Tokef*, which at first lay out that our fates are written, conclude with the charge that repentance and the hard work of repair, prayer and communal camaraderie, righteous acts and generosity lay the pathway around those fates towards a world of love and peace. They ask us, “What will we do to bring light into a world shadowed by darkness?” How do we do that? Through love. Radical love, love expressed intentionally, in all directions, and especially at moments when we feel most challenged to feel love.

¹ <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-audit-finds-antisemitic-incidents-in-united-states-reached-all-time-high-in>

Radical Love

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5783

Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

Love is a powerful emotion. Love binds families and communities together, friends and strangers. The command to love appears over and over and over again in our Torah- love your neighbor, love the stranger, love the Holy One- those three *mitzvot* that are so beautifully illustrated in our congregation's Welcome Center. Love, I want to suggest, is the antidote to despair.

I want to share the story of Linda Schulman. Linda raised her children well, especially her son Scott. Scott committed his life to teaching, working as a camp counselor, high school teacher, and cross-country coach. Then Linda got the phone call that every parent fears- Scott had been murdered, one of the seventeen victims of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School in Parkland. He was shot saving the lives of his students. Linda had to stand right here, right where I'm standing now, and eulogize her son before a crowd of people sitting right where you are sitting now, before we laid Scott to rest here in our Mausoleum. I can't imagine a situation that would be more tempting to despair than the one Linda faced. Instead, she has spent the last four and a half years using every ounce of her energy to try to make the world safer for others. She's worked in Florida to get our red flag law passed. She goes on TV, telling her story, reliving the tragedy over and over again, out of a deep sense of care and concern for all the other parents and children. Rather than despair, she has located her deep love of humanity and chosen to express it over and over again.

So, too, did Dr. King. When he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, he and his community were at risk of despair. The fight for civil rights was ongoing, and getting more difficult each day. It was before the famous March from Selma to Montgomery, before the passage of the

Radical Love

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5783

Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

Voting Rights Act, and just months after of the murders of Andrew Goodman, James Cheney and Mickey Schwerner in Mississippi. In his acceptance speech, recognizing that the realities of being Black in America in 1964 were bleak and morally outrageous, that the movement was no where near achieving the peace and justice it sought, he said, “I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history...I refuse to accept that man is mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events which surround him...I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality.”

When we struggle to know what to do, when we wonder how we can help make things better, when we think things are so dark that we don't know where the light will come from, turn, Dr. King said, to love. Finding ways to love will not solve the problems, not right away. But finding ways to love helps to buoy ourselves and our spirits so that we can work to make things better. Finding ways to love- our family and friends, our neighbors, the strangers among us- is a way to sublimate our frustrations and our feelings of sadness, to keep ourselves from falling into despair. These expressions of love, love in spite of the difficulties, love to combat the pain and anguish that we see or feel, are often called acts of radical love. Radical love is love that “requires us to show up for others, even when it's difficult...love that focuses on the feelings and perspectives of other people, seeing the humanness inside of us...fueled by compassion and understanding and promotes healing and growth...it's action-oriented...and asks us to lean into our own vulnerabilities [and] lead with our hearts.”² I learned this from someone who lives here in Boca Raton with us, Dr. Traci Baxley, a professor of education at FAU. Her work has focused on how

² From *Social Justice Parenting* by Dr. Traci Baxley, published by HarperCollins in 2021, p. xii.

Radical Love

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5783

Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

parents can help their children to be compassionate and caring in an unjust world. Not surprising she too is inspired by Dr. King, and teaches to channel our fears and concerns into action, to be inspired to find ways to express love for ourselves, for our communities, and those around us.

Linda Schulman has used her outsized platform, borne from her personal tragedy, to change our country, but finding ways to love through the pain is something that each of us can do. We can start with ourselves and find time in this new year to take of ourselves, for self-care. If we resolve to love ourselves we can get healthier, happier, and emotionally stronger, better fit to sustain the difficulties that the world seems determined to set before us. If we pursue love for our family and friends, we can make moments of joy and celebration, moments where we can increase our temporal happiness and enjoyment, filling our emotional reserves that have been tapped over these past few years. So many of us have been rightfully reticent to socialize during these past few years of the pandemic, but as new boosters are now available and the virus becomes less of a threat each day, make that time to go to dinner with friends, or on that weekend getaway, and fill your own tank. As a congregational community, we regularly express our love of the strangers through our social action projects that benefit those in need, and that love improves their experience of the world in their own lives. This year offers us new opportunities to spread our love of the stranger, like our project today collecting coats for those in Ukraine who are facing a second winter away from their homes, something small that we can do to help a nation that needs so much love right now. And our love of the Holy One, and *Ahavat Yisrael*, the love of the people of Israel, inspiring us to celebrate together on this day and in this new year, our celebrations that express our gratitude for the gifts and blessings we have received.

Radical Love

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5783

Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

There is a beautiful teaching about how our acts of love and kindness can become seeds sown to even more. Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner, a leader of the last century, lived his own life with significant tragedy. In 1929 his community of Hebron, was massacred; he happened to be away that weekend and survived. In 1970, while flying home to New York after visiting Israel his TWA flight was hijacked, and he, his wife, his daughter, and his son-in-law were held hostage with 40 other Jews in Jordan. Today, September 26, is the fifty-second anniversary of his release, and *Baruch HaShem* he was able to celebrate that year's *Rosh HaShanah* in peace. Despite the pain and anguishes he experienced, he had the love of humanity to write, that “When a person receives a benefit from his fellow, a seed of *hesed* is planted in his world. If the nature of *hesed* is functioning healthily and properly, this seed cannot but give rise to additional *hesed*.”³

Our acts of love, Rabbi Hutner teaches, are contagious. *Mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, like we teach in religious school. *Hesed gorer hesed*. When we do something loving for another, that act can germinate and blossom into more. Maybe I like how it feels so I do it again. Maybe the person I helped feels compelled to pay it forward. Maybe someone hears about it and decides to do the same. Maybe all three. These small kindnesses, these small acts of love to one another can domino and ripple through a family or a community, like a virus of positivity. Over time things can begin to feel better. Maybe the ripple hits someone who has the means to do something monumental, a super-spreader of *hesed*. This contagion of love is exactly what we need right now.

So Let us start with us. For those of you with children and grandchildren or nieces and nephews, start with them. Love on them like Aiden McCarthy yearns for the love of his parents.

³ Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner, *Pachad Yitzhok*, Rosh HaShanah #3. Text taught and shared with me by Rabbi Shai Held.

Radical Love

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah 5783

Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

In a moment we will hear the sounding of the shofar. It begins with *tekiyah*, our call to attention, reminding us to be ever conscious of the world around us. Next, *shevarim*, the three broken blasts that sound like the crying and tears of sadness, reminding us that much is broken. *Truah*, the signal that it is time to act. As we hear these notes, let us know that when faced with sadness, we are called to act with love, a radical, great love as impressive as the *tekiyah g'dolah*.

Shana Tova.