

The Velveteen Shul
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Shir Tikvah Congregation
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There is a wonderful children's book that I treasure. Some of you may know it: **The Velveteen Rabbit** by Margery Williams. It is a remarkable story of a boy who is given a stuffed rabbit by his Nana. The rabbit becomes the young boy's favorite toy and he loves him to the point of rubbing his fur off; the boy's love is so fierce, so wonderful, he believes the rabbit to be real.

When the young boy becomes sick with Scarlet Fever, the doctor orders his bedroom to be disinfected and all his toys burned—including the rabbit. But through the boy's deep and intense love, the toy rabbit weeps real tears, is met by a fairy, and becomes real.

In a breathtaking and tender moment, the story breathes into the intersection of reality and fantasy, about what it means to be real.

“Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real, you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”
Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*.

One of my favorite Midrashim (Rabbinic Legends) occurs in the Sefer Sh'mot, the Book of Exodus, when Moses smashes the first set of 10 Commandments. You know this story, right? God calls Moses up the mountain and the people—out of agony or fear of abandonment or lack of faith or boredom or defiance—build a Golden Calf while God and Moses are rendezvous-ing at Sinai. Moses schleps down the mountain, sees the calf, and smashes the tablets in a moment of rage.

We know that the Eternal and Moses calm down; Moses returns to receive a second set of 10 commandments—who says there are no “do overs”?—and the people keep going.

But what happened to that first set of tablets? The rabbis teach that the people gathered up the broken shards and gently placed them into the ark, to be carried on the journey forward, as our ancestors moved from narrowness in Egypt to the great expanse of freedom and promise.

They carried the broken along side the whole, the sharp edges next to the smooth tablets, throughout their desert sojourn.

A few days ago, we began the month of Elul and 40 days moving towards Yom Kippur, the pinnacle of *t'shuvah*, of getting spiritually unstuck and awakening to the deep potential inside us and the world around us. Jewish tradition calls upon us to always be real, to be open to transformation and healing, especially now.

What is the connection between being “real,” carrying our broken pieces with us, and *t'shuvah*?

Ahavah m'kalelet et hashurah, the Midrash teaches. Real love changes everything.

Real love invites us to open our hearts and to be vulnerable; to see that when others are suffering, we have to wake up to their pain and do what we can to make it right.

Real love, the love that leaves us a bit shabby and our joints aching, but allows us to move forward, to be more empathic and more beautiful and more fully human, it demands honesty and vulnerability. It means we look at Ferguson and we bear witness to the very real suffering of our brothers and sisters of color.

Real love, growing in our compassion, doing the work of t'shuvah, means looking at Israel and at the Palestinian Authority and Gaza and acknowledging the danger of a single story, that we can love our people and weep for innocents dead; that we need not be stuck in the old camps of Pro-Israel or Pro-Palestinian but all join together in the holy work of being Pro-Solution.

Real love, means having the compassion for our own hearts and our own lives to acknowledge our grief and our strength, to choose in the words of Jewish tradition, life and freedom and the possibility to grow into our best, most holy selves.

Real love like the Velveteen Rabbit invites us to do the work of t'shuvah, get ourselves unstuck, and moving towards living with more compassion, more peace, more empathy.

Tonight, this first Shabbat of Elul, is a Shabbes for all of us who are real: whose fur is a little rubbed off and whose joints ache a bit and who look in the mirror and simultaneously amazed and startled by who is looking back; those who carry broken pieces along side whole; we who gather together in the quiet of this hour, as the sun kisses the horizon, our sacred purpose as a Jewish people is to grab the light, "because once you are Real, you can't be ugly."

Shabbat Shalom.