

Yom Kippur 5774 (2013): Yizkor Sermon: Reframing & Forgiveness

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(Show dot on blank poster board):

**What do you see?**

**Hold that thought, as I share 3 stories with you.**

**As I tell these 3 stories, I would like you to consider what these 3 stories have in common, and what they have to do with this picture.**

## **STORY #1**

In the late 1980's, I worked as an Assistant Brand Manager/ Marketing Associate for a company that was once known as Richardson Vicks Incorporated. In the late 80's, RVI was acquired by Procter & Gamble.

For many Vicks employees, there was a sense of foreboding. Even the P&G logo was viewed with suspicion. Many of my colleagues referred to the Procter & Gamble logo as "the devil's symbol" and considered their devil to be overtaking our beloved triangle symbol.

There was a sense of loss throughout the company: the loss of brand identity, the loss of our CT offices as the move to Cincinnati became more imminent, the fear of our relatively small company being swallowed up by this ginormous corporation.

So many P&G employees were mired in negativity and fear of the unknown.

But, there were those who were able to focus on the positive aspects of the merger, such as: economies of scales, and the opportunity to be exposed to additional creative energy and brainpower.

As it turned out, it was the people with the positive attitudes who ultimately rose to leadership positions in the organization.

The others? Well, they stagnated or they left.

There was nothing special about those who rose to the top that distinguished them from the others. They weren't smarter or more business savvy. The only significant difference between the successful and unsuccessful employees was that they looked at the same situation from a **different perspective**. Instead of viewing the P&G acquisition as a curse, it was **viewed by some of the more successful employees as a blessing**.

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## **STORY #2**

This is an aggadah from the Babylonian Talmud in Masechet Makkot (24b):

In the year 70 CE, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva went to Jerusalem. When they arrived at *Har HaTzofim* (Mt. Scopus), they tore their clothing as a sign of mourning over the Destruction of the Temple.

When they reached *Har HaBayit* (the Temple Mount) and saw a fox emerging from the very place where the Holy of Holies had been, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar, and Rabbi Yehoshua began to cry.

But Rabbi Akiva? He laughed.

The other rabbis asked him, "Akiva, why do you laugh?"

He answered them, "Why do you cry?"

The 3 crying rabbis cited some biblical verses that referred to the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Akiva also cited some biblical verses. He reminded his colleagues of Uriah's prophecy regarding the destruction of Jerusalem. Then, he also reminded them of the prophecy of Zechariah, who spoke about the redemption of Jerusalem following the *Churban*, the Destruction.

So, the laughing Rabbi Akiva said to the other 3 rabbis, "Now that I have seen the fulfillment of Uriah's prophecy of destruction, it is clear that the Zechariah's prophecy of redemption will also come to be. Now that Jerusalem has already been destroyed, it is clear that redemption is near."

Having heard this, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, and Rabbi Yehoshua, responded: "You have consoled us (with your words), Akiva! You have consoled us!" "*Ni-cham-ta-nu, Akiva. Ni-cham-ta-nu.*"

### **STORY #3**

This is a story told by Rabbi Kass Abelson about the historian, Arnold Toynbee:

Arnold's mother was an artist. One day, when Arnold was watching his mom paint a watercolor of an old church, he noticed that her painting did not look exactly like the painting of the church. In particular, he noticed that the painting did not include the weeds that were growing out of the cracks and crevices of the church's walls.

Arnold's mother explained, " The secret of painting is knowing what to focus on.... And what to leave out."

I just told you 3 stories:

- 1) the story of P&G's acquisition of Richardson-Vicks,
- 2) the story of Rabbi Akiva & his 3 crying colleagues,
- 3) the story of Arnold Toynbee's mother's painting

What do these 3 stories have in common?

(PAUSE)

All 3 of them illustrate a psychological concept known as **"reframing"**:  
**i.e. viewing the same picture from a different perspective.**

1) By emphasizing the positive aspects of the Procter & Gamble acquisition, some of the Richardson-Vicks employees were able to envision a bright future for themselves.

2) By focusing on the promise of redemption rather than on the Temple's destruction, Rabbi Akiva was able to laugh instead of cry.

3) By choosing to omit the weeds in her painting of the church, the artist portrayed an image that was more beautiful than the church itself.

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In life, we always have the choice of what to focus on, and what to omit.

