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“Rabbi...” began my instructor. “Would you like to lead us in an opening prayer?”

I looked up from my notes and glanced around the room at fifty pastors eagerly awaiting my prayer. I really don't like moments like these. You have to be both spontaneous and genuine, even if you're still waking up. You have to sound Jewish, but not so Jewish that they can't relate to you. A little Hebrew for the sake of authenticity is good, but not too much.

I had been asked to give the blessing, I think, because I was somewhat of a novelty. I was taking a counseling class designed for clergy through UW-Extension, and our instructor was a Christian therapist, meaning that he was not only Christian but he did therapy from a Christian perspective. Our instructor was quite thoughtful, as were many of the pastors. They challenged many of my assumptions about pastoral care and offered new models that are not common in the Jewish community.

In some ways, counseling is counseling, and the particular perspective, religious or not, doesn't matter much. But sometimes it does. At one point, when our instructor was discussing how to counsel someone who is having an affair, I realized how our religious traditions really do shape how we do this work.

“If a man comes into your office and tells you he is having an affair, there are two legitimate schools of thought as to how to work with him,” he explained. “The first is that you should help him both stop the affair and tell his wife what happened so that he can ask her to forgive him. The second is that you should help him stop the affair but not encourage him to tell his wife. Rather, help him deal with what happened privately in counseling.”

Our instructor said he preferred the second school of thought. He clarified that he doesn't promote lying – he promotes protecting. “It might be too difficult for the spouse to handle,” he argued, “and there might not be any good reason to tell her as long as the affair stops and the husband learns from his mistakes.”

That just didn't sound right, and soon I realized why. It contradicts all of our Jewish teachings on *teshuvah*, of making amends, seeking forgiveness, and setting things right. If we wrong others – cheat on them, steal from them, lie to them, humiliate them – we have to ask for forgiveness from *them*, not just work on changing ourselves privately. If we don't, we're evading responsibility for our actions.

But telling the person we've harmed is only part of it. The ancient rabbis describe five basic elements of *teshuvah*, and for complete *teshuvah* to take place, we have to do all of them.

First, we have to recognize what we have done wrong. We have to admit that our actions were misguided and acknowledge that what we have done is problematic, hurtful, or harmful and that we have failed to maintain our moral standards.

Second, we have to feel remorse. *Teshuvah* involves an emotional component. If we don't feel genuinely sorry for what we have done, and guilty for our behavior, our apologies will ring hollow and we will likely continue the wrongdoing.

Third is the confession part, the place where I parted ways with my instructor. The act of saying something out loud makes it real. If we sin against another human being we have to tell him, or her, what we have done – openly, honestly, and directly. Doing so forces us to confront the consequences of our actions. God cannot forgive us for the sin we commit against our neighbor; only our neighbor can.

Fourth, we have to attempt to make restitution. We need to deal with the damage we have done. It might involve financial compensation or a public apology. It's not always possible to make restitution, and it doesn't erase what's happened, but it's an important component if it can be done.

And lastly, we have to stop the actions we are apologizing about in the first place. *Teshuvah* implies a real change of behavior. We can't make amends for what we have done wrong if we continue to wrong our neighbor. And we must truly commit ourselves to not doing the sin if a similar situation or opportunity or temptation arises in the future.

Doing *teshuvah* and going through these steps can be complicated, difficult, and emotionally charged, but the process is fairly straightforward. Things become more complex, though, when we are a third party witnessing a wrongdoing. What is our role? Should we speak up? Remain silent? How do we best care for the person who is being wronged and act with integrity? How do we interact with the person who is committing the sin?

My cousin, Max, used to be a very prominent politician. One weekend some of my cousins travelled to New York City together and went to the theater. During intermission they ran into Max, who happened to be out on a date with a woman who was not his wife, Anna. I'm told it was quite an embarrassing situation, and it created real controversy among my cousins. What should they do? Should they tell Anna? Keep it to themselves? The disagreement happened to break down generationally – my parents' generation said to keep quiet. My generation said to tell her.

The cousins of my parents' generation felt that if they told Anna it would have hurt her terribly. Not only would she learn this ugly information about her husband, but she would also know that her cousins knew her husband was cheating on her. It would have been humiliating. She would probably find out on her own. Maybe she didn't want to know. Or it was possible that

she already knew and was tolerating the behavior for her own reasons. This was a private matter, and it wasn't their place to intervene. It was best just to forget about the whole thing.

