

EKEV AUGUST 2019

I don't know how many people remember or have watched the 1970 film Love Story with Ryan O'Neal and Ali McGraw. It would have come out just after Joe and Marion got married and it generated one of the most popular catchphrases of the 1970s – Love means never having to say you're sorry. It's spoken twice - once by Ali McGraw after Ryan O'Neal has apologised for being angry, and once by Ryan after his father says he's sorry after – spoiler alert – learning that Ali McGraw has died. It's a tearjerker!

I think the film was trying to say something about not having any regrets and about the nature of love being that you are already forgiven in advance of any wrongdoing.

The thing is though that because of the tragic story, the two lovers in the film are always young, they're always newly weds. We don't get to see how they might have fared in middle age after 20, 30, 40 years of marriage. Now I am sure that Joe and Marion have never, in 50 years, had a serious argument, or upset each other in any way!

But for those of us in less perfect marriages, it seems to me that saying sorry might be one of the most important things you do. And hearing that someone is sorry and then forgiving them, might also be one of the most significant things we can do to sustain a long and loving relationship.

The relationship between the Jewish people and God is often described as a marriage, with the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai as the wedding day. One of the reasons God is so angry with the Israelites after they worshipped a golden calf, as we just read, is that they were not just being unfaithful, but unfaithful straight after the wedding!

Towards the end of this week's parsha, beyond the section we read, Moses says, you will win all your battles, if you love God, walk in God's ways and hold fast to God. The word for hold fast, or to cleave to or cling to, is *davka*, which is also the word to describe the act of marriage in Genesis, when it says a man will leave his parents and cling to his wife and they become one flesh – it's a very intimate term.

In the Talmud however, the Rabbis say is it possible to cling to God in this way? It's better to cling to God's qualities. Just as God is compassionate, so you should be compassionate.

Of course in the early years of a marriage, at the point of leaving your parents home and setting up home together, it can feel like we are becoming one flesh, clinging together in passion. But how do you sustain that over a lifetime, over 50 years and beyond?

One of the first leaders of the Chasidic movement in the 18th century, the Maggid of Mezritch, agreed it was impossible to stay in a state of ecstasy either in relationship to God, or in relationship to each other.

As he put it, the flames of a fire have to reach up and down. The point is not to be passionate, but to be compassionate. What does it mean to walk in God's ways and to hold fast to God – it means to be compassionate, to everyone, but particularly to the person with whom you share your life. It is only through human agency that compassion can have any effect in this world.

We are in the seven week run-up to the High Holy Days and one of the motifs we will sing again and again is – Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum ve'Chanun – God of compassion and grace. It is a list of the 13 attributes of God – but of course what we are really talking about is the attributes that we are capable of if we live with consciousness, if we take care of each other, if we live in respectful loving relationships. Compassionate, patient, kind, faithful, loving, forgiving each other when we get it wrong.

And behaving with love and compassion doesn't just heal relationships, it can heal the world. Two weeks ago at Tisha B'Av we imagined that the relationship between us and God had broken down, but now in the seven weeks of consolation that run up to Rosh Hashanah, now is a time of cosmic healing.

We are all in relationship whether or not we have a partner. We have relationships with our family, with our friends, with our community, with our neighbours, with the wider world.

And the question for all of us in any kind of relationship is – what do I have to offer? What is my personal contribution to this marriage, what do I have to offer to my friends, to my community, to those I love, to the world? I offer this question as something you might want to contemplate over the next few weeks as a way of preparing for the High Holy Days – What do I have to offer in this relationship?

I officiated at Kol Chai wedding a few weeks ago. Two people starting out together, in the earliest stages of their relationship, and in the address I quoted the Baal Shem Tov, the teacher of the Maggid of Mezritch, who said:

From every human being there rises a light that reaches straight to heaven. And when two souls that are destined to be together find each other, their streams of light flow together, and a single brighter light goes forth from their united being.

And I would add – that when two people have lived a long life together, raised children and grandchildren, and engaged with a community, then that light is even stronger and brighter. And if we all bring our streams of light together, we can light up the world.

Ken Yehi Ratzon