

## Appreciating The Cracked Pots in Our Lives

On this day when our thoughts focus on questions dealing with the meaning of life, we reflect on what truly matters and what we value, we look to our ancient texts as a source of inspiration and guidance to help us find the path to a more meaningful life and with our current struggles.

Take for example the story of Joseph whose brothers held him in such contempt they sold him into slavery in Egypt for twenty pieces of silver – a paltry amount which led not only to his being sold into slavery, but initiated the trail of events which eventually led to our being enslaved for 400 years in Egypt. One midrash says that this occurred on the tenth of Tishrei and that the brothers were paid not in silver, but with a pair of shoes, which is one of the reasons the tradition enjoins us not to wear leather shoes on Yom Kippur, the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tishri.

Perhaps the selling of Joseph is what inspired Shel Silverstein's poem, "One Sister for Sale."

One sister for sale,  
One sister for sale,  
One crying and spying young sister for sale  
I'm really not kidding so who'll start the bidding  
Do I hear a dollar?  
A nickle?  
A penny?  
Oh isnt there isnt there isnt there any  
One person who will buy this sister for sale  
This crying spying old young sister for sale."

While I am not aware of any congregants selling a sibling into slavery, unfortunately, too many of us either have experienced personally, or know of situations where the falling out with family members can be of biblical proportion.

If you ever think you've got *tsoris* or that dysfunction is confined to your family, all you have to do is read the all too public disputes chronicled in some of the most prominent of families.

A successful New York real estate family that once spent every Passover together at the Fountainbleu in Miami had a falling out that resulted in a series of nasty and messy lawsuits. Things got so out of hand one of the partners sent a videotape to his sister of her husband with a prostitute which he set up and arranged to have filmed. Needless to say, sadly, the family doesn't spend Passover or any holiday together anymore.

Across the Atlantic, the royal family of England has had their share of *tsoris* as well.

Despite his daughter's request not to get entangled with the press, Thomas Markle, Meghan Markle's father gave embarrassing interviews and posed for pictures trying on clothes for the

wedding he was not going to attend in May. It is reported that the Duchess of Sussex has not spoken with her father since the wedding. The last time they spoke he hung up the phone on her husband to-be, His Royal Highness, the Duke of Sussex, Prince Harry. Her half-sister and half-brother are also on the outs, and shouldn't expect an invitation to the Royal Palace anytime soon, as they have spoken publicly and disparagingly about Meghan and their relationship, or lack of one.

Each case is a story not unfamiliar to us, because they are our stories as well. I mention them this morning, not so we can have a moment of schaudenfreude, but to help us realize no one is immune from the primary factors that cause separation, division, divisiveness and distance in families and relationships. The falling out in the first instance appears to be the result of a dispute over money. The second one apparently is motivated by resentment fueled by jealousy, slights and hurt feelings that predate the royal nuptials. Tragically, all of us probably know of a family which has its story of separation, alienation, pain and rejection, of parents estranged from children or siblings not talking to each other. The loss of someone who was once a friend can also be painful.

The question is -- what do we do when we feel an injustice has been done to us and we feel we were wronged by a loved one?

Let us turn to our story of Joseph to see how he handled the situation.

Through a series of events, Joseph rose to become vizier to the king, a position comparable to being the king's chief of staff or his prime minister. Meanwhile, his brothers came to Egypt to escape the famine in their own land. And as luck would have it, they come before the same kid they so despised and resented. Only he was neither a kid nor a slave any longer. In the 17 years since they sent him away, the boy has become a man, and is unrecognizable as he is clothed in the vestiges of the power and authority he commands. Coming before him face to face as foreigner supplicants, vulnerable, in need of food and supplies, they bow before him, just as Joseph had foreseen.

Never in their wildest dreams could they have imagined that they would see him again, and they certainly had no way of expecting that this person with a full entourage of his own was the brother they had once scorned.

So what did Joseph do? Presented with the perfect opportunity to punish them and take retribution, he did not. Instead he forgave them for what they did to him. He reassures his frightened brothers that he bears no bitterness towards them and that they should not worry or be upset, because it turned out for the best since it was all part of God's Divine plan.

How was he able to overcome the humiliation and abuse of being thrown into a pit, bullied, sold into slavery, and having his father told that he had been killed?

We find a clue in the name Joseph gives to his first born son Menashe. “*Ki nishani Elohim et kol amali v’et kol beit avi*: For God has made me forget all the sorrows and hardships I experienced at my father’s house.” In other words, he chooses not to dwell on the pain he suffered in his youth. He overcomes the inclination to seek retribution and instead forgives and thanks God for giving him the ability to forgive and forget.

A friend told me that when kids fight they often get back together on the playground after a little while, but adults can hold onto their feeling of being wronged for a long time. He said the difference is that kids want to be happy, whereas adults want to be right.

On more than one occasion I, as your rabbi have told you the importance of the word *zachor*, remember, and have implored and beseeched you to do so. It is the key to understanding who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. It is one of the distinguishing hallmarks of the Jewish people. But today, in the context of dealing with troubled relationships, I want to tell you a different message – the importance of letting go so we can forgive and heal and move on.

All of us have suffered wrongs, but surely we have also done things we regret. Too often we remember the unfulfilled promises made to us, but ignore the pledges we made and did not fulfill. We hold onto grudges and carry the slights done to us, but overlook the pain we may have caused others.

Joseph is teaching us not to be burdened by the weight of past grievances.

Several times on Yom Kippur we say: “*Eyn anachnu azei panim, lomar lifanecha tsaddikim anachnu vilo chatanu ... aval anachnu chatanu*. We should not be so arrogant, and we should not be so impudent, as to say before You, (O Lord) that we have never sinned, for the truth is: *ashamnu*. We have all sinned.” We all have wronged and been wronged.

