

Repairing Broken Relationships

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Many years ago, I was invited to the law offices of Jake Stein, a legendary attorney in Washington D.C. As I sat in front of his desk, I noticed a really large model of a giant fish mounted on the wall behind him. Under the fish was a caption that read, "If I had just kept my big mouth shut, I wouldn't be here."

Oh, how true that is!

Many problems that we encounter in our life could have been avoided if only we had managed to keep our big mouths shut. In the discussion of vows (*nedarim*), in the opening section of parashat Matot, we see that the Torah and the Talmud recognize the importance of helping correct mistakes that we have made by using our words incorrectly.

The portion begins:

Moses spoke to the heads of the Israelite tribes, saying: This is what the LORD has commanded: If a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips.

If a woman makes a vow to the LORD or assumes an obligation while still in her father's household by reason of her youth, and her father learns of her vow or her self-imposed obligation and offers no objection, all her vows shall stand and every self-imposed obligation shall stand. But if her father restrains her on the day he finds out, none of her vows or self-imposed obligations shall stand; and the LORD will forgive her, since her father restrained her (30:2-5).

According to the text of the written Torah it is only a woman that makes a vow who can have her vow annulled. The annulment can be made by her husband or father only on the same day she makes a vow. On the other hand, a man that makes his vow has no recourse, and must keep true to his vow regardless of the situation.

Although that is the plain reading of the written text, the Oral Law, tells us that the man also has recourse to annul a vow. The Talmud in Chagiga tells us that all the laws of Nedarim are "hanging by a thread," meaning that many of the laws are not explicitly found in the written text of the Torah and are known only through the Oral Law. This statement is also a recognition that the concept of annulment of vows allows us to do something audacious and completely necessary—undo the effects of the spoken word.

Explains the Talmud that when the verse states, "he may not annul his vows," it means that the man may not annul his own vows, but that therefore other people **can** annul them for him (Chagiga, 10a). This is done through the process of *Hatarat Nedarim*, whereby a man goes before a scholar or a court of three and asks for his vows to be annulled.

The process of *hatarat nedarim* was first and foremost instituted for extraordinary situations that can impact us for our entire life. The Talmud in Nedarim gives many examples of a person who has vowed not to benefit from another person thereby effectively terminating their relationship forever. We can imagine that this refers to a situation where in a fit of rage a person has uttered words that would in effect cut off a relationship entirely. The concept of the annulment of vows allows us to turn back the clock and for these harsh and angry words to be erased and for relationships to be miraculously preserved.

The verse states that a husband can annul the vows of his wife and that “Hashem will forgive her” (30:13). The Talmud tells us that when Rabbi Akiva would reach this verse he would cry (Nazir, 23a). Thus, we see that Rabbi Akiva cried when he encountered the concept that Hashem allows us to take the spoken word and undo it. This is the spiritual power of *hatarat nedarim*—it allows to salvage relationships that would otherwise be destroyed. It is for this reason that we recite *hatarat nedarim* on the eve of Rosh Hashanah and then again on Yom Kippur night (Kol Nidrei). We are asking for Hashem to help us repair broken relationships.

According to the Talmud the majestic spiritual power of Yom Kippur is only effective for matters between human beings and Hashem, but it is not effective as it relates to sins between fellow human beings (Yoma, 87a). As it relates to matters where we have wronged another human being, we may not rely upon prayer and fasting, but instead we must seek to repair the relationships on our own.

Repairing a broken relationship is extremely difficult.

This week, as our daf yomi group completed tractate Yoma, we encountered tragic stories from the Talmud of rabbis who had broken relationships that they were unsuccessfully trying to repair.

In one story, even though Rav was the wronged party, he set out to make it easier for the offending person to ask him for forgiveness:

Rav had a complaint against a certain butcher who insulted him. The butcher did not come before him to apologize. On Yom Kippur eve, Rav said: I will go and appease him. He met his student Rav Huna, who said to him: Where is my Master going? He said to him: I am going to appease so-and-so. Rav Huna called Rav by his name and said: Abba is going to kill a person, for surely that person's end will not be good. Rav went and stood by him. He found the butcher sitting and splitting the head of an animal. The butcher raised his eyes and saw him. He said to him: Are you Abba? Go, I have nothing to say to you. While he was splitting the head, one of the bones of the head flew out and struck him in the throat and killed him, thereby fulfilling Rav Huna's prediction (Yoma, 87a).

According to this story, even though Rav was wronged and he had the best of intentions, he still made the situation worse and provoked the offending butcher into a tragic mistake. Although

the butcher was absolutely wrong, Rav should not have gone near him on the eve of Yom Kippur.

