

Modern Love-Modern Loss
Yom Kippur Day – Yizkor 5779-2018
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Modern Loss
Modern Love

One is the title of a book I read this summer – the other is a title of a popular column from the New York Times. The Modern Love – column, describes itself as, “weekly essays that explore the joys and tribulations of modern love.” The book, Modern Loss, edited by Rebecca Soffer and Gabrielle Birkner – is a collection of essays which, say the authors, “is a place to share the unspeakably taboo, unbelievably hilarious, and unexpectedly beautiful terrain of navigating your life after a death.

I couldn't help wondering about those titles: modern love and modern loss. What is modern about them? Love and Death – Woody Allen made his movie on the subject back in 1975, but in truth, we humans have been thinking about love and death – well, since we have been thinking – so what is modern love and what is modern loss?

Sylvia accompanied her husband Irving to the doctor's office, he just wasn't feeling well. After Irving was given a thorough check-up, the doctor called Sylvia into his office to speak to her alone. He said, “Look, your husband is suffering from a serious disease brought on by extreme stress. You must do the following or your husband will die! Each morning, wake him up gently with a big kiss, and then fix him a healthy breakfast. Be pleasant at all times and make sure he is always in a good mood. Cook him only his favorite meals and allow him to relax as long as he needs to after meals. Don't burden him with any responsibilities and don't discuss your problems with him, it will only make his stress worse. Whatever you do, don't argue or disagree with him, even if he criticizes you or makes fun of you. Try to relax him in the evening by giving him messages. Encourage him to watch all the sports he can on TV, even if you have to give up your favorite programs. And most importantly, every evening after dinner do whatever it takes to satisfy his every whim. If you can do this, every day, for the next six months, I think Irving will regain his health completely.” On the way home from the doctor, Irving asked Sylvia: “What did the doctor say when you were alone with him?!” “The doctor said – you're going to die!”

Maybe that is modern love and modern loss? No, I don't think so.

What I think they mean by modern love and modern loss is not that love and loss is something new – but in our modern world we have found new and creative ways to express our love and our loss. Once upon a time, not so long ago, the way of love and the way of loss was much more limited and much more restricted. The rituals of pre-modern love and pre-modern loss were so much more specific. One knew exactly how to court a woman, as my parents might have phrased it, as the ritual of courting was precise and scripted - -and yes, it was the man who courted the woman. Not so today. Today, the only rule seems to be that there are no rules.

Until this year, this was the year of “MeToo!” and “Times Up!”

Reflecting on this past year - -the year of Harvey Weinstein, and Bill Cosby, of Les Moonves

and Louis C.K. and on and on – this was the year we realized the need to shine a light on physical safety when it comes to intimacy in our communities. It has even entered into the debate for our new Supreme Court Justice. This was the year when we were all reminded that there are rules in love and in loss – and that when we ignore these rules – people can be hurt terribly.

I have here a three page Sexual-Consent Form – used by couples to ensure that they legally agree to have sex. There are a number of universities that are handing out these sexual consent contracts to their students and there is even a Smartphone app called we-consent which, as it explains: “with a few clicks and the word, “yes” this app creates videos of both parties consenting to sexual relations and sends those videos off for safe storage.”

Is *this* Modern Love?

Look, there is no doubt that anything which makes it harder for one person to take advantage of another, anything which makes it more difficult for abuse to take place, is obviously a good thing. But when three-page legal consent forms find their way into our most intimate moments – something is askew.

I have a theory as to how things have gone so wrong and maybe even some suggestions how to fix them – how to return love and loss to the kinds of human interactions they were meant to be.

Allow me a brief history lesson – a history, if you will, of love and sex in the hope I can clarify how I think we arrived at our current situation.

For much of human history, love and sex were very different things. The Greeks gave us the concept of the orgy – which was all about sex and had nothing to do with love. In many parts of the ancient religious western world, love and sex were also very different things - love was noble and sex was, well, at best, necessary. In Christianity, love was celebrated and sex was tolerated. The Greeks had different words representing these very different concepts – *Eros*, from which we get the modern word erotic, refers to physical love, *Eros* is the world of sexual passion. *Agape* is also a Greek word for love, but it refers to a very different kind of passion – it is the love of a parent for their child or the love of a person for God. Christians use the word *agape* to refer to God’s unconditional love for man. In the early stages of Western history *Agape* was celebrated and *Eros* was denigrated. Our Christian friends speak of original sin – referring to the original sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In the Christian reading of our bible, the world’s first sin was sex. God told the first couple not to eat from the tree of knowledge and when they disobey the knowledge they receive is sexual awareness – they immediately become aware that they are naked and they are embarrassed. In early Christianity love, to be pure, must be sexless – *agape*. In early Christian thought the idea that sex is sinful reaches its apotheosis with Paul who states in I Corinthians: “I wish that all men were as I. But, if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

