



Rosh Hashanah Sermon - Rabbi Aaron Alexander - 5778

I remember the day after I got engaged, almost as much as the engagement day itself. My mentor and friend casually strolled into my office with what he considered a gift.

It was a book. I was thinking scotch, but okay. What caught me offguard was the genre. Well, really, the title. *"The Divorce Remedy - The Proven 7-Step Process For Saving Your Marriage.*

I mean, come on now. That is not responsible gift giving.

I should know. I'm a terrible gift giver. I once gave a girlfriend, albeit accidentally, a weightloss contraption mismarketed as leg massagers. Ex-girlfriend, obviously.

Even I knew this gift was awkward.

But he looked at me and said, quite simply: Listen, your origin story, your shared and formative experience of falling in love and loyalty, your cosmic bond - take it in--it's bigger than either one of you. But it won't always be enough to sustain your ever-evolving relationship. This is going to take work. Work that will demand honesty, transparency, and a willingness to say the things you never imagined you'd say to someone you loved so much.

That's actually... helpful. It's true.

And I was still really annoyed. He could've waited a few weeks to project this own life onto mine.

That unrequested wisdom feels particularly relevant right now. We are living in a time of unique relational gaps - giant spaces between previously thick associations--once firm--no longer.

1) Several weeks ago it was announced that there would be a March For Racial Justice here in Washington D.C. -- it's self-description: Unity March to CREATE A JUST & EQUITABLE FUTURE FOR COMMUNITIES OF COLOR. The only catch - it is scheduled for 10 days from now. September 30. Which happens to be Yom Kippur. It was inadvertant, but it still precludes most Jews from attending and showing solidarity. The mainstream Jewish response was not unexpected--and the critique went beyond the particluar situation of this March.

Within minutes, before conversation or explanation, the March's facebook page was flooded with Jewish responses which ranged from serious concern to disgust.

The President of the March of the Living, a trip that I and 10's of thousands of others have participated in, declared: "By choosing a day in the Jewish calendar that Jewish people cannot participate in, you have effectively turned your March for Justice into a monumental act of injustice against the Jewish people."

Even Mayyim Bialik, weighed in to her 1.5 million followers on facebook: . "anyone else think that's absurd?, she wrote? , "i mean, it automatically excludes a distinct portion of people who historically have stood up for racial equality in enormous ways." "argh, super mad right now.", she concluded. (Argh is inter-web speak.)

But I think we have to ask: Are these responses proportionate? Do they reflect a critique that's worthy of the current relationship between these two persecuted communities? Do we even still share a similar American story that connects and obligates us to the other? Now. In 2017.

Have we, outside of typical activists and expected social justice-minded organizations, shown up in large numbers recently, for each other? Have we spent time recently in each other's homes, listening to shared stories of persecution and liberation? Do we even travel **to** each other's neighborhoods, and not just **through** them?

Here's another example of a gap, or several gaps: Shanto Iyengar, a Stanford political scientist writes: "If you go back to the days of the Civil War, one can find cases in American political history where there was far more rancor and violence," "But in the modern era, there are no 'ifs' and 'buts' — partisan animus is at an all-time high."

Democrats and Republicans truly think worse of each other, a trend that isn't really . or only, about policy preferences. Members of the two parties are more likely today to describe each other unfavorably, as selfish, as threats to the nation, even as unsuitable marriage material.

Really. A 2010 study found that 1/3 of democrats and almost 1/2 of republicans would be upset if their son or daughter married into the opposite political party. That number was more like 5% in the 1960's.

This stark political divide exists within the Jewish denominational community as well. Last week, an American Jewish Committee survey found that 71% of Orthodox Jews approve of Trump's performance as president, compared with with 25% of Conservative Jews, 11% of Reform, 8% of Reconstructionists and 14% of those identifying as "just Jewish."

You may have heard about a month ago that 3 of the major Jewish denominations, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative, canceled, *before being invited*, their participation in the now yearly call with the President just before Rosh Hashanah. The call would normally last around 45 minutes, with a long statement from the President and then a few pre-planned (and often vetted) questions from each denomination.

The language used in their statement was quite strong: "The president's words have given succor to those who advocate anti-Semitism, racism, and xenophobia. His statements during and after the tragic events in Charlottesville are so lacking in moral leadership and empathy for the victims of racial and religious hatred that we cannot organize such a call this year."

