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Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 5772
September 29, 2011

About a month ago I was talking to a colleague who works in a large congregation about High Holiday sermon writing. He was stressed. Really stressed.

"I have one sermon to give this year," he told me, "And I've been working on it for months."

"Months?" I asked, slowly realizing that I had not really begun thinking about my four sermons.

"It's not like I plan much with the services. I just call out page numbers. That's not interesting, anyway. People only come for the sermon."

"So what's the problem?" I asked.

"I deliver this sermon to 5,000 people, and I see most of them once, maybe twice a year. This sermon has to cause them to make real change in their lives."

"That's a lot of pressure. I mean – you barely know them. How is this one sermon going to lead them to act differently?"

"Well that's why it has to be REALLY good!"

"So what do you plan to talk about?"

"That's the problem. I keep giving sermons about the importance of personal change. I did reconciling with loved ones a couple years ago. Last year I did loneliness."

"That's good. So what's the problem?"

"I can't get pegged as the rabbi who only gives personal change sermons. I need to do something different this year."

"Okay. What if you talk more in the collective, talk about communal responsibility. Hey, talk about the economy – that's timely."

"I'm not an economist," he said with a touch of irritation in his voice.

"Neither am I – what does that have to do with anything? Talk about how we *all* need to grapple with the pain caused by unemployment, foreclosure, and deepening poverty. Talk about how the recession has affected your members."

“Do you know how many investment bankers are going to be sitting there? They’re not affected.”

“Do you know how many other people who are sitting there *are* affected? And everyone has family members who are hurting, neighbors who are hurting.” I paused. “And if they don’t, all the more reason they should hear your sermon.”

I have thought about this conversation a great deal, wondering about my colleague’s reticence to talk about collective or communal responsibility. It’s not that Judaism is silent on the matter – our tradition is full of teachings that guide our behavior towards others, that teach us how to treat the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. He reminded me that we often pit the individual against the collective – either we are concerned with our own self-improvement and the well-being of our family and friends *or* we are concerned with broader societal issues, helping people we may not even know or working for social change.

We likely know people who are so preoccupied with their own personal growth that they become self-centered. Or they are so committed to tending to the needs of their own families that they never consider the needs of families who live on the other side of town who cannot find jobs, cannot save their homes, cannot buy enough food to feed their kids.

Or we know people who are so absorbed with their commitment to helping the poor and with their vision of creating widespread social change that they evade responsibility for their actions and neglect their intimate relationships. They are so quick to blame others, be they politicians or bankers, that they do not examine how *they* have failed those who are the closest to them.

Our concern with the individual and our concern with societal issues are closely related. If there is one central message of these High Holy Days it is that we are accountable to others – spouse and stranger alike. We are accountable to friends and family, to community members and colleagues, to the stranger across town.

It is much easier for some of us to focus on the immediacy of our own lives and to work hard to cultivate strong relationships with loved ones and with the people we interact with on a daily basis. Others of us prefer to immerse ourselves in political work and to work hard to create social change that will benefit large groups of people. Both are paths to holiness, yet to walk only on one path leads us to turn away from someone important.

The challenge for us on these High Holy Days is to engage wholeheartedly in the parts of our lives that we are neglecting. These holy days call on us to do *teshuvah*, to turn towards our best selves. We are called to do *teshuvah* inside the small circle of our family and friends, reconciling with loved ones and taking responsibility for our actions. We are called to do *teshuvah* with our neighbor, with those in our community and in our workplace, to try to understand what they may need and extend a hand with generosity, kindness, and compassion. We are called to do *teshuvah* with the strangers in our midst, to see our destinies as intimately woven with theirs, to open our hearts to their suffering, to work so that their voices are heard.

We begin with our own families. The Book of Genesis tells of the acrimonious relationship between Jacob and Esau, twin brothers who struggle bitterly with sibling rivalry, parental favoritism, and transcending others' assumptions of who they should be. Jacob cheats Esau twice, taking both the birthright and his father's blessing. They fight so fiercely that Jacob has to flee in order to save his life. But after twenty years, the brothers meet again. Jacob makes restitution to Esau. Esau rises above his old feelings of revenge and runs to embrace Jacob. Jacob rises above his old feelings of superiority, and he declares, "When I see your face, it is like seeing the face of God." This is a story of both the desire for revenge and the imperative of reconciliation. It is a story of what it means to set things right in our family.

What is the bitterness existing between us and our families, between us and our friends? What relationships have soured or even dissolved? We can speak easily of what others have done to us, but what have we done to others? What was our role in the conflict? What hostility or resentment are we still holding on to? And most importantly, how might we let it go and begin to repair our relationships?

Rabbinic commentators are quick to point out that the reconciliation between Jacob and Esau was far from perfect, and they do not fully come to terms with what happened between them. But they reconcile nonetheless. What an important lesson for us – reconciliation is so rarely perfect, and in holding out for some storybook version of forgiveness, we miss real opportunities to reconcile with loved ones and recreate broken relationships.

The story of Jacob and Esau is one of being accountable to another, of being accountable to someone we know quite intimately. These relationships are often the most intense because we have such deep ties to our family or friends. *Teshuvah* begins here, with loved ones, but it does not end here. We are also accountable to our neighbor, to those in our community and in our workplace.