The ideal for Paul was celibacy – to remain chaste, untainted by physical sexuality. For him and for the early church, marriage was a concession to those who did not have the self-control to reign in their passion. To this day, the ideal in the Catholic Church celebrates celibacy for priests and nuns – but as they are learning, and we Jews always understood, celibacy may not be their best idea, and sex is not an easy thing to repress. There is another verse from that

same Garden of Eden story that deserves attention: *lo tov heyot adam l'vado* -- it is not good for man to be alone – and Judaism, as we will see in a minute was built on a very different reading of the Bible and a very different set of values.

But, before we get to Judaism – our history lesson has a few more turns. The division between sex and love, and the celebration of love and the denigration of sex was continued in the Middle Ages. Even when western civilization developed a concept of secular identity and even outside of the church and religious thought this notion that love is good and sex is bad was considered foundational. Think of any knight in shining armor story you were told as a child. They all followed a variation on the following script: the knight in shining armor demonstrates great bravery and strength in saving the damsel in distress – at great risk to his own welfare, he risks life and limb to save her, and then he sweeps her onto his horse and rides her home to safety – but there is never any *nookie* for the knight. To have sex with the damsel in distress would somehow diminish and tarnish the purity of the manly act of bravery. Love, if it is to be of the highest order must remain chaste.

And so went the story up until modern times – sex and love were two very different things – love was noble and sex was dirty, love was sought after and sex was to be avoided as much as possible.

And then came the '60's and the 70's and the world of love and sex, was turned on its head. The sexual revolution turned 2000 years of history upside down. All of a sudden sex was celebrated and love was, well, optional. Rock and Roll may have talked a lot about love, but it was no coincidence that this period was defined by: "Sex, drugs and Rock and Roll," and when Elvis first gyrated his pelvis on the Ed Sullivan Show stage, it was clear that Rock and Roll was about much more than the music. Rock and roll explored and celebrated the possibilities of this new world order. "Come on baby light my fire" – was clearly not intended to be a celebration of the Christian notion of *Agape* – of sexless, spiritual love. But, even though this represented a revolution, a total inversion of what had come before, the most fascinating thing about the sexual revolution of the 60's and 70's was that it still maintained the basic template that Christianity had established 2000 years before, it maintained the separation between sex and love – it just turned them around. Where once love was celebrated and sex denigrated, now, sex was to be celebrated and love was nice, but certainly not necessary, for sex to take place.

Is it any wonder that a world in which: "Gimme gimme some lovin'" (Spencer Davis Group 1966) was the theme song, it was just a matter of time until we needed the MeToo! Movement to respond to the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault?

This is the story of Modern Love.

But I told you all of that so that I could tell you this: In Judaism we have always danced to a very different kind of music.

We never read the Bible the way our Christian friends did. Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden, was not sex, it was disobedience. The moral of the story, for us, was not that we are born in sin but that doing the right thing is not easy and is a lifelong struggle. And what does Judaism have to say about sex? Well, God makes it clear in those same early chapters: It is not good to be alone. We were meant to seek love and companionship. It was meant to be at the very core of who we are. Sex and love were and are at the very heart of a Jewish notion of humanity.

And here is the clearest proof I can give you: Christianity developed two different words – *Eros* and *Agape* to signify two very different kinds of love. But, in Judaism love is love is love.

“*V’ahavta et adonai elohecha* - You should love the Lord your God” (Deut. 6:5)

“*V’ahavta l’reyecha k’mocha* - Show love to your neighbor as you would show love to yourself” (Lev. 19:18)

And in the x-rated love poem that is the Song of Solomon it states in Chapter 2:1 – “on my bed at night, I sought him whom I love. I sought him, but I did not find him...” And the word for love - -yep, *ahava!*

This is the great teaching of our tradition. We never did and we do not now accept any categories in our notion of love. We love our children and they love us. We love our friends and our teachers. We love God and we love life. If the love that is expressed in moments of intimacy is not an expression of that kind of love and care and concern, then it is a false love, an unworthy love. The *ahava* of sexual intimacy and the *ahava* of divine concern is the same *ahava* – just expressed in different forms and different contexts. In Judaism there is no division between sex and love – both must be an expression of care and concern, and yes, holiness.

Why on earth would you want to trade our sacred and far more beautiful notion of love for modern love?