In another story involving Rav we see that even great rabbis can sometimes allow their own ambitions to interfere with the concept of fixing a broken friendship.

Rav was once reciting the Torah portion before Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. Rabbi Ḥiyya, Rav's uncle and teacher, came in, whereupon Rav returned to the beginning of the portion and began to read it again. Afterward, bar Kappara came in, and Rav returned to the beginning of the portion out of respect for bar Kappara. Then Rabbi Shimon, son of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, came in, and he returned again to the beginning of the portion. Then, Rabbi Ḥanina bar Ḥama came in, and Rav said to himself: Shall I go back and read so many times? He did not return but continued from where he was. Rabbi Ḥanina was offended because Rav showed that he was less important than the others. Rav went before Rabbi Ḥanina on Yom Kippur eve every year for thirteen years to appease him, but he would not be appeased. The Gemara asks: How could Rav act this way? Didn't Rabbi Yosei bar Ḥanina say: Anyone who requests forgiveness from another should not ask more than three times? The Gemara answers: Rav is different, since he was very pious and forced himself to act beyond the letter of the law. The Gemara asks: And how could Rabbi Ḥanina act this way and refuse to forgive Rav, though he asked many times? Didn't Rava say: With regard to anyone who suppresses his honor and forgives someone for hurting him, God pardons all his sins? The Gemara explains: Rather, this is what happened: Rabbi Ḥanina saw in a dream that Rav was being hung on a palm tree, and he learned as a tradition that anyone about whom there is a dream in which he was being hung on a palm tree will become the head of a yeshiva. He said: Learn from this that providence has decreed that he must eventually become the head of the yeshiva. Therefore, I will not be appeased, so that he will have to go and study Torah in Babylonia. He was conscious of the principle that one kingdom cannot overlap with another, and he knew that once Rav was appointed leader, he, Rabbi Ḥanina, would have to abdicate his own position or die. Therefore, he delayed being appeased, so that Rav would go to Babylonia and be appointed there as head of the yeshiva. In this way, the dream would be fulfilled, as Rav would indeed be appointed as head of a yeshiva, but since he would be in Babylonia, Rabbi Ḥanina would not lose his own position. (Yoma, 87b).

These stories demonstrate that there is no blueprint as to how to repair a broken friendship. Rav was perhaps the greatest sage of the Talmud and yet he could not fix the situation—not with respect to the butcher and not with respect to Rabbi Hanina. With respect to the butcher, all he should have done was remove himself from the situation, and with respect to Rabbi Hanina all he could do was remove himself from the situation.

All of us have been in a situation where we have wronged others and have sought forgiveness for our actions. This is not a pleasant feeling and it should motivate us, when we are the ones from whom forgiveness is sought, to view the matter differently and to be generous with our powers of forgiveness.

This week we read a special Haftorah from Jeremiah chapter 2, that relates to the darkest spiritual period of the year, the three weeks leading up to Tisha Be'Av, and reminds us why we should generously forgive those who have wronged us.

The haftorah states that Jeremiah rebukes the *Benei Yisrael* and says to them: "Your evil will catch up with you and chastise you, and your backslidings will eventually reprove you" (Jeremiah, 2:19).

The phrase "your evil will chastise you," is explained by the Ba'al Shem Tov to mean, "that when we see evil in someone else, we should consider that person a mirror reflecting to us our own evil. Since people generally find it difficult to see their own shortcomings (and easy to see oother'), God arranges to show us our own faults in others. In this way, 'Your [own] evil [that you see in your neighbor] can chastise you'" (Haftarot, Based on the Commentary of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, 345.)

The period of the three weeks leading up to Tisha Be'av is then followed by the seven weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah. These ten weeks are supposed to be a time of deep introspection and are the most important time of the year for all of us to engage in *teshuvah*, often translated as repentance.

Teshuvah literally means to return, or to turn.

Jeremiah says that we have turned the backs of our neck to God (*ki panu ailei oref*, 2:27). The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that this idiom is based upon the fact that since God is everywhere it is actually an impossibility to be distant from God. All we can do is change our orientation away from God, by turning away. Thus, *teshuvah* literally means that we reorient ourselves by changing our orientation and perspective (Haftarot, 347).

This process of *teshuvah* –changing our perspective—is essential for all of us, not only in our relationship with Hashem, but also in our interpersonal relationships. Perhaps if we are successful in changing our perspective, it will help us all repair any broken relationships.

You can now watch a Youtube recording of Rabbi Herzfeld's D'var Torah:
<https://youtu.be/x33d8DxxMj8>