

## Our Relationships: Seeking Healing, Forgiveness, and Peace

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Heavenly perfection: It is an image that has captured the imagination of the rabbis for generations. Jewish texts are filled with legends about those seeking to experience the majesty of G-d's abode....of individuals who ask to witness first hand the majesty of G-d's throne room. Likely, the rabbis were inspired by such Biblical accounts as the story of Jacob's ladder linking heaven and earth....and the story of the prophet Isaiah, who shared the light of his own heavenly vision of angels singing to G-d: "*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh....*" "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts." These words, in fact, so moved the authors of our prayer book that they wove them into our own worship.

But rabbinic tradition did not stop here. Later, when it came time to craft the sanctuary setting for Yom Kippur, this image of heavenly perfection essentially became a blue print for our service. Consider:.....as we gather on this day of awe - our own angelic choir lifts its voices beautifully and blessedly..... our Torah covers, ark illumination and robes are of pure white....and even the Torah portions chosen for this day are amongst the most sacred: This morning we read the powerful text that describes that moment when the Children of Israel re-affirm their acceptance of the Torah itself. This afternoon we will read the Holiness Code – the very "heart" of the Torah. And....perhaps most explicitly when considering that image of perfect peace....in one of the Haftarah texts for today we hear G-d's promise to the Jewish people:

*"Shalom...Shalom....l'rachok ve'karov."*

"Peace...peace....to those who are far and to those who are near."

This heavenly imagery for Yom Kippur has an essential purpose: to inspire and to help us. For our rabbis understood that our lives would be far from perfect. That over the course of a year – in our day to day living – things would happen that would bring about imperfection...distancing us from G-d....from our better selves.....and from each other.

Our tradition understood well how imperfect we can be. To be "only human" is to acknowledge our limitations and propensity to fail and to fall short. And in religious terms, we know that we are prone to committing "*cheit*" – or "sin." Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century sage, has described sin as "the failure to live up to the highest moral potentialities in one's self in any given situation."

Our misdeeds create separation. And so the rabbis created something that they hoped would help us bring healing: Yom Kippur - An opportunity to experience the holiness of heavenly Shalom so that we might be inspired to do that which they knew would be very difficult – to respond to that distance and return a measure of wholeness to our lives.

Stories of strained relationships fill the Torah. Cain and Abel....Abraham and Isaac.....Moses and Aaron...All of them were engaged in emotionally laden conflicts that, even as founders of our faith, they found challenging. Indeed, even G-d's own relationship with humanity was, at times, strained.

In the sixth chapter of Genesis, G-d looks upon the newly created world. Filled with hope and promise and potential – creation was teeming with nature's beauty and bounty – all for humanity to embrace. But, as the story unfolds, the Holy One watches as

people forsake this gift....and each other. The specific misdeeds of the people are not described in the text. We are told only that violence has filled the world.

G-d's response to this betrayal is powerful – revealing G-d's own pain, hurt, and disappointment. In a Torah passage particularly remarkable for its use of emotional language, we read: “*Va Yinachem Adonai...VaYit'a'tzeiv el Libo.*” “And G-d regretted having created humanity and He wept in his heart.” In anger, G-d is determined to destroy it all – humanity, animal life – the whole lot. However, we are told that after a time G-d comes to notice a single good man....Noah. Because of him, G-d's anger is eased - and the command to build the ark is issued.

This command, by the way, is striking in one particular aspect. G-d tells Noah: “When you place the wood for the ark “*V'chafarta otah*” - place a seal covering over it so that water will not enter. The Hebrew root letters of this word, “chafar” – meaning “cover over” - are “caf – fei – reish” ---- And they are the SAME root letters used to form the Hebrew word: Kippur. ----- It is the first time in the entire Bible that this word is mentioned, and provides a profound insight into the meaning of atonement: That despite the sometimes difficult ‘relationship waters’ that surround us...atonement is that which can help keep us afloat...help us to keep going and to move forward.

Our first task in atonement – we are taught – is to begin with ourselves....to honestly reflect upon past words and deeds and to sincerely apologize to those whom we may have hurt. This gesture is called: Teshuvah. It is an act in which we own our mistakes – take personal responsibility for what we have done – and then humbly turn towards another person in an attempt to bring healing. Engaging in genuine Teshuvah – our rabbis taught – requires that one have a “*Lev Nishbar v'Nid'cheh*” – a “heart that is shattered and contrite.” And when done with sincerity and sensitivity....it is considered to be amongst the most holy things that we can do.

So important is engaging in Teshuvah, in fact, that, some people at this time of year, even go so far as to send notes to everyone that they know saying essentially: “If there is anything that I have done to hurt you in the past year, I ask for forgiveness.” The reason for doing this is not to passively cover one's bases. Rather the gesture recognizes that sometimes we unintentionally cause pain to another person – and that the person who was affected, at the time, decides not to say anything – believing perhaps, that it wasn't anything worth mentioning. Nonetheless, the affront and the bad feelings continue to linger. Sending such a ‘Teshuvah note,’ in effect, invites the person who was affected to share what happened....and gives the person who acted a chance to apologize.

Marian Wright Edelman, in her bestselling book, *The Measure of Our Success* wrote a chapter which she entitled: “A Letter to My Sons.” In it, she expressed her own feelings to her children...