In Judaism marriage is called *kiddushin*. It is from the very same Hebrew root for *Kiddush* and *kaddish* and it means holy, sacred. Isn’t it interesting that we use the same word – when a love relationship is begun – *kiddushin* and when it is lost – *kaddish*. In Judaism, both are sacred moments of love.

But *kadosh* – is one of those words that are easy to say and very hard to understand. What does it mean to say a relationship is *kadosh* - holy? Again, we have been heavily influenced by Christian thought, and when many of us say “holy” – we think of a priest in his vestments waving a censer filled with smoking incense.

In Judaism, *kadosh* means special, unique, and separate from everything else. When, the prophet Isaiah in his great moment of Divine revelation attempts to put into words the ineffable experience he is having – all that emerges from his mouth are three words: *kadosh, kadosh, kadosh!* It is the Hebrew equivalent of Wow! But if you force me to break it down further – what Isaiah seems to be trying to describe to us is that what he was seeing and feeling and experiencing was unique, unlike anything he had ever known before – it was *kadosh*.

To designate something, as *kadosh*, to make it holy, is to set it apart and make it unique, unlike anything else. As I sometimes say to couples when I stand with them under the *hupah*: “We have just added a new dimension to your relationship. In addition to love and commitment we now add the word - *kiddushin* - sanctification. Through the words we just recited and the traditions we embrace your love has been sanctified and elevated - it has been made holy and sacred and even more precious than it already was.”

What we do at a Jewish wedding is transform love into holiness. What we do when we recite the *kaddish*, is to take a complicated human relationship, one that was filled with so many competing and conflicting emotions, and we elevate it, we sanctify it, we make it holy and sacred and more precious than it already was.

And when I teach this to our teenagers in our Makom Hebrew High School - I tell them this is what we, as Jews, believe love and sex should be: holy, sacred.

Now here is where your rabbi gets a little bit radical, and, you should know what I am teaching your children. I make it clear to them that not so long ago – there was no sex outside of marriage. In traditional Judaism, marriage was to be conducted with holiness and since marriage was the sole context for sex, so sex operated only in a world of holiness. But, I tell them, that this is not the world you occupy. You live in a world that knows the possibility of sex independent of marriage. You even live in a world that knows of the possibility of sex independent of love. And it is here that I try and make my case to them, that whether love in their world operates in or out of marriage, and when sex in their world happens, in or out of marriage, as Jews, it should never happen in their world independent of holiness.

Sex and love, for us as Jews, must always be *kadosh* - holy. It must be special, and unique, it must be elevated and honorable and noble. It must be an expression of care and concern for the other. Sacred love, holy love, and sacred sex, holy sex, whenever it occurs, is never about what *you* want or what *you* need. It is always about the needs and the wants of the other.

In a world of true Jewish love and Jewish sex there would be no need for MeToo!

It is at this point that my more insightful students usually ask – “if love is all about the other person’s needs and wants, how do I ever get what I need and want?” To which I answer: “if you have chosen your partner wisely, they will be as concerned and attentive to your needs and wants as you are to theirs.”

In our world of modern love, everyone wants to be liked. It’s all about me. Facebook has created a generation of “being liked – seekers” instead of “love givers.”

Facebook and Instagram and Snapchat all operate in a world that says: Look at me! Aren’t I clever? Aren’t I cool? Aren’t I beautiful? My God – they are even called: “selfies.” Every single one of the cameras out in our exhibit in the lobby – they all have one thing in common – they were designed to focus our attention outward. Not so our smartphones, they are actually designed with two cameras to make it easier to take pictures when the camera is turned toward us rather than outward toward someone else.

What are we trying to say with our “selfies?” Look where I am eating, look who I am with, look where I am – you are probably sitting at home in your t-shirt and torn sweatpants but I am living a beautiful life.

The problem is, most of it is a lie.

My son, Ari, pointed out a new book to me titled, “Everybody Lies,” published by the Harvard economist and Wharton lecturer Seth Stevens-Davidowitz. Davidowitz uses big data aggregated from millions and millions of Google searches and Facebook posts and his conclusion, from all this research, is that everybody lies - about their health, happiness, and the perfectness of their lives. Facebook, he says, is a digital brag-to-my-friends-about-how-good-my-life-is. In Facebook world, family life seems perfect. But, we all know that in the real world, family life is messy.

Here are just a few examples from Stevens-Davidowitz’s research:

1) The National Enquirer - the supermarket tabloid - sells three times as many copies as The Atlantic magazine. But people are 45x more likely to post an article from the Atlantic or like it on Facebook than they are to do either of those things with the National Enquirer.

2) Americans spend about six times as much of their time cleaning dishes as they do golfing. But there are roughly twice as many tweets reporting golfing as there are tweets reporting doing the dishes.

