

Margie Freeman's Sermonette Rosh Hashanah 2026

I read an article recently by Vanessa Berg that resonated with me called Judaism Knows Something About Love that Modern Culture Forgot.

We talk a lot about love, yet often treat it as an emotion, something we search for, measure, and abandon when we no longer “feel” it. Judaism offers a more demanding vision. It turns love into a practice.

As a couples therapist, I am often confronted with broken relationships. My mentor Terry Real, emphasizes that long-term relationships move endlessly from harmony to disharmony to repair and back to harmony. The repair piece is a crucial component. It is only when we know how to take accountability for our part in the disharmony that repair can happen.

Terry Real talks about the 3 phases of love: Loving and not knowing, Knowing but not loving, and knowing and loving. Falling in love is easy when someone is still mostly an idea, a fantasy. We see their beauty, kindness, and possibility before disappointment has had time to arrive. Eventually, however, every serious relationship reveals the same truth: the person you love is an imperfect person, and so are you.

Judaism's central relationship—between God and Israel reflects this reality. Israel enters into covenant, then repeatedly fails: building the Golden Calf, rebelling, wandering, and breaking commandments. The prophets describe the relationship with God through the metaphor of marriage, which includes episodes of betrayal, longing, and reconciliation. Yet the possibility of return remains. If Israel could never walk away, loyalty would be meaningless. If God abandoned Israel after the first failure, the covenant would be meaningless. Love requires freedom, and freedom creates risk.

The month of Elul, the month leading up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is traditionally a month of introspection, repentance, and preparation for judgment. Yet Jewish traditions also associate elul with the romantic biblical verse “Ani l'dodi v'dodi li” I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.” Berg points out that the first letters of those Hebrew words spell *Elul*. The month before judgment is framed as a month of love. At first love and judgment seem contradictory. Love accepts; judgment evaluates. Love comforts; judgment demands change. Judaism

recognizes that there is no meaningful love without accountability. We hold people accountable because they matter to us.

She also notes the importance of the order of the verse. First, “I am my beloved’s, and then my beloved is mine.” Modern relationships often begin by asking, “Does this person love me? Do they meet my needs? Elul begins by asking: “What am I giving? What kind of a partner, friend, or Jew am I?”

This brings us to *teshuva*, usually translated as “repentance,” but its Hebrew root means “return.” The message is not simply, “You failed.” It is “You wandered. Come back.” You hurt someone? Repair it and return. You became distracted or ungrateful? Return. Mistakes matter, but they do not have to get the final word. **Judaism asks us to** take accountability, apologize, ask for forgiveness.

Feelings matter, but they fluctuate. Love cannot survive forever as a noun. Eventually, it must become a verb. Love must become action: showing up, apologizing, forgiving, keeping promises, making time, and changing behavior. Judaism does not promise that relationships will never break. It asks what happens afterward. Can we take accountability, repair what we damaged, and return?

Love is not merely choosing someone. It is choosing responsibility, vulnerability, and renewal. It is being disappointed without becoming indifferent. It is leaving the door for return and reconciliation open—and having the courage to walk through it again.

May we all have the courage to walk through the door of repentance and seek renewal in our significant relationships with God and with each other.

L’shana tova! Wishing everyone a good, sweet, loving New Year!