

A Politics of Love

An Excerpt from the forthcoming edition of the bestselling book *The Mystery of Love* by Dr. Marc Gafni

Our community, our polis, has lost its soul. Polis is the word for city. Metro-polis means the mother city. This in Christendom meant the cathedral city where the Archbishop anchored the spirit for the people. Politics needs to be rooted in soul. Because tragically the marriage of soul and politics was corrupt for most of the 1700 years of papal power – we have needed to fully separate church and state. Yet even while insisting on the legal separation of organized religion from state power, we must seek to re-integrate soul into politics.

Said simply, we must seek a politics of love. We cannot be lovers if we live in a world where 35,000 people* die every day of hunger or hunger related diseases. We must realize that for all their glory – both politics and science have failed us. They have certainly not produced the best of all possible worlds.

Instead of our world being guided by lovers, as Naomi Klein documents in her important work *No Logo*, it is largely driven by a small group of multinational corporations. Most corporations are, in the final analysis, run by men and women who have internalized a psychology of fear. The corporations intentionally decide to play off human fear and insecurity rather than speak to human generosity and goodness. The underlying dynamic driving the corporate chieftains is the terror of being vulnerable to hurt. The way to overcome vulnerability is to accumulate as much power as possible. Power means “buying power”. This is what allows those driven by fear to feel protected from the vagaries of life. Moreover buying power provides an illusion of value. Everyone wants their lives to matter. Not being sure how to achieve such a life, many people fall back on monetary valuation to give their lives worth.

Corporate Kindness

Yet, corporations in the end are made up of real people, and real people all have the potential to be lovers.

The following is an excerpt from an acceptance speech made by Howard Schultz, the chairman and chief global strategist of Starbucks.¹

When I was in Israel, I went to Mea Shearim, the ultra-Orthodox area within Jerusalem. Along with a group of businessmen I was with, I had the opportunity to have an audience with Rabbi Finkel, the head of a yeshiva there. I had never heard of him and didn't know anything about him. We went into his study and waited ten to 15 minutes for him. Finally, the doors opened.

¹ Through CARE and the Starbucks Foundation, the company works to give back to the communities in which it does business. Schultz received the Columbia Business School's Botwinick Prize in Business Ethics last September.

What we did not know was that Rabbi Finkel was severely afflicted with Parkinson's disease. He sat down at the head of the table, and, naturally, our inclination was to look away. We didn't want to embarrass him.

We were all looking away, and we heard this big bang on the table: "Gentlemen, look at me, and look at me right now." Now his speech affliction was worse than his physical shaking. It was really hard to listen to him and watch him. He said, "I have only a few minutes for you because I know you're all busy American businessmen." You know, just a little dig there.

Then he asked, "Who can tell me what the lesson of the Holocaust is?" He called on one guy, who didn't know what to do-it was like being called on in the fifth grade without the answer. And the guy says something benign like, "We will never, ever forget." And the rabbi completely dismisses him. I felt terrible for the guy until I realized the rabbi was getting ready to call on someone else. All of us were sort of under the table, looking away-you know, please, not me. He did not call me. I was sweating. He called on another guy, who had such a fantastic answer: "We will never, ever again be a victim or bystander." The rabbi said, "You guys just don't get it. Okay, gentlemen, let me tell you the essence of the human spirit. As you know, during the Holocaust, the people were transported in the worst possible, inhumane way by railcar. They thought they were going to a work camp. We all know they were going to a death camp.

"After hours and hours in this inhumane corral with no light, no bathroom, cold, they arrived at the camps. The doors were swung wide open, and they were blinded by the light. Men were separated from women, mothers from daughters, fathers from sons. They went off to the bunkers to sleep.

"As they went into the area to sleep, only one person was given a blanket for every six. The person who received the blanket, when he went to bed, had to decide, 'Am I going to push the blanket to the five other people who did not get one, or am I going to pull it toward myself to stay warm?'"

And Rabbi Finkel says, "It was during this defining moment that we learned the power of the human spirit, because we pushed the blanket to five others."

And with that, he stood up and said, "Take your blanket. Take it back to America and push it to five other people.