3) The Las Vegas budget hotel Circus Circus and the luxurious hotel Bellagio each holds about the same number of people. But the Bellagio gets about three times as many check-ins on Facebook.

Apparently people are more willing to post and project a life that is glamorous, even when life isn't all that glamorous all the time. We want our friends and community to believe that we're staying at luxury hotels, out playing golf, and reading the Atlantic, when more often, we're staying at Circus Circus, doing dishes, or peeking at the National Enquirer while waiting at the supermarket checkout.

And all this "lying" about ourselves has consequences, it makes us all miserable, as we compare our "real lives" to other people's Facebook lives. It's a fresh take on the old 12-step adage: "don't compare your insides to other people's outsides."

Anyone who is or lives with a teenager knows that these pressures are especially difficult for them. The pressure to be popular was always a challenge, but in the age of Facebook and "selfies" it is almost impossible. Today our teens' sense of self worth is often measured by how many "likes" their posts get. But, truth is that we're all feeling more miserable lately, less self-satisfied, less whole, less loved.

We wonder are we worthy? Are we good? Are we loved? Are we loveable? Likeable? And not in the Facebook sense of "like." In the Jewish – *ahava* – sense of love.

We come here on this Yom Kippur and we're asking the deep questions about ourselves. We're asking what Rabbi Gordon Tucker refers to as "*Neilah* questions." "*Neilah* questions" are the questions that we ask when we're really looking at ourselves honestly. They're the questions of our liturgy - *Mah anu? Meh hasdeinu? Mah tzidkeinu?* What are we? What is our life? What is our righteousness?

Unfortunately, the High Holy Days can be a lot like Facebook. We come to synagogue on Yom Kippur and we wear our nicest clothes and we present a curated version of ourselves to our community. Sometimes, the high holy days can feel like a high school reunion. We're trying to project to one another or perhaps trying to convince ourselves. "Look at me, my life is good. I've got everything together. I'm doing all right," when really on the inside, in our real lives, inside our homes and inside our hearts, everything's not all right.

Perhaps that's why so much of our liturgy over this holiday attempts to get us to internalize our own reality. We beat our chests because for most of us, our hearts have become hardened, they have a layer that prevents anything from coming in or going out. And so we need to pound these things through the wall of protection we've built up around us: *Ashamnu bagadnu Al het* -- We did it. We're not perfect, in fact far from it. We're broken, fragile, in pain, angry, sick, alone.

In the liturgy of the *mahzor*, God is described as someone who knows you inside and out. God is *goleh amukot* - the one who reveals that which is buried deep; “the one who knows our deepest feelings”; *hoker levavot* - investigator of hearts. I believe the message intended by referring to God in this way is clear. Whatever is on the inside, it’s meant to be explored on Yom Kippur. There’s no hiding. God is the ultimate accountability measure, an eye that sees and an ear that hears, all our deeds and words.

You see the goal of these High Holy days, and, I’d argue, of a religious life in general is to have a better awareness of our insides, and better answers to those *Neilah* questions. That we stop pretending to be people we’re not, and start being the beautiful broken people we are; that we strive for more honesty in our relationships with ourselves, with one another and with God. The problem with Harvey Weinstein was that he believed his own press, his own “selfies,” and I am concerned that to many of us do as well.

I understand how Harvey Weinstein’s happen when you live in a Facebook world. When you come to believe your own postings, that your life is perfect and you are powerful and successful. How could anyone else *not* like me? Not love me? Not want to be with ME.

In a world where we spend so much time looking at ourselves and creating an artificial image of the perfect self that we put on display for the world, there is little time and little thought given to anyone else but yourself: **I, me, mine**, these are the holy trinity of our modern world.

When Moses was receiving the instructions for how to build the Holy Ark of the covenant. The most sacred structure that would exist on earth, the ark that would contain the tablets that Moses received on Mt. Sinai. It says something peculiar that catches the attention of the ancient rabbis.

“And you shall make an ark of acacia wood...covered with pure gold inside and out. (Ex. 25:10-11)

Many of the commentators are puzzled by this instruction. It is understandable that one would want to cover the ark in gold on the outside - such an important piece of artisanry should be beautiful and inspire the hearts of those who see it. But why, they ask, does it need to be covered with gold on the inside. No one will ever see the inside, the only one who ever went inside was the High Priest and that was only one day a year, today, on Yom Kippur. So why go to all that expense for something no one would really see except one person, one day a year?

