

April, 2021

Love Your Neighbor: God's Ultimate Challenge?

At the very center of Torah (Pentateuch), in chapter 19:18 of the book of Leviticus, we find the instruction that Jesus said was the most important of all: "to love your neighbor as yourself." This commandment is an integral part of the regimen of holiness to which both Jews and Christians are called: to not take vengeance, to treat strangers and the needy well, to observe the Sabbath, and to perform dozens of other acts of justice and kindness. These moral laws of Leviticus implore us to engage in love that is more than a feeling. They call for just, humane and sensitive treatment of others. Living in respectful relationship to all who are all created in the Divine image is the most vital connection to the God who we love with all of one's heart, soul and might (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

Who are the neighbors we are commanded to love? Are they those in close proximity who look like us, act like us, believe like us? Are they people in our actual neighborhood, people at work, people who live in the same city or nation? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel has emphasized that loving one's neighbor is unconditional. We are challenged to love our neighbor irrespective of what one earns, how one looks, whether the person is warm or aloof, a corporate titan or a common laborer.

What sort of love are we talking about? Love comes in different varieties. We love our friends, our partners, our parents, our children differently. Pope Benedict XVI beautifully defined love in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, where he writes, "To love someone is to desire that person's good and to take effective steps to secure it" (CV 7). He goes on to say that to love someone is to will their good and to act in a way that actually brings it about.

What does it mean to love someone "as yourself"? It is necessary to recognize the dignity and humanity of our neighbor in the same way that we ourselves want to be acknowledged. We can see the Divine in the face of another just because we are fellow human beings.

Lip service is constantly paid to this commandment. It turns out that fulfilling this commandment is much more difficult than it appears. History has proven that loving your neighbor often succumbs to hatred of others who are not consistently in alignment with who we are, how we look and what we believe. This hatred has been expressed in ideas of superiority that can lead to persecution and even violence against a fellow human being. It seems so easy to forget that we are supposed to treat others with respect and dignity.

Loving your neighbor may be God's ultimate challenge to humanity. Spreading compassion and sharing kindness with strangers as well as with friends appears to be a constant struggle. In American society today, we are challenged with racism of many types, along with antisemitism, islamophobia, and homophobia. The path to peace and harmony may be filled with hurdles to overcome, but we cannot and must not give up on what God expects humanity to someday achieve.

Holocaust Memorial Day—Yom Hashoah

Beginning at sundown today, Jewish communities around the world remember the six million innocent Jewish children, women, and men who were systematically murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust. Also honored on this day of remembrance are those who survived the Holocaust and those who risked their lives to save others during this dark time in human history.

The Holocaust was the largest manifestation of antisemitism in recent history. Yom Hashoah (Hebrew that literally means the day of the catastrophe) reminds the world of the horrors that Jews and other persecuted groups faced: forced labor, starvation, humiliation and torture, which often resulted in death. It was a systematic effort to wipe out an entire population from the face of the earth.

The contempt for the Jewish people was ingrained in Christian teachings for many centuries. It was after the Holocaust that the Catholic Church recognized that these teachings may have influenced the attitude of Christians toward the Jewish people leading to the murder of two-thirds of the Jewish population of Europe. Pope John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council and included a reexamination of the relationship to the Church to the Jewish people and other non-Christian faiths. His views on equality were summed up in his statement, "We were all made in God's image, and thus, we are all Godly alike." A ground-breaking document, *Nostra Aetate*, was published in 1965. It not only repudiated antisemitism but also stated that Catholics would no longer hold the Jews collectively responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.

If Jesus, who was born and died a Jew, is the Christian model of love and holiness, how was it possible for many of Jesus' faithful to denigrate and destroy Jesus' Jewish people? On this day of remembrance, we must be sure to honor the Righteous Gentiles who put themselves at risk to save their Jewish neighbors during the Holocaust. It is important to continue recognize when we have missed the mark to care about others as we would like to be cared about. If each of us loves a little better today than we did yesterday, we can come closer to achieving what God has intended for humankind and not repeat past mistakes.

You are invited to attend
Milwaukee's Yom Hashoah Online Commemoration

Sunday, April 11
3:00-4:00 p.m.

Featured Special Guest: Dr. Alfred Munzer

Dr. Munzer spent the first four years of his life hidden from the Nazi occupiers with an Indonesian family residing in The Hague, Netherlands.

For more information and to register, click here

<https://www.milwaukeejewish.org/news-media/calendar/#event=64643754;instance=20210411150000>

Recommended Films to Watch about the Holocaust

- 1. The Return of the Violin** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HF_YsEd-0g
The film tells the story of a 1731 Stradivarius that was stolen in 1936 and was rediscovered in 1985. It was purchased by American virtuoso Joshua Bell who plays it during his concerts.
- 2. Into the Arms of Strangers: Story of the Kindertransport**—Streaming on Prime Video or can be rented on youtube.com
Documentary film about the rescue of 10,000 Jewish children from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia who were taken into foster homes in Great Britain. Most of them never saw their parents again.
- 3. Defiance**—Streaming on Netflix and Prime Video or rent on youtube.com.
In this action-packed drama based on an extraordinary true story, four brothers protect more than 1,000 Jewish refugees during WWII.
- 4. The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler**-- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rINpk-aFd7o>
Also streaming on Netflix, Prime Video, DIRECT TV, Apple TV
The story of a Polish Catholic social worker who was part of the Polish underground during WWII and smuggled 2,500 Jewish children out of the Warsaw ghetto.

Pope Francis and the President of Israel: Words of Harmony and Peace

An article in the April 2nd edition of the Jerusalem Post reports on a letter sent to Pope Francis by Israel's President Reuven Rivlin on Good Friday. In addition to greetings for the holy days of Easter, Rivlin notes that the unfortunate circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic caused this year's Easter celebration in Jerusalem to be limited to only a small group of worshippers.

On a different note, Rivlin emphasized that the pandemic does not differentiate between the artificial borders between countries and also holds significance between faiths "of

cooperation, of the values of brotherhood, humanity, mutual trust and help.” He noted that all residents of Israel—Jewish, Christian or Muslim—had the chance to be vaccinated.

Rivlin mentioned the Abraham Accords that aim to normalize relations between the Arab Gulf states and Israel bring hope for peace to the Middle East. He also expressed the hope that “our Palestinian neighbors would seize this unique opportunity as well”.

Pope Francis also had sent greetings to Reuven Rivlin last month as he passed through Israeli airspace on his Apostolic journey to Iraq. “Praying that almighty God will bless you all with His gift of harmony and peace. Franciscus Papa.”

Rivlin responded to these warm greetings with these words “May the gift of G-d for harmony and peace will reach all. And finally, as my term as president comes to an end soon, I hope we will have an opportunity to meet once again to reiterate my commitment to the connections of Israel and the Holy See to the freedom of religion in the Holy Land and to the advancement of the Land of Monasteries project. Please accept, Your Holiness, the assurance of my highest considerations.”

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