

Rabbi Debra Cantor

REMARKS FOR 2019 CCIU “LOVE THY NEIGHBOR” DINNER

November 4, 2019 ~ Hartford, CT

I’m about to enter the school cafeteria, when I feel a tap on my shoulder. It’s Mrs. Lovett, a teacher at my school. She leans down and whispers conspiratorially into my ear: “Tell your father thank you; he spoke beautifully last night at the town meeting and we really appreciate it.”

I am 11 years old, a sixth-grader at Center School in the small town of Ellington, Connecticut. I have never had Mrs. Lovett as a teacher, but she is our neighbor; she lives down the street from us. And I quickly understand that my father has once again spoken up at a town meeting on behalf of the teachers. My father is not a teacher himself; he’s an engineer, but he deeply values the work of teachers and the importance of good public education. Louis Cantor is the sweetest man alive, with a big grin and easy-going personality. But he is passionate when it comes to the values he holds dear.

My father believes in the power of education, of lifelong learning. He believes that teachers should be paid fairly. He supports unions and workers’ rights. He can’t abide injustice. At town meetings, he gets angry when fellow citizens complain that they shouldn’t have to pay for schools if they don’t have children, or if their kids are already grown.

At home, he tells us that whether your own children are in school at any given moment is irrelevant; schools and teachers *need to be supported*. That is how we build a decent society, he says. That is what we do for one another. He tells us, no, he *shows* us, the importance of voting, of speaking up, even for unpopular causes when you know they are right. At town meetings, my sweet, affable father turns into a fiery orator.

V'ahavta l're-acha ka-mocha – “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” we are taught in the Book of Leviticus. For my father, may he rest in peace, that meant making sure his neighbor’s children had the kinds of opportunities he wanted for his own children; it meant fighting for fair wages for folks who worked hard; it meant ensuring there was a safety net for people when they needed it; it meant volunteering his time to the community.

The Hebrew word *v'ahavta* – “you shall love” – comes from the root word “hav,” meaning “to give.” An act of connection, of love, is linked to giving, to generosity of spirit. The medieval commentator Abraham ibn Ezra noted that, by contrast, the word for cruelty, *akhzar*, is based on the root, *zar*, stranger, “implying that cruelty grows when we make each other into strangers.”

Yet the commandment *V'ahavta l're-acha ka-mocha* – “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” takes us only so far. Which neighbors are we talking about? The family next door and across the street but not on the other side of town? The people who look like us? Or worship the same way? Are our neighbors only the ones who share our social class, or economic status? Are they only the people who were born here, or who come from the places we came here from? Are they only people who think like us, vote like us?

Think about it. Part of the power of the command to love your neighbor as yourself depends on how narrowly or broadly we define the term “neighbor.”

Nearly 2000 years ago, two rabbinic Sages debated about what was the most important verse in the Torah. Rabbi Akiva, the greatest Sage of his time, declared it was “Love your neighbor as yourself” from Leviticus. But another Sage, Shimon ben Azzai, disagreed. He argued that even more central was a verse from Genesis:

“*Zeh sefer toldot Adam...*This is the record of Adam’s line. When God created humans, God made them in the likeness of God...”

For Ben Azzai, what matters most is that we view our fellow human beings as having been created in the image of the One Creator. Each one of us - equally - reflects the Divine. If we accept this, if we truly take this teaching to heart, there is no possibility of our de-humanizing one another. For, if we do so, we diminish God.

When I was growing up, my father modeled for my brother and sister and me how to stand up for others and speak out for justice, to love our neighbors as ourselves. He treated everyone he encountered with warmth and respect. We were part of a tiny Jewish minority in our town; he taught us to honor and embrace others from diverse cultures and faiths. We have tried to live out my father's lessons in our adult lives, and to pass on his wisdom and values to our children.

My father died in 2001; I think about him all the time and wonder what he would make of these times in which we live, when hate is so flagrantly displayed, language weaponized and debased, and cruelty so often reflected in public policy. Surely, my father would not be silent. Surely, he would work to build a world of understanding, equity, connection and compassion.

As a rabbi, as my father's daughter, I can do no less.