We can focus on the negatives of a situation and ignore the positives,

Or we can focus on the positives of a situation and minimize the negatives.

Even given a negative reality, we always have the choice of how to react.

And, given the choice, maybe we should try to "look on the bright side."

Now, what do the concept of "reframing" and the 3 stories I shared with you have to do with this picture?

(Show dot on poster board)

What do you see on this poster board?

(PAUSE)

Many people see the dot.

But there happens to be a lot of white space on this page & the white space takes up much more room on the page than the black dot.

If we shift our perspective and "reframe", the dot can be seen for its smallness and insignificance.

On **Yom Kippur**, we ask God to do some "reframing", hoping that God will see us in a better light.

On **Yom Kippur**, we ask God to forgive us, hoping that God will emphasize our positive characteristics and actions, hoping that God will minimize our negative traits and transgressions.

But Yom Kippur is not just about each of us asking God and others to forgive us; it's not just about each of us saying "I'm sorry" to those we have wronged. Yom Kippur is not just about seeking forgiveness; it is also about granting forgiveness.

How can we ask God to forgive us by "**reframing**", if we aren't prepared to do the very same act of "reframing" in our personal relationships?

Just as the artist "**reframes**" by choosing to omit the weeds in her painting, so too do we have the opportunity to reframe a new portrait of others on Yom Kippur.

In forgiving others, we "**reframe**," by choosing what to emphasize and what to omit. By minimizing the bad qualities of those who have hurt us and by not focusing so much on how they have hurt us, we can portray those who have wronged us in a better light. This is the first step towards true forgiveness.

A few years ago, I got into a terrible argument with one of my friends. From my perspective, she was wrong and I was right. I felt hurt. For months, I was stubborn and unforgiving; I refused to give my friend a chance. Finally, after months of not speaking to her and focusing on how betrayed I felt, I realized that **I had to do some "reframing."** It took awhile. But, after much thought, I finally began to minimize how wronged I felt. And I began to emphasize what a good friend she had been and how important our friendship was to me. I realized that being "right" was not as important as maintaining this relationship. So, I swallowed by pride and forgave her.

It is also possible to apply the concept of “reframing” and to seek reconciliation with people who are no longer with us, as well as with relatives and friends who are still alive.

Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship. While some are able to look back fondly on the life spent with a loved one, others carry the residue of pain left from years of suffering in a failed relationship. Long after the funeral, a lifetime of bad feelings and unresolved issues linger and refuse to die.

Rabbi Charles Klein tells the following story:

Following the death of her mother, a woman named Andrea went to a therapist for grief counseling. She told the story of their relationship, recalling countless occasions when she felt ignored and unloved by her mom. While growing up, she was envious of the girls whose mothers made time to be with their children. Repeatedly, her mother failed to show up at the important occasions in her life. She missed school plays, piano recitals, and graduations. She seemed to have no interest in her daughter or her accomplishments. She made her daughter feel insignificant. And Andrea grew to resent her mother.

When Andrea’s mother died, she cried, but not out of sadness. She cried because she felt anger and bitterness instead of sorrow. And she cried because she would never be able to have the talk she always wanted to have with her mother.

When Andrea told her therapist about how she felt, he requested that she bring in a photograph of her mother. The therapist then placed the photo on an empty seat in his study and asked Andrea to look at that photograph and speak to it as if her mother were present and still alive. The therapist then asked Andrea to express all the things to her mother that she had wanted to say to her before his death.

Hesitant at first, Andrea eventually began to speak. She told her mother that she had always felt cheated. She said to her mom, "All I ever wanted was your unconditional love." Then as her emotions overflowed, she walked over to the picture, hugged it and said, "This is all I ever wanted. Do you hear me? I wanted to be able to give you a hug." She sobbed as she said, "Mom, I don't know why you missed so many of the special occasions in my life. Maybe you just didn't know how to do any better. At least, that's what I want to think. I don't want to hate you anymore. I can't forget all of the times that I felt disappointed when you weren't there. I can't forget, but I do want to forgive you. So, mom, wherever you are, I love you."

After her mother's death, Andrea was able to achieve some type of reconciliation with her past.

While some of you may feel the need to **seek** forgiveness from a relative who has died, and while some of you may feel the need to **grant** forgiveness to a relative who has died,

there are many of you who are about to say Yizkor who are **not seeking reconciliation** with a deceased loved one. You are just feeling sad or angry that the ones you love are no longer with you.