As our birthdays roll around, year after year, the accumulation of wealth and power seems more and more vapid and ridiculous. At each birthday, we ask with more urgency, "Did my last year have any lasting significance? Did I push my blanket to five people? Have I made progress in the search for a life that matters? Did I make a difference? Did I give something of important to the world? Was I a lover?"

On Baseball and Life's Other Great Questions

My uncle used to tell this story every year at his birthday celebration.

There were once two best friends who loved baseball. Their great theological question in life was whether there is baseball in heaven. So they make a pact that whoever passes away first will come back and tell the other whether there is baseball in heaven! Well one passed away and sure enough, true to their pact, appears to his friend in a dream several days later.

“Well,” asks the surviving friend, “tell me already – is it good news or bad news?”

“Truth is,” comes the response, “it is both good news and bad news.”

“Well what’s the good news?”

“The good news is there is most certainly baseball in heaven. Not only that but there’s the finest diamond you could imagine. Moreover all the greats are here. DiMaggio, Ruth, Cobb...and we get to play with them. Every day you look and you see what teams are up for the next week.”

His friend is overwhelmed with the good news. “That is fabulous!” he responds. “After all that, what could the bad news possibly be?”

“Well, I just looked at the lineup...and tomorrow...you’re up to bat.”

As long as we think we will live forever, we can afford to ignore ultimate issues. But once the simple truth that we are all “up to bat tomorrow” is internalized, then the search for meaning becomes a central concern.

Of course, there are appropriately many different answers as to what constitutes meaning. What is absolutely intriguing, though, is that all of the great systems of spirit viewed some form of significant giving beyond the circle of family as being essential to a life well lived!

You cannot be a lover without being committed to the growth of a community beyond your own circle.

Circles of Caring, Circles of Influence

The major reason that we stop giving and loving beyond our circle of protection is that it hurts too much. We know that if we open our hearts, they will all too often get trampled and trashed.

We basically feel powerless. We feel that we cannot really change anything. Once that belief is internalized, a self-protective mechanism kicks in. We cannot tolerate a situation in which our circle of caring is far larger than our circle of influence. When we feel that our ability to experience hurt is far greater than our ability alleviate the pain, we simply turn off. The dissonance becomes too great to bear. The gap between our perceived ability to hurt and help is simply too wide to traverse. So we narrow our circles of caring to only those we feel we have the ability to help. But to do so, especially in a world where graphic images of pain invade our living daily, we need to shut down our hearts.

One modern master who died not more than ten years ago tried to bridge that gap. The master, referred to in popular culture as the Rebbe of Lubavitch, was an activist mystic who spent his life praying and actively trying to initiate a messianic age. His motivation was pure and simple. Love! He felt profoundly

the searing pain of world suffering. As a great lover, he simply could not bear this pain and longed with great passion to gift all who suffered with love and healing.

Towards the end of his life he send shock waves throughout the ranks of his disciples, among whom I count myself, when he issued the following terse statement:

'I have done all I can to bring the Messiah (read; to mystically heal the cosmos and end suffering). I can do no more. Now it is up to you. If ten of you, three of you, or even one of you- will demand redemption from the Universe— radically with no reprieve – If you will cry out “Ad Matai” - “ Until When!?” - then surely the messiah will come....”²

The master was saying that powerlessness corrupts. We need to know that each of us by ourselves, and even more powerfully as a community, can make a difference for love.

The Genesis Festival – I will not be inscribed without You!

In the hills of Galilee in Israel today, I am engaged with our Holy Band in nurturing the seedlings of a new activist mystical movement. We call it Bayit Chadash. Together with wonderful partners, students, friends and teachers we are trying to reclaim the holy impulse of Hebrew Mysticism and social activism. We are radically under-funded and understaffed – often to the point of absurdity. Yet we hold to the belief that a future vision of Hebrew thought needs to be re-born from the same hills which birthed the Zohar and Lurianic Kabbalah. We realize how truly silly it is that common folks like us should set to this task but in the words of the ancient Talmudic sages, “In a place where there is Nobody, try and be Somebody.”

Over the last several years, as the Rosh Bayit, (somewhat of a cross between the President of a College and leader of an Ashram, minus the salary of the first and Guru implications of the second) I have been invited by my friend and fellow traveler Roni to do the opening ceremony of what is called The Genesis Festival. It is a wondrous gathering of some 25,000 people which takes place at the time of the Hebrew New Year It takes place in Megiddo, no less than the New Testament sight of Armegeddon. In the opening circle several years ago we started a custom of having one hundred shofarot (ram horns) blown together with 360 drummers to bid farewell to the past as we usher in the future. In the middle of this all, I give a short Darshan talk, which is always the same.

