Between ourselves and our families

Shabbat shalom and good yontif. Tonight as we begin Yom Kippur, we reflect upon our lives and our place in this world and with those we share this world.

*Im ein ani li mi li; U-ch’she-ani l’atsmi ma ani; V’im lo achshav eimatai?* If I am not for myself, who will be for me; if am only for myself, what am I, and if not now, when. This famous quote of Hillel from Mishnah Avot offers us a framework for discussion tonight.

It is wonderful to see so many people in the congregation. As it is customary on Yom Kippur to seek forgiveness, tonight I ask forgiveness from you. Forgiveness in the event that I did anything to wrong you or cause any hurt. To ask us to create the space for forgiveness in ourselves that we be kind and gentle in our manners, loving and supportive in our criticisms, and work ultimately toward building a
stronger sustainable congregation and community. My office is open, and as your rabbi, I am here to serve you. If I have done anything to hurt or offend any of you this year, I am truly sorry. And I want to be able to hear from you if you have not felt heard or appreciated, please contact me to set up an appointment, to have coffee, or to take a walk together. My door is open to all of you, my congregants, and I am here too for you.

In my discussion tonight, I will be considering family relations and the ways that we can find peace within our families. Over Rosh Hashanah, I spoke on the topics of reflecting upon one’s self and reflecting upon Judaism and the world. Tomorrow the reflection will be on race relations and how we relate as human beings. These are all a part of the Jewish vision or practice for this time of the year, to help re-align our relations with our world, with our people, our families, and ourselves.

Last year, the Pew Research foundation issued A Report of Jewish Americans in 2013. The report found among other things, a rise in the sense of Jewish cultural aspirations while also noting a drop in formal Jewish affiliation. Among the trends noted, is a relationship of family and exposure to Jewish life to the relation of positive affiliation. Positive
exposure in a variety of ways leads to a positive outlook to the future.
Positive exposure to Jewish communal life can make a family’s relationship more positive.

From a biblical perspective, one might be inspired by the spirituality of our ancestors, but not necessarily each of their parenting techniques.

Unfortunately, from Abraham to Moses to David, the fathers don’t fair so well. And from Sarah to Leah and Rachel to Bathsheba, the mother’s aren’t so great either. So we need to look more into later Jewish writings to understand the balance, power, and holiness of family structures.

Each of us has a family of origin. Almost all of us have people to whom we can call our family, even if we are single adults in our community.

One thing that we can learn from our biblical ancestors is the power of family to heal and transcend its own traumas to leave a legacy of positivity and inspiration.

For a moment, let us take a look at two biblical situations that call upon us to look at family structure. In particular, Isaac and Ishmael, who
reappear in our narrative text when Abraham dies. The half-brothers, Isaac and Ishmael, come together to bury their father. Similarly, Jacob and Esau reappear in our text as two brothers united to help bury Isaac. It is a powerful model. These are sibling relations that are the very essence of strained. We sense the apprehension in our Torah when these siblings come back together, but as brothers, as family, they are able to overcome the parts of life that are physical to the ultimate work of the metaphysical. They help escort their fathers to their final resting places with honor, dignity, and respect. But not without the challenge of having had parents who were hard or harsh or who left their children with a sense of bitterness, and still they were able to be present.

I think that these examples are unusual. They show us the power of forgiveness and the power of healing. How a family that might be torn asunder for a variety of reasons, the children are able to give respect at the end of the life to their parent. Jacob and Esau did not have to be together. Each could have grieved on his own. But they made their way back together. This kind of familial connection is also highlighted in a Hasidic story we will hear tomorrow of two brothers whose selflessness helps mark the place where the Holy Temple would be built.
I think that is the challenge to us all to find our way back to wholeness again when our family relationships are strained or broken, to find a way back to wholeness again. Whether through stress, verbal or physical abuse, it can take time to find our way back to wholeness.

Hopefully, your family story is one mainly of blessing and goodness, and one of good connections. Most of our family dynamics are multi-faceted and our narratives depend on the lesson. Some of our families struggled hard to make it to these shores, and many of us have family who struggled to make ends meet while on these shores. Many of us are here on this High Holy Days remembering, missing, and longing for family loved ones. May our coming together as a community offer support and solace as we remember those we love.

Love is something very important in my understanding of what is a family. Unconditional love. And yet in our tradition, love is not commanded from a parent to a child. Honor and respect are mitzvot, they are commandments towards our parents. Interestingly, our
tradition does have a command to love God, and certainly to love human beings, but for our parents, the command is to honor and respect.

Each of our families has its story, its narrative. How you present yourself. Even to answer the questions, how did we get here? Today, we find our way back to a sense of family.

In our congregation, there are a number of multiple generation families whose lives have had a great impact upon our community. And I would like to take a few moments to recognize them. During this past year, we were blessed to have two b’nai mitzvah of children who are third generation in our congregation. The Millers and the Sarawesky families are part of the wonderful legacy of family at Temple Beth El. Coming up in our community, as well are the children of the Aber, Cohen, Kaess, Prybutok and Fullerton families whose children may be third generation b’nai mitzvah in the future. We are blessed to have the intergenerational connections throughout our congregation’s families up to three generations including the Glassners, Altshulers, Stone and Brandt families. Each of these families has their own narrative of being at
Temple Beth El. Tonight we come together and share our stories, prayers, aspirations, and hopes for the New Year.