In the Talmud, the Babylonian scholar Rava interprets the verse in the following way- “*kol tamid chacham she-eyn tocho k’boro, ayno talmid chacham* “Any sage whose insides do not match his outsides is not a sage” (BT Yoma 72b)

First, let us consider the interpretive leap that Rava has made. The verse in the Torah is about the construction of the ark, but Rava sees much more than that - he sees instruction on how to live a good life. He views the sacred ark, the most holy *place* on earth as a metaphor for a sacred human being, the most holy *creature* on earth. His understanding of the requirement to cover the inside in gold, even though no one will see it, is that a person’s insides must match that person’s outsides if he or she is to be considered a scholar. For Rava, the essence of holiness in a person is integrity.

There are parts of each of us that we don’t show to the outside world, parts of us that are personal and private, the inner workings of our emotions; the dynamics within our families. When what’s on the inside doesn’t match up with the image of ourselves that we project to the

outside world. And we don't have to share everything with everyone we meet. There are things that I share with my family, that I wouldn't share with you, and there are things that I share with you that I wouldn't share with the New York Times. That's called discretion. But it's when we distort what's going on with us, when we project gold on the outside, but we're simple acacia wood on the inside, that's when we get ourselves into trouble.

The sin of the Facebook person, is that they believe that the gold they show to the world on the outside is really who they are on the inside. And that it is why it is impossible for the Harvey Weinstains of the world to properly love another because it is *always* about them, their power and their glory and what they need and what they want.

There was once a wealthy businessman in Florida - a religious Christian. And he decided to rent Billboards all over the state spreading religious messages that he believed in. He wrote them as if they were messages from God. Some of them were comical: "If you think it's hot here, keep sinning and I'll show you hot." Or, "I heard your prayer, I just don't care who wins the ball game." And each one was signed - God. But, one in particular has really stuck with me. The Billboard read: "If only you could see you the way I see you. Signed - God."

"If only you could see you the way I see you." In a sense that is what we have come here today to do, not to show others what we are wearing, but look and see inside – inside of ourselves and inside each other. To appreciate the gold that is on the inside of each and every one of us. We have come here today to love, ourselves, and each other.

Jewish love is the opposite of Facebook "likes" – it is the inverse of the "selfie." It is not about seeing yourself and your needs in another – but seeing the inherent beauty that is the other--your lover or your neighbor. In Facebook world, we want to be told, we need to be told, that we are beautiful. Jewish love, holy love is about the need to tell someone else that they are beautiful.

And because you are my congregants, and I love you, I want to tell you that you are more beautiful than you think. The High Holy Days calls on us to try and see ourselves, and each other, as God sees us. So in that spirit, let me tell you what I am looking at this very moment.

As I look out on this room, I see teachers and students; I see people who are such loving parents, and I see people who have lost their parents, I see parents who have lost their children, and I see adult children who are struggling to care for their aging parents. I see doctors and lawyers, professors and professionals, educators, executives, and engineers, musicians and mechanics. I see mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, I see friends. I see people who are great speakers and people who are even better listeners. I see people who are beautiful inside and out. Broken but beautiful, all of us. "If only you could see yourselves the way I see you." That is what God is saying to each of us today.

So this year, I'm adding some lines to the litany of *al hets*: "For the sin we have committed against You for comparing our insides to other people's outsides For the sin we have committed against You by bragging about our perfectly curated lives on Facebook when secretly we're Googling about everything that pains us. And for the sin we have committed against You by not appreciating and giving sufficient gratitude for the inherent beauty You have given each of us. For the sin we have committed by equating love with what we get instead of what we have to give. For the sin of having sex without loving and loving without caring."

Be honest with yourself, but be kind to yourself too. Stop trying to be someone you're not. You're beautiful just the way you are. You deserve to be loved, just the way you are. You're beautiful each and every one of you because you were fashioned by God. You are beautiful inside and out. And I love you, we love you, just the way you are.

At this hour of Yizkor, as we gather to remember those no longer among the living. Let's extend to them the same kindness of not judging them for what they were not but loving them for who they were. For each and every one of them were also worthy of our love. We need to see them as we want God to see us – as flawed but worthy and beautiful people.

Modern Love --Modern Loss

The truth is there is no modern love and there is no modern loss – there is only love and loss.

Maybe it is time to embrace these traditions which too many have too easily cast aside. Shiva, and *kaddish – hupah and kidushin*. When you stand to say *kaddish* for someone you loved, when you share a cup of wine under the hupah – you are doing so much more than honoring an old tradition – you are affirming a sacred concept of love – you are internalizing what it truly means to love and to lose someone you loved –

Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh – Holy, Holy, Holy –

God is Holy

Love is holy

Loss is holy

You are holy.

And it is time we treated them so. That is what I promise to do...YouToo?!