

**Beth Chayim Chadashim
Los Angeles**

**Bat Mitzvah Drash - May 5th, 2001
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In 1970, when I was 12, I came home from yeshiva one day and told my mom that I wanted to have a bat mitzvah. That wasn't really an option in our shul; it was a traditional orthodox synagogue. But my mom went to bat for me. She spoke to the rabbi, who agreed to let me make a speech - in English - from below the bima. Now, I understood that this was a tremendous concession, but I also knew it wasn't the real thing, and I turned it down. I know my mom respected that decision; I think she was proud of it and, if she were alive today, I believe she'd be here.

As an adult, I've gone back and forth between BCC and a conservative shul in Lakewood where, until recently, women weren't permitted to read Torah or Haftorah. Even now, it's an issue there. I knew that women in some synagogues were becoming b'not mitzvah, and I thought about having my own but I never did anything about it. Then, after I came back to BCC a year and a half ago, I read in one of the seat bulletins that there would be a B'nei Mitzvah class offered here, and the desire came back all over again. I think it never really went away in the first place. I felt again the need to participate fully and equally in communal Jewish prayer, to know the joy of reading Torah and Haftorah from a place ON the bima. So I signed up for the class, and I imagined a bat mitzvah that would be the completion of an intense period of Jewish learning and deep personal and spiritual growth. Well, completion is a long way off, but in the process of becoming a bat mitzvah, I've not only learned to chant Torah and Haftorah, but also have been able to meet some personal objectives - things that the 12 year old me, who started all this, might have done intuitively but that the adult me has had to relearn.

Consequently, when it came time to choose my Torah portion for today, my eyes were drawn to the words "as thyself," kamoachah in Hebrew, from the verse "Hager hagar itchem...v'ahavta lo kamoachah - Love the stranger as thyself." So, this morning, I thought I'd focus on those two words - but without discounting the importance of the rest of the verse. As everyone else indicated last night and this morning, our Torah portion this Shabbat is filled with mitzvot that deal with compassion. There are, by my count, 26 such mitzvot in just thirty-seven verses.

Because of Judaism's emphasis on caring for others, when I first read the verse many years ago, "LOVE THE STRANGER," and ITS RELATED VERSE: "LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR," I hardly even noticed the words "as thyself." It's easy to overlook our own needs when so much of what we learn in Judaism is focused on the needs of others. Hillel, in the first century BCE told us not to do unto others what is hateful to us. The prophet Micah, seven centuries earlier, preached that we "must do justice and love goodness." Today, we admire someone whom we recognize as a "mensch," someone who treats others fairly, who can be trusted. And we focus our energies on Tikkun Olam - the concept of repairing the world. - -
- We can get lost in all that justice. But maybe if we look at "love the stranger, and neighbor, as thyself" as having a double message, it can help us balance our ethical values

with our own needs. These verses can remind us that we are worthy of our own compassion, and they can help us balance selflessness with self-nurturance.

It may be true that taking care of other people is one way of taking care of ourselves. As Rabbi David Cooper explains in his book *G-d Is a Verb*, the "benefit of giving equals the benefit of receiving." Loving ourselves is a natural outcome of loving others. By the same token, the more understanding we are of ourselves, the more considerate and sympathetic we can be towards others.

Still, I think that loving ourselves has to involve a more deliberate effort, and the requirement to consciously treat others in ways that are morally and spiritually right can apply to ourselves as well. How we apply it is probably different for each one of us. For me, it means acting and speaking in ways that reflect who I am, how I feel, and what I believe. This notion hit home for me the night my mother died twelve years ago. My brother called and told me it was time to come to New York; my mother was in the hospital and things weren't going well. Sandy, my partner, booked me a flight and drove me to the airport. It was a difficult flight. When I finally got to my mom's room, we shared a few quiet moments alone while the rest of the family sat talking. Soon visiting hours were over. I wanted to stay with my mom, but everyone else thought it would be better if I went home, got some sleep, and came back the next day. That wasn't what I wanted to do, and it wasn't what I knew was best for my mom and me. But I went home. That night, my mother died, and I learned the hard way that not being true to myself meant I couldn't be true to another. It's a lesson I'm still learning. Rabbi David Aaron, who wrote the book *Endless Light*, says that "loving [others] is impossible without a sense of self."

Every Yom Kippur, we recite a prayer called the *Al Chet*, in which we ask forgiveness for deeds and words which have hurt others. We feel remorse and vow to show more consideration, more "love" to others. I wonder how it would feel to recite an additional *Al Chet* - one that also asks forgiveness, but that implies a vow to treat ourselves well. *Al chet shechatanu l'fanechah* - for the sin which we have committed before You by judging ourselves too harshly. *Al chet shechatanu l'fanechah* - for the sin which we have committed before You by blaming ourselves for things that are not our fault or over which we have no control. *Al chet shechatanu l'fanechah* - for the sin which we have committed before You with acts of self-betrayal and not acting in our own self-interests when it was appropriate. *Al chet shechatanu l'fanechah* - for the sin which we have committed before You by placing stumbling blocks in our own paths. *V'al kulam, elohai s'lichot*, and for all these, G-d of Forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

This past Yom Kippur, Rabbi Edwards reminded us to treat ourselves "gently, forgivingly, and not exploitively," and Rabbi Naomi Levy, in *To Begin Again*, says that we have the "power to transform our lives, overcome our fears, realize our dreams, uncover our passions, and fulfill our highest potential." If we can have faith in our abilities and our choices, if we cherish our dreams and are willing to take risks to achieve them, if we accept the discoveries we make about ourselves while still reaching for higher planes, if we make time for pleasure and speak softly to our own souls, then we can truly perform the mitzvah of loving others as we do ourselves.

In closing, I would like to thank a few people. My mother, for having loved me

unconditionally and for having taught me values that I'm proud to live by. Rabbi Edwards for her gentle wisdom and guidance. Cantorial Soloist Fran Chalin and Bob Levy for their time, instruction, and words of encouragement. Davi, Bracha, Amanda, Lauren, Tanya, Sandi, and Sabina for kind words and mutual support. Family and friends who have come to celebrate with me today. Jan, who couldn't be here, for being a source of inspiration and courage. And, finally, Sandy, my partner of 16 ½ years, for sharing her life with me, for encouraging me always to live Jewishly, and for supporting me in doing that.

Shabbat shalom.