On the other hand, Rabbi Avi Shafran, the official spokesperson for the Ultra-Orthodox Umbrella Org Agudath Israel, wrote in the Jewish Daily Forward a justification for taking the call, which Trump did end up organizing--mainly for orthodox Jewish leaders. He said: There is a difference between respectfully asking a president to clarify that he does not equate proponents of white supremacy with protesters against the same, and starkly insulting our nation's duly elected national leader. Jewish religious tradition is very clear on the matter of showing honor to governmental leaders – even those with overactive Twitter feeds, then citing how Moses, even while informing Pharaoh that the Jewish People will come to leave Egypt, took pains to craft his words with respect.

Rabbi Shafran somehow forgot to mention the plagues that God and Moses unleashed on Egypt--I think we'd all agree, a less than respectful technique. Thank God.

Sometimes it feels like we are two peoples. Or three or four. All emerging from one place, one core story. But does that story still hold us together? Does it still hold authority over us in such a way that it obligates all of us, to each of us? As Americans or as Jews?

Do these responses reflect a critique that's worthy of the current relationship between these two groups from one religion?

Have we shown up in large numbers recently for each other? Have we spent time recently in each other's homes, listening to shared stories of persecution and liberation? Do we even travel **to** each other's neighborhoods, and not **through** them?

Those Torahs behind me, I'd say they are doing a pretty good job of keeping small, like minded micro-communities together and connected--inspired even. In our community, a great job. But are they still glue for denominations? For Jewish neighborhoods worlds away or minutes apart? Do they still inspire a shared story for American and Israeli Jews?

A recent study found that Israeli Jews, when asked about their biggest long-term challenge, were as likely to mention affordable housing and cost of living, as they were national security. American Jews, asked the same question about Israel -- just one percent, 1, mentioned economic distress. Are we actually talking to each other? And if so, are we listening for the real concerns of the other, or only hearing what it is we believe to be important?

The distance between these two communities cuts to my core.

We need to ask these questions, and approach them honestly.

At the beginning of Parashat Nitzavim, read this past Shabbat, Moses tells the Israelites as they stand on the precipice of Israel--so close to their destination: Atem Nitzavim Hayom, Kul-Chem Lifnei Adonai -- "You stand here this day, all of you, before the Lord your God--your tribal heads, your elders, and your officials--all the people of Israel, even the stranger within your camp, from wood-chopper to water-drawer (in other words, every class of people)--to enter into **the covenant of the Lord your God**, and into God's oath, which God makes with you here today."

The covenant? What covenant? Didn't that happen already at Sinai? After we escaped from Egypt? Wasn't that the whole point of Sinai?

Hassidic commentator, Rabbi [Shmuel Bornsztain](#), who lived in the early 20th century, picks up on this as well: Why was there a need for a covenant just before they entered Eretz Yisrael, and after the Sinaitic covenant. He then quotes the Ba'Al Ha-Tanya: When two friends make a covenant, a sacred agreement, it is not for the present, for a time when they are very close, but for the future, because sometimes, as time lapses, their feelings of closeness dissolves. Thus the renewed covenant is meant to have them maintain their closeness even after those factors which brought it together no longer exist. The second covenant therefore came to ensure that even in dark times, amidst despair, when sacred stories become new and differing narratives--the loyalty might remain.

Just 40 short years after the first national covenant, the most important moment in our foundational history, a renewal was already necessary.

Because as the relationship evolves, so too the covenant must evolve with it. Or dissolve altogether, perhaps.

And therein lies, potentially, the distinct Jewish-values based paradigm that might inhabit all these the various relational gaps. *Brit. Covenant.*

Not one that was, *but ones that might be.*

Sir Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reflects on covenants, generally. "Covenants are more foundational than contracts. Covenants are beginnings, acts of moral engagement. They are couched in broad terms whose precise meaning is the subject of ongoing debate. Covenants are about identity. Covenants transform.

What makes covenant a concept for our time is that it affirms the dignity of difference. The great covenantal relationships--between mankind and God, between partners in intimate relationship, between members of a community and members of a society--they exist because both parties recognize: it is not good for a person or a community to be alone--Covenants exist *precisely* because we are different and seek to preserve that difference, even as we come together to bring our several gifts to the common good."

Like God and humanity forged, together.

We are in need of several renewed covenants, internally and externally. We need new commitments for old relationships. New Torah, grounded in ancient Torah.

I'd like to share one model, one story, of what that process of powerfully inhabiting the precarious gap and re-establishing covenant, looks like.