“On the New Year, our tradition teaches that those who merit it are inscribed in the book of life. At this moment, the universe is judging who will live and who will die. Here at the Genesis festival of love, we will not allow God or his angels that choice. We will not allow judgment to separate us from each other. So I ask each one of you – we number tens of thousand of holy souls- each one of you, turn to the person next to you and say - ‘I refuse to be written in the book of life....without you!’”

² I have interpolated into my reading a particular reading of Lubavitch mystical thought which is well rooted in the primary sources of Chabad. I hope –together with my study partner Avraham Leader – to publish a detailed monograph on Messianism in Lubavitch. It will be our contention that the Historian David Berger who has so vociferously attacked the theological integrity of chabad mysticism has (honestly) misunderstood the mystical sources of Lubavitch and particularly their place in the broader context of Chassidic thought and messianic agitation.

Thousands of people turn, and with pure love flowing from open hearts, they embrace the person next to them, and we all say together, "I REFUSE to be inscribed in the book of life, without you."

Such is the gift of loving and the erotic power of holy polis: Eros and Zohar – the feeling of being on the inside of love, intense yearning, radical fullness and deep interconnectivity between souls. In this moment, I feel like we are in the Temple, in the inner sanctum of the Holy of Holies. It is worth being born just to experience these minutes. These people of the festivals and of Bayit Chadash give me great hope. They are the best in all of us. They remind me that we can transform our world into something more!

The Possibility of Possibility

We need a politics of love! We need to know that it is possible. We are taught that what human beings want is money and power. Anyone in close contact with people knows this not to be true. Human beings want to live in a world based on love and caring, awe and radical amazement. Everyone knows that having more is not being more.

The great credo of faith for religion today is not dogmatic assertions about the metaphysical quality of divinity. Rather it is the belief that God is the power for love, healing and transformation in the universe. God is the belief in possibility. In fact it is the possibility of possibility that is affirmed by lovers everywhere, that ultimately love will win out and we will be able to create a better world. That there is a covenant not only between the human being and the divine, there is also a covenant between generations. Each generation commits itself to living so that we can show our children a way that is a little more loving, a little more caring.

This is possible because the underlying reality of the universe is relationship and interdependence and not loneliness and alienation. We are born into loving hands. Left alone, we would die. It takes a world of cruelty and greed driven by fear to produce a reality where so many people die alone.

It is possible, as Robert Kennedy reminded us in the sixties, to change the bottom line. Instead of a gross national product measured in purely economic terms, we could have a bottom line in which loving, human dignity, value and uniqueness were factored into the equation. A company which was highly profitable financially but insensitive to human dignity in measurable ways should not be given the same benefits or would be taxed at a higher rate!

We think this is absurd because we have internalized the pathologies of our generation. Erich Fromm and Victor Frankel have already reminded us that entire societies, including our own, can be profoundly imbalanced. We need to remember their teaching – otherwise, we will experience the pathologies of spirit of our generation as our personal failures. If we feel emptiness in the mad drive for success, it is not because we are neurotic, but because the success is an empty goal. If we feel powerless and frustrated, it is not because we are in need of treatment. Quite the opposite; it is because our societal norm needs treatment it is often a symbol of our sanity and inner balance that we have not succumbed to the superficial standard of valuation touted by our society

We must know that our deep desire to give – to be lovers – is the most profoundly normal human state of being. We cannot have a delusion of grandiosity for we are, in fact, grand. For the Kabbalists, the natural human condition is to feel wholly dissatisfied unless we feel we are meeting a cosmic need.

Teaches Renaissance mystic Meir Ibn Gabai, “Only the knowledge that our gift is needed – that the universe ‘needs our service’ can we touch fulfillment.” This is what it means to be a lover of God and man. It is our calling to embody love and giving in our lives.

We are God’s language in the polis. There is no split between politics and love. Love, Eros and politics are one! We understand that on the inside we are all interconnected. Politics is usually about protecting our rights, particularly our right to be separate. It needs to also be about obligation and love which, you may recall, are the same word in Hebrew. Both affirm the erotic interdependence of all life. We experience an intense yearning and desire to be of service in our communities. In that loving service, we experience the fullness of being.

