



Shabbat Mishpatim 5777

Dear Shir Tikvah:

We are living in a moment of history—in part because of the ease and access to social media—to easily and rapidly dehumanize people we disagree with; to feel hatred for them.

Being on the receiving end of such vilification is familiar; we know how to cry for justice, to speak for the underdog, to protect the vulnerable—indeed, these are our religious mandates handed down in Torah. “*V’ahavta l’reiy’cha kamocho*—Love your neighbor as yourself,” God proclaims, “Love the stranger, the immigrant, the widow, the orphan.” Indeed, since the founding of our people millennia ago, we’ve stood with the most vulnerable.

Thank God!

But, all too often, we don’t see ourselves as powerful, as people with agency, who can cause pain, who vilify those we disagree with, who perpetrate suffering.

That look inward is agonizing, challenging, difficult spiritual work.

As we finished our second cohort of **Beloved Conversations: Meditations on Race and Racial Justice**, we were invited not only to see those who are suffering in our midst, but to consider deeply the ways in which we—often unintentionally and unknowingly—cause harm, perpetuate injustice, and benefit from racism.

This was some of the hardest and holiest work I’ve ever had the privilege of doing! Why? Because once we are aware of how we move in and through the world, how we unconsciously perpetuate and participate in racist behavior and systems, we have the power to change, to be an instrument of *tikkun*—of healing and justice. We were invited to reflect on who we are and ask ourselves deeply spiritual and theological questions:

Am I living in concert with my values?

Am I treating others how I want to be treated?

Am I taking responsibility for my actions?

Why am I compassionate towards some people but find it hard to be compassionate towards others?

Am I living up to the mitzvah—the commandment—to love my neighbor?

In world that is so divided, it is easy—too easy—to disregard those we disagree with; especially those public leaders who promote and institute policies that attack the core of our Jewish moral conscience—the vulnerable, the immigrant, the sick, the elderly.

It seems to me one of our great moral and spiritual tasks is to practice lifting our voices for justice, challenge mean spirited policies, and still—as hard as it can be—see people we fundamentally disagree with as human and worthy of dignity. Even when we disagree with virtually everything they promote.

Not just for their sake. For ours.

Hatred infects every cell in our body; it weakens our will, damages our spirit, and ultimately, kills our souls.

But love? When love fills our hearts, our bodies, and our souls, we are energized and committed to do this painful, holy, imperative work of *tikkun*—repairing what is broken around us. Love is harder because love demands all of us. We are implicated in love for self and the Divine and our community.

But love—not the sappy kind with bad chocolate—but the enduring, hopeful, determined love of a people who were once slaves but found the faith to endure the desert and strive for a land of promise and joy, who never gave up on one another, this love is an eternal gift. This love is the daily commitment to rise up in the face of intolerance and injustice to recreate the world.

Painful, yet so holy. Always, always choose love.

Shabbat Shalom,

Michael