A TIME TO EMBRACE
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I hugged my parents for the first time today in 19 months.

We have driven down to California after dropping our children at Jewish summer camp in Washington State. One of the many advantages of now being dual citizens is that we can drive across the US border on our US Passports and return to Canada in a few weeks on our Canadian passports.

My parents live in the SF Bay Area, Sharon's in Los Angeles, we will see them G-d willing next shabbes.

I have known for weeks that my sermon tonight, delivered as it is from my parent's guest bedroom would be about that first hug; I have thought of nothing else for nearly a month.

What I didn't know was how it would feel and what I would say about it after it happened.

These are those thoughts

King Solomon, the wisest of all men, long ago taught us in the book of Ecclesiastes (The Birds set to music in the 1960s) that there is "A time to embrace and a time to cease from embracing" (Ecclesiastes 3:5). The sequence is significant. There may be good cause at times to cease from embracing. Surely a plague is one of them. But we must never forget that human contact is an ideal – an ideal which for many has tragically been all too often unattainable during the past year and half during this pandemic.

Among the many images that will stay with me probably the rest of my life as I reflect and eventually retell the story of this pandemic to the next generation will be those of grandparents waving to their children and grandchildren from behind glass windows in long term care facilities or through patio doors. They each desperately want to hold each other, to wrap them in their arms and let the other know they love, they care, it will be ok. But they cannot, glass separates them, a virus endangers them, so they wave, or talk – but painfully they cannot touch and something profound is unable to be fully expressed without it.

No matter how often I saw my parents on zoom nothing can replace the physical connection of a hug.

Rabbi Yosef Jacobson is a world-renowned scholar of Kabbalah or Jewish Mysticism and I turned to his writings this week to try to understand why a hug is more powerful than words, or a kiss or a longing look into the eyes of another.

In teaching about the spirituality of a hug he explains that there are four universally accepted forms of expressing love to another human being.

The first is, through words of affection. The three simple words "I love you," when uttered sincerely, may have a transforming impact on people's lives. Words have always served as the basic tools for expressing our inner emotive experiences.

A second, more powerful expression of love is a kiss. A genuine kiss contains an extraordinary energy and serves as the medium for communicating a deeply intense feeling that may not be grasped in words. Words can state, "I love you," while a kiss declares, "I love you more then I will ever be able to tell you how much I love you."

A third, perhaps even more powerful expression of love comes in the form of a gaze. Two people in love can gaze at each other for long periods of time without uttering a sound. To reference another 60's folk bank, Simon & Garfunkel, the sound of a silence when accompanied with a gaze is sometimes louder than all the "I Love You's" shouted from rooftops.

Eyes carry within themselves deep secrets of the soul (that is why most people feel uncomfortable when somebody stares them in the eyes for more than a few seconds.) There is something of your soul that you can communicate to another human being exclusively through your eyes. I think however that this is lost or greatly diminished via zoom, physical proximity is also a key component of this "love communication".

A fourth universally accepted method of expressing love is by means of an embrace. A hug demonstrates a solid and profound bond existing between the two people embracing each other.

Which of these four forms of love do children cherish most?

Children enjoy being spoken to (to, not at). They certainly take pleasure from being kissed and being looked upon with tender affection. Yet, more than anything, most children, especially infants, and in my experience most adults as well cherish being hugged. It supersedes the previous three, a words, a kiss or a longing gaze.

What is the secret of the hug? What is its power?

It may surprise you but our rabbis have though and written deeply about the power of a hug.

Rabbi Isaac Luria, also known as the Ari, one of the great scholars of Kabbalah from mid 16th century Tzafat explains how the physical mechanics of a hug set it apart from all other forms of "love communication".

Part of kabbalah is finding hidden meaning in words and constructs that are right in front of us. This teaching from that spiritual lens.

Look at your arm for a moment or look at mine. It is of course with our arms and then our whole bodies that we embrace another person.

For The Ari there are three dimensions of an arm's embrace, and each encompass three distinct parts of the body being embraced. When you embrace another person, the highest part of the arm (between the shoulder and the elbow) encompasses the entire side of the one being embraced. The middle part of the person's arm, the forearm, expands over the entire width of the embraced person's back. Finally, the palm and the fingers extend even further and cover a small part of the face of the embraced one, a handbreadth of the face.

Lastly, and this is my own hiddush to his teaching, the body comes into the mis to complete the embrace, to fully encircle the other and when done in coordination with the intended recipient of your hug, two bodies combine in what philosopher Martin Buber would describe as an I-Thou moment, when two separate entities become something new, and whole and even holy, when they become one being.

My hug with my parents was like that. Something that has not existed from 19 months was created in that moment. It wasn't the same as hugs pre-pandemic, it carried with it nearly two years of yearning and angst and worry and trauma and unrequited affection. It was filled with tears and joy and pain and overflowing with love.

I am painfully aware that I'm among the lucky ones, for many even after 19 months that hug is still some time and distance away. For some, more than we can imagine that hug will never come; they lost loved ones to this virus or having lost their parents before COVID emerged they had to go through it without them. Still others; alone, lonely and isolated because of the pandemic or in spite of the pandemic have no one to hug or hug them back. My heartbreaks for all who have not or will not experience what I was so fortunate to finally feel this morning as my parents held me in their arms and I held them in mine. I understand that pain now better than I did the last 19 months when I felt it myself.

There is a time for every experience under heaven, a time to be born a time to die, a time to laugh and a time to cry, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing. Thank G-d the deaths from this virus are declining, there were no COVID related deaths in BC today. We have shed many tears for all that we have been through these many months, and we have, as Jews have done with resilience from generations found moments of laughter and joy in the midst of the OY and sorry. The time to embrace is here or it is coming soon. Embrace it! Give extra hugs to those who surround you, embrace this powerful and much-needed communication with our loved ones. Hold on to it, hold on to them – like your life depends on it; because as I learned today, in so many ways it does.