After March for Racial Justice organizers were publicly excoriated by almost all sectors of the Jewish community, days of closed-door conversations took place between Black and Jewish leaders, primarily millennials. March Organizer, [Dorcas Davis](#), reflected on that experience (which I've slightly edited so that it would read in a sermon):

"I've been on the phone all day and most of yesterday because I want to understand this storm--the anger we are receiving. I recognize that we have hurt people.

What I've come to realize is that our misstep was that we were naïve to the complexity of Jewish identity and the observance Yom Kippur. In many Black and other People Of Color communities, we don't have a parallel religious holiday. We WOULD hold marches on Easter and Christmas or whenever else. They are not holidays that reaffirm our identities or our humanity, In fact, many of us share the religion of the people murdering us--*that* connection hasn't stopped them. September 30 is significant bc it marks the date of the The Elaine Massacre, in which an entire town was erased. It started at a church.

In our initial conversations with Jewish leaders and Jews about the conflict of Yom Kippur, we were hearing it through the lens of a holiday. What I am hearing now is that Yom Kippur is a HOLY day, where Jews reconnect to their people and faith and are made whole, spiritually

and historically. I get it, and I apologize to those who feel like we were asking them to choose between being a Jew and standing up for racial injustice – we are not.

I realize, he continued, that the tragedy of Charlottesville opened up many wounds and that is part of the anger and hurt. Where I stand now – where we stand now, is being in dialogue with Black, Brown, indigenous and Jewish people to work together so that our traumas and humanity are seen, our histories reclaimed and our voices heard, but not at the expense of each other."

This, friends, is what reconciliation looks like when we transcend the typical assault-style op-ed pedagogy we've become addicted to.

Conflict has so much potential to be generative, if we let it, a friend and Adas member who was involved in the talks recently wrote to me. (*Rebecca Ennen!*)

I would add, if we are truly loyal to one another's humanity---if we feel each others stories even when they don't appear to intersect with ours--conflict has the potential to be covenantal.

A handful of people, previously strangers, worlds apart but minutes away, open to new truths, willing to be wrong, but wanting and needing to be united.

Yes, the black and Jewish community share intersecting points of similarity and bonds of friendship in our American pasts. But let's be honest, what was in the early to mid-20th century - two systemically persecuted communities, pervasive for both, is hardly any more. To believe otherwise is to be willfully blind to a reality in which, generally, we have been able to blend as another and climb out of degradation, while our brothers and sisters of color, Jews of color included, still fight for that same opportunity.

When I get into my car, I'm always fearful that an accident could quickly change my life. But I've never worried a traffic stop could end it.

Charlottesville, while not totally isolated, certainly lifted the veil off American bigotry and anti-semitism and re-opened wounds in a painfully raw way. Jews today do have legitimate reason for concern - we need to be very awake.

and we have real work to do; but it can't be done alone. It's time to renew old loyalties and create new ones altogether, risky and vulnerable as it will likely make us. Our shared history is no longer enough to determine our necessary future. The more we rely on it, without honestly and openly acknowledging the new truths underneath spacious gaps, the further we distance ourselves from the modern covenants we need.

This December 25 will mark the 102st anniversary of the famous [Christmas Truce of World War I](#). On December 25, 1914, "British and German troops in trenches on the Western Front...put down their weapons and walked into No Man's Land. There were joint burial ceremonies and prisoner swaps, while several meetings ended in carol-singing. Men played games of football (I think that means soccer) with one another, exchanging cigarettes, schnapps and chocolate with the enemy.

It makes for a great story. Powerful... but with almost no historical significance. It didn't end the war; WWI endured for years. It didn't stop the brutal killing.

But it does offer a glimpse into the complexity of being human and in relationship. A flickering light of what it might take to renew covenants--to venturing into a No Man's Land, literal or figurative, putting ourselves at risk, for the sake of something far greater. Our shared humanity. Our equal dignity. A dignity that preserves our differences.

My mentor gave me another relationship book. He knew me very well. Here's what I learned from *7 Principles For Making Marriage Work*:

Relationships demand **continuously creating shared meaning**---rich with symbols and rituals, and a deep appreciation for the others' roles and goals that link them. When a marriage has a transparent, agreed upon, shared sense of meaning, conflict is much less intense and perpetual problems are less likely to lead to gridlock.

I feel called this year. I feel called to re-engage and help end the gridlock, any relational gridlock. I've been on my side too much. I haven't ventured into the no-man's land, that space between the desert and Eretz Yisra'el.

I feel called to build new stories with new people and old family. To create second covenants.

I hope you'll join me.

Shana Tova.