Edelman wrote: “I seek your forgiveness....for all the times I talked when I should have listened; got angry when I should have been patient; acted when I should have waited; feared when I should have been delighted; scolded when I should have encouraged; criticized when I should have complimented; said ‘no’ when I should have said ‘yes’ and said ‘yes’ when I should have said ‘no.’ I did not know a whole lot about parenting or how to ask for help. I often tried too hard and wanted and demanded so much, and

mistakenly, sometimes tried to mold you into my image of what I wanted you to be rather than discovering and nourishing you as you emerged and grew.”

I find Edelman’s words beautiful because they acknowledge that even when our intentions are good..... we sometimes make mistakes. Atonement gives us the opportunity to apologize....to help us bring healing and peace to our relationships.

Some relationships, however, we know, are marked by such profound separation and disappointment that true healing is hard to imagine. Perhaps the one who caused the pain doesn’t feel remorse.....Perhaps it has just happened and we find ourselves, like G-d was, very much in a place of anger and sadness – and it will take time for us to live differently with the hurt....Or perhaps the offense was so painful that even the possibility of reconciliation seems distant....if not impossible.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a woman who had approached him following services one Shabbat evening. She explained that her father was dying and that he wasn’t expected to live much longer than a few weeks. The rabbi had thought that, at that moment, the woman would ask questions about funeral and shiva arrangements. But instead, she shared that she and her father had not had any kind of meaningful relationship for years. That he had left her family when she was only a child and had caused such hurt that she wasn’t sure whether or not she should attend the funeral and if it was even proper to say Kaddish.

Rabbi Kushner listened thoughtfully and then offered his advice. He began: “First of all if you go to the funeral and decide that you made a mistake....you’ll get over it quickly enough. But if you stay away from the funeral and afterward realize that you should have gone, I’m afraid you’ll carry (that) burden...for a much longer time. But more importantly, (I think that) this is your opportunity to mourn the father you never had.....to come to terms with your sadness that he couldn’t be a father to you when he was alive, and now that he is gone, there is no longer even the possibility of his making it up to you.”

Even for this woman, we learn - forgiveness was possible – because, over time, she found that she was able to find healing by living with and understanding her relationship with her father.

In Judaism, forgiveness is not about forgetting.....nor is it about pretending that nothing has happened to disrupt a relationship that had been strong. Rather, we are taught that forgiveness is like confronting any loss that we may experience. It is about coming to terms and being at peace with the past so that we can step more confidently into our future. It is about honoring and learning from a past which cannot be changed, without being held captive by feelings of resentment, anger, and frustration. In the words of author Carol Luebering, “forgiveness frees the forgiver.”

To do this takes strength....courage.....and even a measure of compassion.

Throughout the Torah, G-d is known most commonly by two names: Adonai and Elohim. Commentators have pointed out that these names are not interchangeable. Rather, each one is said to reflect a specific aspect of G-d’s divine nature. Elohim, we are taught, is used for the side of G-d that represents “justice.” Adonai, on the other hand, is used for the side of G-d that represents “compassion.” Throughout the Bible, we learn

that G-d engages in an oftentimes difficult internal struggle between them: Justice on the one hand and compassion on the other. G-d knows – as did our rabbinic tradition, that for G-d to be absolutely one...or the other, would be untenable. What we learn about G-d's struggle to find the right balance is that during those times when divine forgiveness is necessary, G-d realizes that absolute justice sometimes has to be compromised. We are taught that with time this can also be the case for us. And that opening ourselves to even some compassion might enable us to notice and then understand things that we couldn't have before.

A story is told about a miser who consistently refused to give money to help the town in which he lived. The people of the community were deeply frustrated by the man's unwillingness to part with any of his fortune. And even though the man had received countless visits from town dignitaries and fellow townspeople their requests were always denied.

One day, the rabbi and some of his students paid the miser a visit. When the man answered, the rabbi explained the town's need and asked him for some money. The man, apparently moved by the rabbi's request, withdrew into his home and returned with one, very dirty penny. The rabbi looked at the penny, took it, and then began to thank the man and bless him profusely. "May G-d grant you health and long life," he said. "May you live a life of joy worthy of heaven."

The students of the rabbi looked at him as if he was crazy. After all, the miser had given him only a penny. Walking home, one of the students summoned the courage to ask the rabbi why he had put up with such behavior.

The rabbi answered simply, explaining that he understood what others did not.

"Remember how dirty that penny was?" he began, "that was because for years the miser had held on to it because no one would accept it from him. A penny was all that he had the strength to give, and yet people believed that he was capable of giving more. I simply accepted the man's gift as he was able to offer it – not asking for any more from him than he was really able to give."

In those relationships in which we struggle, the High Holy Days invite us to consider where we are emotionally and whether a will to find forgiveness might lead to understanding and ultimately to our own healing. Recognizing how difficult a task this is.....our rabbis crafted our Yom Kippur observance to offer insight and hope.

This day, we glimpse the perfection of Heaven so that we might both be inspired by G-d's love for us....AND by the realization that while G-d's heavenly peace is perfect – for us – here on earth – we strive for a different kind of peace. One that is necessarily less perfect...but just as essential.

In the words of the poet:

Shalom is not the absence of difficulties,  
but the handling of difficulties without loss of balance.

Shalom is not the absence of tension,  
but acceptance of it as part of the Way.

Shalom is not passive inaction,  
but active and honest confrontation with truth.

Shalom is not the absence of conflict,  
but the careful waging of conflict with understanding.

Shalom is the ability to see the grain of life and  
act in accord with it;  
to discover for ourselves our ability to bring  
some of G-d's heavenly Shalom into each of our lives.

May this be our peace in the year ahead.

Amen.