Small Groups with Shared Vision

To move towards a politics of love you do not need to found a new political party or national social movement. You need just a small group of people with shared vision who are willing to stand together. As anthropologist Margaret Meade said so succinctly,

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Your political spiritual lovers should be chosen the same way you choose your spouse: shared visions and values.

Philosopher Maimonides, taking his cue from Aristotle, teaches that there are the three kinds of friendship communities. First, there are the pragmatic friends that help each other through life. Whether in carpool or the office or to round out a doubles game in tennis, these friends makes our lives more practically feasible. The second group, more psychological in nature, is empathetic community. It is a place to share your woes, sorrows, triumphs and victories. The third, and by far the highest kind of fellowship, is one based on shared vision and values. This is what philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel calls "a community of concern".

If you think that you are only a small band of committed students who can’t change the world, know that you are the only ones who can. It is the gift of commitment and love between holy Chevre that can bring healing where there would otherwise be only sickness, and life where there might otherwise be only death.

To Life, L’Chaim

A famous mystical tale told about the Seer of Lublin, mystical master from Eastern Europe of 150 years ago. Everybody knew that the holy seer could see from one end of the world to the other. For him, Past and future were transparent in the present moment. Well, one day Levi came to the Seer to be with him for the Holiday. However, as soon as he came in, the seer said to him, “I am sorry, Levi, but you cannot stay with me this holiday.”

“But why?” protested Levi. “I have come so far to be with you!”

“The angel of Death his around you, Levi. I see that you are destined to die this holiday. It would be better for you to go to one of the surrounding villages and die quietly there.”

You can imagine the shock and despair that overcame Levi. He had only one day to live. He took his belongings, and with tears streaming down his face, he began walking out of town towards his death. On the road, Levi saw a coach full of the Seer’s students traveling towards Lublin. They were singing with great joy, obviously on their way to the seer for the holiday. Spying him on the side of the road they stopped the coach and invited him in.

“Holy Friend!” they called out. “Jump in! The holiday is soon and you are walking the wrong way!”

Levi could barely talk and motioned them to continue. Being mystic initiates in the art of loving, they could not just leave him on the road, so they pressed him for an explanation of his strange behavior. Accordingly, Levi related to them what the Seer had told him and how he was going to die in a nearby village. The students glanced wordlessly at each other and then back at Levi.

Virtually in unison they responded, “The Seer is not always right. You do not have to die alone in a village. Come with us to Lublin; that way, if you do have to die, we can at least make you comfortable and help you in the crossing. Yes,” they insisted, “you must come with us, and let us rejoice in the holiday together.”

So Levi got in and they continue on towards Lublin. On the way, they passed a tavern, which prompted one of the students to say to Levi, “Since you will die tomorrow, surely you do not need your money. Why don’t you buy us all drinks at the tavern and we can have a pre-holiday celebration.” Levi agreed that this made sense and into the tavern they all piled.

They bought a great deal of good whiskey. Each time one of the students was to down a shot, he would first turn to Levi who was, after all, footing the bill and say, with great passion, “L’Chayim, Levi! Levi, To Life!”

What a time they had. They got higher and higher and soon Levi got caught up in it all. Each time a student would drink and cry out “Levi L’Chayim tovim aruchim – Levi, A Good and Long Live to You,” he would respond by downing another shot and returning the L’Chayim. Before long, tomorrow seemed eons away. Round after round the blessing of L’Chayim poured forth.

They lost track of time and arrived at the Seer’s Prayer service only minutes before the holiday, happy, more than a little inebriated, and deeply bonded. After the service, which was overflowing with people, Levi, unsteadily but respectfully, edged his way to the Seer to wish him a Good Holiday.

The seer smiled at him with great love and said, “Levi, the angel of death has left you! A master’s protection is not as powerful as the love filled blessings of L’Chayim that the students give to each other. So Levi,” he said, lifting his holiday wine glass, “Let me add my blessing to theirs, L’Chayim To life!”

You see, my sweetest readers and friends, it is when we come together in holy community, when we stand for life together against the forces of fear and greed, that we can indeed change the world.