

Fueling ourselves to Audaciously Love

This past Sunday I witnessed a *glass-ceiling shattering* moment in the majestic chapel of Temple Emanu-El in New York City. To bring you to this incredible moment, let me at the scene. This synagogue is an architectural marvel: with large ceilings; numerous stained glass windows; and adorned with a stunning, golden bima. And in the center, sits a tremendous ark—one of those arks that just causes your eyes to marvel at in awe. And in the center, each of my classmates to be ordained, stood for a private moment and this year a historic milestone with Rabbi Dr. Andrea Weiss. Rabbi Weiss is our Bible teacher and one of the co-editors of the green Women's Commentary on the Torah, and the first woman in the history of the Reform Movement to lay hands, and create cantors and rabbis.

What is even more special, is that Rabbi Weiss was not on this majestic bima alone. She was joined by Rabbi Sally Priesand: the rabbi who *broke the glass ceiling for women in the rabbinate*, when she was the first American Jewish woman to be ordained a rabbi only, in 1972. With Rabbi Priesand and the rest of us looking on in tears, my classmates became *klei kodesh*, sacred vessels.

This momentous event comes on the heels of a *tragic moment* in the history of the *Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion* and of the *Liberal Jewish World* when our beloved past President, Rabbi Dr. Aaron Panken, of blessed memory, was tragically *killed* in a *plane accident* the day before ordination last year, at only age 53.

You can imagine the deep hole – and the *sacredness in our sadness*—that we all felt during ordination last year, and that we still felt during ordination this year. Grief and death can be some of the most holy moments in our lives. And the joy of witnessing brand new rabbis and cantors walk down those five steps on the bima in a *glass-shattering* moment of pure love and hope, is its own unique kind of holiness.

And friends, holiness is where our Torah portion begins this morning:

“God spoke to Moses saying: ‘Speaking to the whole Israelite community and say to them: K’dushim Tihiu, You shall be holy; ki kadosh ani Adonai Eloheichem, for I am Adonai Your God and holy.’”

¹ Leviticus 19:1-2.

And within that holiness, we get the most comprehensive, loving list in the Torah in this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Kedoshim*: This is quite literally the "best of the best" list in the Torah, which includes: honor your parents; ...; pray with intention; don't waste food; be respectful to the poor and the stranger, and support them by providing them sustenance... and always remember to pay your workers. Do not insult people with disabilities and do not make their lives more difficult. Judge everyone fairly and do not profit by the blood of your fellow, among others.

And that brings us to the most important line in our Torah: Do not hate others, nor take vengeance or bear a grudge against them, "*Veahavta l'reyecha kamocho, Love your neighbor as yourself; I am Adonai.*"²

What does it mean to be holy? Respecting others, justice, and audacious love. When I say "holy" or "sacred," I am translating the Hebrew word *kadosh*, which comes from the root koof-dalet-shin, meaning to be "cut off," "separate," and to be or become "pure." I think of that incredible moment when two lovebirds choose to get married, we call that a *Kiddushin*, in Hebrew. One someone gets married, they are actively choosing to *separate* their partner from the rest of humanity, and their partner the same, in a beautiful ceremony before their loved ones. Holiness is separating out people and moments, places and foods, rituals and items that bring us mindful moments of bliss and hope.

On the crossroads between human relationships and holiness, Rabbi Angela Buchdahl writes that: "In order for the Torah to be a living tradition, we must interpret our text not just on the literal word and original intent, but on the basis of our own evolving understanding of human nature and sacred relationships."³ I would like to make the argument that *kadosh*, holiness, is the result of the deep relationships that we form. Holiness is the result of the deep relationships that we form with other human beings, our pets, with ritual objects, within sacred and special places, and within community.