The concept of reframing applies to YOU as well.  
When someone dies, it is easy to focus on the negatives....

As difficult as it is, we need to reframe; we have to try to seek out blessings even though our hearts may be broken.

When a loved one dies, we can reframe by concentrating on whatever positives, whatever good can possibly emerge from this loss.

Sometimes blessings can come despite, or even because of, loss.

Last fall, when **Hurricane Sandy** hit this area, we saw what good could emerge from the ashes of a tragedy. In the aftermath of the hurricane that destroyed so many homes in Union Beach and other shore communities, many members of this congregation, as well as other volunteers, stepped forward to help. In addition to thinking about why this natural disaster happened, some of you also asked the question, "What can I do about it?" and then moved beyond the realm of contemplation to the realm of action. I remember how proud I felt of this community last Thanksgiving Day, when dozens of Temple Beth Ahm members cooked meals and delivered them to the make-shift 'soup kitchen' tent at the fire house in Union Beach. Many of you also donated food, cooking supplies, toiletries, gift cards from places like Home Depot, and other much-needed items to the residents of Union Beach: not just in the days and weeks following the hurricane, but continuously throughout the past 10 ½ months.

When communal tragedy strikes, we have a choice of how to “frame” the situation and how to react...

And when it comes to the loss of a beloved relative or friend, **the strategy of “reframing” can help us deal with the loss:** Fourteen (14) years ago, almost to the day, my grandmother, Regina Post z”l died just one week before *Rosh HaShanah*. Babi and I were very close... I grew up in her house... with her chicken soup and *shlishkes* and *fricasee*....and her unconditional love. Then, just when we were about to spend the High Holidays with her and my grandfather, Babi suddenly got very sick and died within a few days. I was devastated.. heart-broken...

For close to a year, I felt like I was sleep-walking... like I was living in a nightmare, without my dear Babi Gina... I was angry- at the doctors who couldn't save her, at God who didn't listen to our prayers, at myself for not seeing her more often during the summer, and for not spotting the warning signs of her illness... My anger and my sadness consumed everything I did for an entire year....Sometimes it was difficult just to get out of bed. ...

Then, one day, after endless months of grieving, I realized that I needed to “reframe”. One day, I realized that Babi would not want me to spend the rest of my life being depressed. She would want me to have the energy to enjoy my children, her beautiful great-grandchildren.

I realized that I needed to start thinking about Babi's life and her legacy... and not just about her death.. I needed to start living my life in a way that embodied the values that my grandmother had taught me. I needed to stop mourning her death and start celebrating her life.

When my Babi died, I was depressed and despondent for nearly a year.

But, at some point, I had to **search for blessings amidst the loss.**  
What meaning could I derive from my broken heart?

One thing is for sure:

If I had not experienced the pain of losing my dear Babi Gina,  
I don't think I would have learned to empathize with others' sense of loss-  
not when I officiate at a funeral, when I make a shiva call,  
or stand beside someone who is saying Mourners' Kaddish.

*Halevai* that my grandmother were still alive.

I'd gladly give up any of these blessings just to see her again.

Still, I am thankful for these blessings.

Some of us have lost loved ones in the past year. And many of us are not yet at the stage where we can seek out blessing. I doubt that anyone who is here today saying *Yizkor* would think to laugh instead of cry, as Rabbi Akiva did when he saw the fox emerging from the destroyed Temple. And I'm not sure how many of us could conceive of our broken hearts as a blessing,....not yet, anyway.

But, our tradition encourages us to try and **search for blessings in the midst of tragedy...**

- 1) When we refer to our deceased loved ones, we say the following Hebrew words after their names:
  - a. "*zichrono livracha*" "May his memory be a blessing" or
  - b. "*zichronah livracha*"... "May her memory be a blessing"

- 2) Even as we mourn our loved ones, we are encouraged to acknowledge the blessings in our life and to affirm God's greatness in the face of personal loss by reciting the words of the Kaddish:

*"Yit-gadal v'yit-ka-dash Shmey Rabbah."*

"May God's great name be elevated and sanctified."

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As we begin the year 5774, may we all try our best to "reframe" by focusing on the positives in others, in our relationships past and present, and in every aspect of our lives.

*Gmar Chatimah Tovah.*