A story is told of Reb Yitzhak Meir Alter, who was known as the Gerer Rebbe. One day, after the morning prayer service, he asked one of his disciples, "How is Moshe Ya'akov doing?"

Confused, his disciple stammered, "I – I am not sure. Is there something I should know?"

And with that the Rebbe shouted, "What? You pray under the same roof? You pray from the same book? You serve the same God? You study the same Torah? Yet you do not know how Moshe Yaakov is doing? You do not know whether he needs help or advice or comfort? How can that be?" (adapted from a sermon by Rabbi Marc Soloway).

Who is the Moshe Ya'akov in our communities? Whose welfare should we be inquiring about? Whom have we neglected? Who might need our help or advice or comfort?

We live in an extremely individualized society. That makes being in community, in real community, a radical act. In reality, the places where we pray or work or live are not the kind of community in which the Gerer Rebbe lived. Yet we can still act as if they are, inquiring after our neighbor and extending a hand with generosity, kindness, and compassion.

One of the most challenging ideas in the Torah comes from the Book of Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). The great Talmudic sage, Rabbi Akiva, calls this the most important principle in the Torah. Not only are we responsible to our neighbor, but we are instructed to love our neighbor, to love the Moshe Ya’akov who is sitting at the back of the room or whom we see only in passing. Compassion – love – for others is the very core of what it means to be Jewish.

However, not everyone agrees with Rabbi Akiva. The Talmud records a debate between Rabbi Akiva and a man by the name of Ben Azzai who questions Akiva’s conviction that “Love your neighbor as yourself” is the most important principle in the Torah. Instead he argues that the most important principle in the Torah comes from the Book of Genesis: “This is the record of Adam's line. — When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God” (Gen 5:1). Ben Azzai maintains that we should tend to the needs of others not out of love but out of sacred responsibility – every human being is created in the divine image and thus any harm or injustice perpetrated towards a human being is harm or injustice against God.

Rabbi Arthur Green elaborates on this debate in a lecture entitled the “Theology of Empathy” and explains the wisdom of Ben Azzai’s position:

Every human being is God’s image...Some are easier to love, some are harder. Some days you can love them, some days you can’t. But you still have to recognize and treat them all as the image of God. Love is too shaky a pedestal on which to stand the entire Torah. It is too dangerous to base the world on the commandment to love.

Moreover, argues Rabbi Green, Ben Azzai might have seen that the concept of “neighbor” could be narrowed to only one’s fellow Jew whereas his principle “leaves no room for exceptions, since it goes back to Creation itself.”

It’s an important question to ask – do we base our ethical treatment of others on love or on the belief that each of us has within us a spark of the divine – because it begs the basic question of why we should care about others and why we should do *teshuvah*. Certainly self-interest is involved – we want to enjoy healthy, loving relationships with family and friends – and we want to benefit from living in strong communities where people care for each other’s welfare. But ultimately, our concern for others goes beyond self-interest; it is rooted in love and self-respect.

Judaism is a religion of obligation that extends past ourselves, past our relationship with friends and family, past our relationship with our neighbors. Judaism teaches that we are also accountable to the stranger. Both through loving the stranger and refraining from oppressing the stranger, the Torah does not mince words, and it repeats it over and over again: “You shall love the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Deut. 10:19) And: “You shall not oppress the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 22:20).

If we think of the stranger as the one who is marginalized, the one whose existence in our society is precarious, we can hold ourselves accountable to this person as well as to our family, friends, neighbors, community members, and colleagues. The Torah commands us to have empathy towards the stranger because we know what suffering is, and therefore it is our obligation to work to prevent the suffering of another.

The challenge, however, is that many of us do not know what real suffering is. We were not actually slaves in Egypt, so we can only rely on the teachings of our tradition to invoke that empathy.

We often perceive ourselves as so different from the stranger, and in many ways, we are. We have had different experiences, hold different assumptions, dream different dreams. We cannot presume to truly understand someone else's suffering.

Yet the words, "V'ahavta l'rayecha kamoachah," while usually translated as "Love your neighbor as yourself" can also be translated as "Love your neighbor. For he is like you."

"Love your neighbor. For he is like you." Your neighbor and the stranger alike are just like you. Love that other person, because you struggle just like him. You love your family just like him. You make mistakes just like him.

"Love your neighbor. For she is like you." Love that other person because you laugh just like her. You worry about your children just like her. You hurt just like her.

Love that other person because, in the words of Ben Azzai, you were both created in the image of God. You are both holy beings who are trying to walk in God's ways. You are both trying to make sense out of this world in which we live.

As Rabbi Green writes, "Empathy means *both* embracing each of us in our diversity *and* seeing through to our oneness."

The High Holy Days teach us that we are accountable to the other – to our family, friends, neighbors, community members, colleagues, and the strangers in our midst. We each struggle with accountability in different ways – being more or less comfortable with being responsible to our loved ones, neighbors, or strangers in our society. Some of us walk the path of personal growth, some of social change.

Before us are different challenges. May we look honestly at who we are, how we struggle, and who deserves our love and respect. May we love those whom we know most intimately and those whom we do not know but with whom we have a shared destiny. May we build connections with others that will make us all stronger in this New Year.

L'shanah tovah – may this be a good new year for us all.