Martin Buber wrote of two kinds of relationships that we form in our lives. One he refers to as an "I-It" relationship, a relationship that "I" have with others that is not overly meaningful, where I ultimately treat another like an "It." Buber also speaks about an "I-You" relationship, which instead are deep relationships that we have with others. These are the kinds of relationships where we each bring our whole self. It is in those relationships where "I" really see "You," and really hear "You," and really respect "You."

These are the kinds of relationships where we deeply connect through God's loving Presence. Eugene Borowitz writes that this connection between God and the relational self is a key to a new theological understanding of the universe where one sees "God's role in every I-[You] meeting."⁴ God is at the center of loving and caring relationships.

² Leviticus 19:18.

³ Rabbi Buchdahl, Angela W., "Homosexuality in the Bible and the Supreme Court (Acharei Mot/Kedoshim)," *Central Synagogue*, <https://www.centralsynagogue.org/worship/sermons/detail/parashat-acharei-mot-kedoshim>. Accessed May 5, 2019.

⁴ Borowitz, "The Autonomous Jewish Self" in Eugene B. Borowitz: *Rethinking God and Ethics* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

“Veahavta l'reyecha kamocho, Love your neighbor as yourself; I am Adonai.”⁵

Rabbi Rachel Barenblat argues that these instructions sit at the metaphorical and literal heart of the Torah: “love your neighbor as yourself, I am God.”⁶ Rabbi Akiva called this *klal gadol baTorah*, the greatest principal of Torah. My teacher Rabbi Jerry Davidson says time and time again, if you were to open up any *chumash*, any copy of the Torah, to the direct center you will inevitably find love, because love is at the center of it all.

What does it mean to truly love our neighbor as ourselves? It's all about our relationships. Remember, the phrase is not just: “*Love your neighbor as yourself*” but “*Love your neighbor as yourself, I am God.*” When we truly love our neighbor as ourselves, we see God in them. We see their unique gifts and their holy sparks, and we remind ourselves that they are only human when they make a mistake.

I would like to suggest that we as Jews are lovingly commanded by the One who guides us through an ethic of audacious love. Audacious love is not only when we truly love our neighbor as ourselves, but audacious love is when we listen, hear, learn, and forgive our neighbors because they are human too.

Audacious love is daring.

Audacious love is beautiful.

Audacious love leads us to holiness.

But also, audacious love can be really hard. We live in such a difficult world often filled with pain rather than fueled on audacious love. Wouldn't spreading compassion and justice be easier if everyone was on board?

In order to act on audacious love, you need to find moments and people and media and relationships that inspire you.

Who brings you hope today? What brings you that small smirks and big belly laughs? What television shows or books bring you deep comfort, and fuel your fire? Who inspires you?

Rabbi Dr. Andrea Weiss, our provost who made my classmates cantors and rabbis, spearheaded the [American Values Religious Voices: 100 Days. 100 Letters](#), an incredible campaign designed to bring leaders of faith together in shared values to write 100 beautiful letters to the President of the United States and his administration for his first 100 days. Rabbi Weiss writes that “the words of the Bible call to us with clarity and urgency, reminding us of [our] core values.”⁷ Reading these holy letters help remind me of all of the beauty that still exists in our often dark, cold world.

⁵ Leviticus 19:18.

⁶ Rabbi Barenblat, Rachel, “This week's portion: on loving our neighbors,” *Velveteen Rabbi*, <https://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2012/05/this-weeks-portion-on-loving-our-neighbors.html>. Accessed May 4, 2019.

⁷ Rabbi Dr. Weiss, Andrea, “Letter 1,” *Values and Voices*, <http://www.valuesandvoices.com/letter1>, Accessed May 5, 2019.

These letters fuel me. Having witnessed this historic moment last Sunday where Rabbi Preisand looked on as Rabbi Weiss transformed my classmates into cantors and rabbis, this moment continued to fuel me. Spending quality time with my loved ones, that fuels me. What fuels you?

And it is with our fuel that we can work to bring more audacious love into the world. And if not that, maybe something even higher.