The following is a story from Jewish folklore that may shed some light on the idea of family repair.

Isaac and Joseph were brothers. They were not friends. Pity the poor mother who raised them under the same roof! Isaac begrudged Joseph every success he ever had. Rather than rejoice and be happy in his brother’s successes, Isaac became envious and jealous. Does age change envy into love? For some souls, it may, but not for this Isaac.

Joseph grew to be a caring man. He worked hard as a farmer, and after many years of toiling, his hard labor paid off. Isaac had watched his brother’s fields grew rich as he grew more and more jealous.

One day, disaster struck, and a flood from a river that went through Isaac’s land ravaged Joseph’s fields which were downstream. Isaac did not help his brother. Joseph was left with
nothing. Isaac sold his grain and produce. Joseph sought to confront his brother but was unable to speak with him. Joseph thought to himself, who can help me?

At that time, the famous Rabbi Akiva was alive and in the land of Israel. He would listen to the troubles of all those who would come to him for advice. So Joseph set out to see Rabbi Akiva. Joseph’s journey through the Judean hills was hard. It was long, it was hot and it was dusty. After a while, Joseph needed a break. Spotting a carob tree, he decided to stop there for shade. As he got closer, he could see that the tree was not quite well, one half was in full bloom but one half seemed dead—brown leaves, no fruit or flower. Joseph heard the tree cry for help.”Can you help me,” the tree asked. Joseph couldn’t believe it, a talking tree, but he answered, “I am not a wise person, but I am going to Rabbi Akiva who might be able to help you.” Joseph grabbed a few carob fruits to sustain him along his journey, and promised not to forget the tree and its predicament.
A few hours later, Joseph found himself at a river crossing, when he sat down to consider how to proceed, and a large splash of water doused him. While it was cool and refreshing, it was a surprise. “Who did that?”, he asked. A voice answered, “I did.” And when Joseph looked around, he couldn’t believe his eyes, there was a talking fish. “I did”, said the fish again. “This is my river, and no one crosses it without my permission.”

So Joseph explained his story. The fish told Joseph that he had a pain in his eye and he could not see, the pain had been there for so long, that the fish was always grumpy, to the point of driving away all of his friends. Joseph promised he would ask Rabbi Akiva for a solution. Pleased, the fish offered Joseph a ride on his back across the river.

Joseph made it to Rabbi Akiva. He was teaching to a group of students beneath a tree, and he overheard Rabbi Akiva’s teaching, “Beloved is each human being in that each one— each person—
is created in the image of God.” Joseph thought for a moment on this teaching. It struck Joseph that he and his brother were both created in the image of God.

The session ended, and Rabbi Akiva approached Joseph to ask about his troubles. Joseph relayed his struggles with his brother, and also told the rabbi of the tree’s and the fish’s situations.

Rabbi Akiva smiled. He said, “For your two new friends, the answer is simple, when you get to the fish, carefully look behind the left eye. And when you get to the tree, search under the roots on the bad side. However, in terms of shalom bayit, the relation between you and your brother, you did not need to make the journey to me to find your answer to what troubles you, for you know the answer in your heart. Akiva looked at Joseph, deep in the eyes, and said, “The most important teaching in our whole Torah is ‘Love your fellow human being as yourself.’” And with that, Rabbi Akiva was gone.
The next day, on his journey home, Joseph found his fish friend, and behind his eye was a pearl. The fish felt better and could see again out his eyes, pleased, the fish granted the pearl to Joseph. When he saw the carob tree, Joseph discovered a large bag of coins had been deposited underneath the tree. The tree also felt better, and told Joseph to keep the coins, after all they were of no use to a tree.

His new wealth allowed Joseph to purchase new land, trees, and seeds. He met his brother Isaac again. He brought his brother tales of his journey, and slowly, they were able to accept each other and celebrate one another’s successes.

I hope that throughout this Yom Kippur, you can find your sense of holiness and connection to your family, however you personally define family. That it can be a repair of your soul-family and a repair for your heart. I hope that tomorrow during the Yizkor prayers when we recall those of our immediate family and friends who have died, that we are able to feel a connection to those who are our family, to those who we may never have seen or known, those we may never have met, that we
meet them with love and respect, with repair and holiness, and with forgiveness. I hope that we can work together to create a community of love and acceptance for our future generations.

As we work to repair so much in our world, may we also strive to heal the interpersonal relationships within our own families—families of origin and families of choice. To receive with openness and an open heart. Let us be the kabbalists, the receivers and transmitters of this connection. May we work to help bring about a true repair and to be the receivers of the new way.

May you be sealed in the book of life goodness and health, and may your soul be filled with the uplift of this Shabbat and Yom Kippur.

Good evening, Shabbat shalom, and gut yontif.