

Sanctifying the Senses 1:
“Let me be a seal upon your heart”
(Genesis 32:22-32; Song of Songs 8:1-7)

When I was a newlywed, I happily did the grocery shopping for my new husband. He liked yogurt with berries, so I'd bring home yogurt with blueberries, raspberries, boysenberries, black cherry. The first three he greatly appreciated, but it turns out that my husband doesn't like black cherry yogurt. Somehow, I kept forgetting that. Week after week, only the black cherry yogurts would remain untouched in the fridge. Finally, one day, after multiple gentle reminders, he tried something new. He reached for my hand and with a sharpie wrote on it, “No black cherry yogurt!” And you know what? I haven't bought a black cherry yogurt going on 29 years! That little inscription, long faded from my hand has not faded from my memory. Paradoxically, even the most evanescent touch can endure long beyond the moment.

I was reminded of this when I recently attended our nephew's wedding in Houston. He married an Indian woman whose family observed Jain traditions, so we were treated to the sounds, scents, colors and tastes of India. From a contingent representing the groom's village dancing our way into the wedding hall to the beat of a traditional drum to the riot of color of the gorgeous silk garments, it was a feast for the senses. But the sense that seemed most on display throughout the highly choreographed ritual was touch. First, the man who officiated tied a string around the bride's wrist and then around the groom's wrist, to symbolize protection during their married life. Then the bride's parents poured holy water onto the groom's hands with the bride's hands under his, so the water fell onto both of them. This ritual reflected the parents' trusting the groom with their daughter. Her parents then placed a hand woven cord in the shape of a figure eight—an infinity symbol—to unite the couple for eternity. Then the groom's sisters tied one end of his scarf to the corner of the bride's sari. A single thread of raw cotton is easily torn, but interweaving the strands strengthen it. So it is that the couple is stronger together. Looking at my nephew and his bride, literally tied together at their wrists, enwrapped in a cord between them and connected by a scarf, the union of the two of them was not just symbolic. They were bound. They were no longer individuals. They were the foundation for a new family. And even after

the string, cord and scarf were ritually undone, their new status was palpable. Touch endures long beyond the moment.

Whether in an Eastern religious ceremony or in our more familiar “Song of Songs” where the lover says, “Set me for a seal upon your heart. For I am with you until the end of time. Many waters cannot quench this love of ours,” how we touch tells a great deal about who we are. Our greatest intimacy takes place through touch. Our deepest violation can as well.

Three weeks ago, thousands of volunteers laid out a million handmade replicas of human bones on the National Mall in Washington, DC. This was not simply an art project. The bones represented mass graves. Laying them down was a call to action to end genocide at the most significant public space in America. The installation was the culmination of similar events, which occurred in 100 different cities around the nation. One Million Bones is the brainchild of artist, activist and educator Naomi Natale, who spent three years mobilizing artists from around the world and students at over 2000 schools to create bones out of clay, plaster and paper. Over 250,000 people in every state of the union and in over 30 countries crafted the bones, and through the work of their hands, learned about genocide and mass atrocities in countries such as Sudan, Somalia, the Congo and Burma and channeled their paralyzing feelings of despair into action and hope. Touch endures long beyond the moment.

If touch can awaken our awareness and teach us empathy on a grand scale, it can also do so on a local scale. Mierle Laderman Ukeles was already a well respected artist when she became a mother. As she walked down the streets of New York City pushing a baby carriage, she realized that as a mother, she had become invisible, a glorified maintenance worker. That identification led her to glorify maintenance workers. She created “Touch Sanitation”, a project in which she shook the hand of more than 8500 sanitation workers in the New York City and said, “Thank you for keeping New York City alive.” So appreciative that they were not only recognized, but touched, they proclaimed Ukeles the “artist in residence of the Sanitation department of the City of New York.”

The workers were responding to being touched because to be untouched can be dispiriting or even deadly. In too many cultures we refer to those with the lowest social status as “untouchables.” In my neighborhood growing up, a boy my age had familial dysautonomia, a disease of the autonomic nervous system. We kids knew that if he fell or got hit with a ball, it was our job to tell his

parents because he couldn't feel pain. Something that would be trivial in a healthy person could be life-threatening to him.

