

Who Is Our Neighbor?
Yom Kippur Afternoon 5774
September 14, 2013

D'var Torah

No one really knows why the traditional reading for Yom Kippur afternoon was chosen. Why would anyone want to read Leviticus 18, the long list of, how do I put this delicately, romantic restrictions of those with whom one should not become involved. Even, um, temporarily. Some valiantly try to give reasons for that selection: it is read now because it is important, and everyone is at services! Well, no comment. Or it is read because, while we are on a lofty spiritual plane now, we should remind ourselves not to return to our animal instincts after Yom Kippur is over. It is a puzzle.

Our movement has chosen, however, the very next chapter of Leviticus as our reading of the afternoon of Yom Kippur. It is the Holiness Code, invoking the principle of *imitatio Dei*, the imitation of God: “You shall be holy, for I, the Eternal God, am holy.” And that holiness manifests, apparently, most vividly through the way we lead our lives – through our ethical conduct, and our moral behavior.

Since I spoke of one important verse in my D'var Torah this morning, I will focus on one additional, also famous verse, now. It is a verse so different from what we usually think of as the book of Leviticus – indeed, it is so characteristic of another religion, rather than being associated with ours – that one pastor I heard of simply denied that it was here. But there it is, in the middle of the book dealing with priestly purity, the words “*V'ahavta l'reyecha kamocha*. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Lofty words, of universal care and connection. And yet, never underestimate the power of extremists to take the most lofty sentiments, and twist them to their own ends. How is it that ultra-Orthodox Jews sometimes read this verse? Not: “love your neighbor as you love yourself,” but, rather, “love your neighbor who is like you,” which they then interpret as “love your neighbors *if* they are like you,” thus taking some of the most profoundly loving words in the entire Hebrew Bible and using them as an excuse to distance themselves, if not actually hate, those who are different. Exactly the opposite, I believe, of what these words mean... or what they should mean.

So this afternoon I ask you: who is it that you think of as your neighbor? Who is it that is included in the range of your care and concern, the scope of

your sense of connection? Can we build on these words, and create an expanding circle, from self, to family, to neighbors, to community, to country, to humanity, to all creatures of the world? Can we use our love of self as a springboard, a base, a platform from which love will spread, not one which defines its parameters and limitations? Can we love those who are different, until we are able to say we feel connected with everyone, and everything in the world? Not equally, not in the same measure, but know that feeling, and then we can understand why this famous verse, and many of the verses here, end with two additional words: "*Ani Adonai*. I am the Eternal." A connection with all, comes from the Creator of all, or the One who holds all within a Divine embrace. For Judaism, no less than for any other religions, love leads us to God.