The cousins of my generation couldn't understand how they could not tell her. How could they walk around with this secret? Why should Max get off the hook so easily? It's true he was a politician and the information could harm his career, but it wasn't right to protect him while Anna was oblivious to what was going on. And what would happen if she found out that everyone knew? She would be even more hurt.

I'm not exactly sure what happened, but they're now divorced.

I sided with the cousins of my generation. I believe that my older cousins had Anna's best interests at heart, but I also suspect that they desperately wanted to avoid conflict. Speaking up would have potentially entailed two conversations – first with Max to tell him that they could not keep his secret, and then with Anna.

Both conversations would probably have been painful, and they could have created real strain on my cousins' relationships with Max and Anna. But addressing the issue directly with each of them could have really helped them. My cousins could have taken great care not to gossip or be overly intrusive, but instead to be a source of support for each of them. It could have strengthened their relationships with Max and Anna at a time when each of them really needed their love and compassion.

I think we do a real disservice to ourselves and to others if we are silent in situations like these, especially if I'm right – that ultimately the older generation's desire not to tell was really about avoiding conflict.

I can't help but think of the story of Jonah, which is traditionally read on the afternoon of Yom Kippur. Granted, it's a little extreme, but it's the perfect story of someone who wants to avoid conflict so badly that he will go to any length to do it. God commands Jonah, who is a prophet, to go to the city of Nineveh to tell the people that they must change their ways. And what does Jonah do? He runs the other way and boards a ship to Tarshish. So God causes a huge storm to erupt while Jonah is on the ship. As the sailors do whatever they can to stay afloat, Jonah decides to go to sleep. Either he would rather drown than face up to reality, or he believes someone else will save him. Regardless, he abdicates any responsibility for the storm until the sailors confront him directly.

"How can you sleep?!" the shipmaster asks him. "Tell us, who is causing this great storm?" Jonah tells the sailors that God is the one who is causing the storm and he tells them to throw him into the sea. After they do so the storm subsides. Jonah is then swallowed up by a great fish. After three days and nights in the belly of the fish, Jonah faces up to God and the fish vomits him onto dry land. God again says, "Go to Nineveh to tell the people to change their ways." This time Jonah finally agrees.

For whatever reason, Jonah really wanted to avoid going to Nineveh. He didn't want to get involved – maybe he just couldn't be bothered, or it seemed too difficult a task. He might have been afraid, or he didn't want to interfere, or he didn't see it as his responsibility.

So often, when we are presented with a conflict of some kind, we can't be bothered, or the task before us seems too difficult. We are afraid, or we don't want to interfere, or we don't see the problem as our responsibility. But one of the messages of the story of Jonah is that we should not avoid confrontation. In fact, it is so problematic that Jonah evades his responsibility as a prophet that God causes him to be swallowed by a great fish. My cousins, like Jonah, were the third-party observers of wrongdoing. I don't believe they should not have remained silent.

I would guess that for most of us, myself included, dealing with conflict is hard. It's uncomfortable to tell people that what they are doing is hurtful or dishonest or unjust. But it's important. It's so important that it's an obligation in Jewish tradition. It's called *tochecha*, which literally means rebuke, and there many texts that outline exactly how to confront someone and when to confront someone so that doing so can be helpful and doesn't humiliate or shame someone or lead to gossiping.

One of my favorite texts from Talmud takes this even further:

Anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of one's household and does not, is responsible for the actions of the members of the household; anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of one's townspeople and does not, is responsible for the transgressions of the townspeople; anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of the entire world and does not is responsible for the transgressions of the entire world (Shabbat 54b).

We have a responsibility to our loved ones, to our community, to our neighbors and colleagues, and to people whom we do not even know to speak up when we observe a wrongdoing – not in a meddling, gossipy, or intrusive sort of way, and especially not in a way that that is a veiled attack on someone we don't like, but in a manner that is loving and compassionate.

When we see someone doing something that we know is wrong, it's also an opportunity to remind ourselves that we too make mistakes. We may be observing someone else's transgressions, but we are not so flawless that we should stand arrogantly in judgment of them. The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism, taught that if you see another person doing something ugly, you should first meditate on the presence of that same ugliness in yourself (Seder ha-Dorot ha-Chadash, p. 59).

This is why the rabbis outline the five elements of *teshuvah* so specifically – recognize what you've done wrong, feel remorse, confess what you've done, make restitution, and stop doing the problematic action itself – because we *all* hurt other people sometimes. We *all* behave badly sometimes. We have to be accountable first for our own behavior if we are to live ethically and then work to nurture and build families, communities, and societies where we

care for each other, speak up when we see wrongdoing, and act so that we are truly responsible for each other.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah – May we be sealed for a good year.