Babies who are not touched in their first days or weeks of life often have health problems. We call this "failure to thrive." Sometimes even with good nutrition and shelter, newborns can die without touch. Many hospitals, including Lucille Packard, have volunteer "Baby Cuddlers" who hold and calm premature newborns or babies who are ill. Hospitalized babies who are held frequently get better and are discharged sooner. Withholding touch can have permanent consequences. Touch endures long beyond the moment.

Rabbi Robert Kirschner once wrote about those our society doesn't want to touch, whether they be lepers or gay men in the early days of the AIDS epidemic. He reminded us, "God has no other hands than ours. If the sick are to be healed, it is our hands, not God's that will heal them. If the lonely and frightened are to be comforted, it is our embrace, not God's that will comfort them. The warmth of the sun travels on the air, but the warmth of God's love can travel only through each one of us."

In the Bible, Jacob learns how God's love can travel through touch when he wrestles with an angel. He is traveling with his large family and helps them cross the river Jabbok along with their copious possessions, but then, in the dark of night, Jacob is alone. He is about to encounter the brother whose blessing he stole. This is a time of settling accounts. This is a time of quiet before the dawn of a new encounter. But the encounter comes earlier than the morning light. A man appears and wrestles with him, a man whose identity is shrouded in uncertainty. Some see this moment is one where he wrestles with his conscience. Others identify his mysterious adversary as an angel of the Divine. The challenger changes Jacob's name, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human and have prevailed." This moment of touch transforms. It helps Jacob to know more fully who he is, to claim the name of one who struggles, one who limps, one who reaches out toward another.

How do we encounter the Divine? How do our confrontations with our conscience change us? How do we touch? How do we use our hands? To harm? To sanctify? To wrestle? To reassure? Are our hands God's hands? Do we keep them close in our pockets when we should be offering a helping hand? Do we cross our arms in a stance of protection or reach across a great divide toward another? Or do we offer an outstretched arm toward another in our daily lives, in our families, in our communities, in our country?

In the Talmud is a story about three rabbis and the choice and the meaning of reaching toward another.

Rabbi Hiyya fell ill and Rabbi Yochanan went in to visit him. Rabbi Yochanan asked,

“Are your sufferings welcome to you?”

Rabbi Hiyya replied: “Neither they nor their reward.”

Rabbi Yochanan said to him: “Give me your hand.”

Rabbi Hiyya gave him his hand and Rabbi Yochanan lifted him from his sickbed.

Then, Rabbi Yochanan, the healer fell ill. His friend, Rabbi Hanina went in to visit him and asked,

“Are your sufferings welcome to you?”

Rabbi Yochanan replied: “Neither they nor their reward.”

Rabbi Hanina said to him: “Give me your hand.”

Rabbi Yochanan gave him his hand and Rabbi Hanina lifted him from his sickbed.

Why did Rabbi Yochanan, the most accomplished healer of his time need another’s help? Because, they say, “A prisoner cannot free himself from jail.”

That outstretched hand beckons to each of us. Without the kindness of touch, without the connection of touch, without the reassurance of touch, we are all imprisoned. Whether for premature babies or stricken adults, whether for a couple committing to a life together or artists calling forth empathy, like Jacob coming to terms with his past, touch can heal. Touch can teach. Touch can transcend. Human beings need one another. No matter how accomplished, how confident, how experienced, how self-reliant we may be, an outstretched hand, a comforting hug, a soothing gesture reminds us that we have been fashioned in the image of the ultimate Creator, the One who formed us from the dust of the earth, the One who blew into our nostrils the breath of life, the One who made each of us a living being.

Earlier this week I visited the Getty Roman Villa in Malibu and saw ancient Greek and Roman figures on terracotta and on stone. Their hands reached out to clasp one another, their fingers nearly touching. One of the two figures depicted was alive, the other one, dead. This gesture, common on gravestones represents the family’s final farewell. For over twenty-five centuries, a gesture of touch has symbolized the border between the present and eternity.

“Set me for a seal upon your heart. For I am with you till the end of time. Many waters cannot quench this love of ours. Many waters cannot quench this love of ours.” As we remember and honor those who have cared for us with loving touch throughout our own lives, let us make of our hands God’s hands. Let us reach out toward one another in generosity and gentleness, in kindness and with strength. Let us sanctify our touch and keep sacred our connections. Let our touch endure long beyond our moment.