Sometimes all it takes is a simple apology to open up a gate that may seem closed shut.

In the commencement address at Columbia University in New York City in 2006 John McCain spoke about how an adversary with whom he disagreed and once considered an enemy became a close friend. He told the graduates, “I had a friend once, who, a long time ago, in the passions and resentments of a tumultuous era in our history, I might have considered my enemy. He had come to the capitol of the country that held me prisoner, that deprived me and my dearest friends of our most basic rights, and that murdered some of us. He came to denounce our country’s involvement in the war. His speech was broadcast into our cells. I thought it a grievous wrong and I still do.”

The friend McCain was referring to was David Ifshin, who was a member of B’nai Tzedek.

An editorial in the *New York Sun* the day after the speech said, "It's hard to remember a more moving moment in college oratory than the one that came yesterday when Senator McCain, speaking at Columbia College on the subject of division and unity in American politics and war, suddenly started telling a personal story....And it's a testament to Ifshin's memory that a decade after he died a candidate for president is pausing to tell some of our finest graduates what his life meant for his country."

When David was a student at Syracuse University, head of a national student organization, and a prominent anti-Vietnam War activist, he traveled to Hanoi with Jane Fonda in 1970 where he delivered a speech condemning the war which was carried on Hanoi radio and broadcast into McCain's prison cell.

A few years later in October of 1973 when David was working on a kibbutz in Israel he witnessed first-hand the support America provided during the Yom Kippur War and the role played by emergency supplies rushed to Israel. He realized that although he had believed American involvement in Vietnam was a mistake, he should not have let his criticism blind him to his country's generosity and came to regret what he had done in his student activist days.

Years later when McCain was a freshman congressman he gave a speech at the request of the Reagan campaign criticizing Ifshin. At an Aipac dinner a year later the former war protester sought out and approached the former POW to offer a personal apology. As soon as he approached him, McCain stretched out his hand, saying, "I'd like to apologize to you for the statement I made about your Hanoi speeches last year. I was terribly wrong."

I have read several accounts of their meeting, and both McCain and Ifshin told me about it, but it still is not clear to me who approached who first to offer an apology, because each claimed it was the other one.

McCain spoke at David's funeral here at B'nai Tzedek and said of his one-time adversary, "I came to admire him for his generosity, his passion for his ideals, for the largeness of his heart, and I realized he had not been my enemy, but my countryman. We disagreed over much and our politics were often opposed,...but we worked together for our shared ideals. David taught me a lot about the meaning of courage. His friendship honored me. His country was a better place for his service to her, and I became a better man for my friendship with him."

Their friendship was made possible by a simple and sincere gesture. In reflecting on the relationship and all the good they did working together despite their differences McCain said, "Thank goodness we didn't waste any more time in anger. You can't put off setting your life right."

How true. We should not wait to make that call, to reach out to a person we once loved and may have hurt or from whom we may have grown distant.

Maimonides offers advice for how to approach someone you know who has done something wrong. It is called *tochecha*, and considered one of the most difficult things to do. He writes, “We should approach the sinner in private, and speak to him kindly and gently. Tell him how good and how honorable he has been in the past, and tell him that he can be good and honorable again, if only he will repent.” And then Maimonides says that “you should show the sinner kindness and respect and that you should not humiliate him, for his pain and his shame is already great enough.” The 12<sup>th</sup> century philosopher wisely suggests 21<sup>st</sup> century sensitivity towards the feelings of others.

When President Clinton was asked earlier this year if he had apologized to Monica Lewinsky for the pain he caused her, he said he didn’t have to, since he had already publicly apologized. Were I Mr. Clinton’s rabbi, I would have to tell him that actually the public apology does not suffice. Our tradition teaches that we must personally and directly ask forgiveness of the person we have wronged.

We say the vidui in synagogue and confess our sins to remind us of the misdeeds for which we need to atone. The Talmud and Maimonides say that atonement is achieved when one placates the person he offended which requires us to approach the individual directly.

Perhaps this explains our aversion and discomfort with the Catholic practice of going to confession. There is a story about a Catholic priest who asked his friend who was a rabbi if he could cover his confessional booth for him for the afternoon while he attended to some other matters. The rabbi sat in and observed a few confessions and heard the priest ask someone who confessed their sin how many times they had done it. When the confessor said he had sinned three times, the priest told him to say two Hail Mary’s, put \$15 in the collection box, and sin no more, and he will be absolved. The rabbi heard the priest do the same thing several times, and tells the priest he can go. He’s got the hang of it. The first person to come in for confession says he sinned. The rabbi doing as he saw the priest do, asks him how many times he has sinned. When the guy says, just once, the rabbi wasn’t sure what to say, so he tells him, “Go do two more. We’re running a special this week -- three sins for two Hail Mary’s and \$15.”

An interview with Raphael Bob-Waksberg creator of an animated Netflix series called BoJack Horseman and which I have never seen nor even heard of, caught my eye because in one short paragraph he captured the essence of the concept of teshuva. Discussing a scene where the talking horse is speaking at his mother’s funeral he explains that a big part of BoJack’s relationship with his mother is about the question of, what can you forgive? He says, “And can

you forgive when no apology is offered? You're not forgiving for her sake, you're forgiving for your own sake. Is that a thing worth doing? And how can you find a way to do that? I think there's a lot to be said for stopping, and changing. There's a danger in thinking, 'It's too late for me, therefore I'm just going to continue being a bad guy for the rest of my life.' I think that's really damaging and self-fulfilling — using your previous damage, or bad deeds, as an excuse to continue to do bad deeds.”

The answer to his question if you can forgive someone when no apology is offered is found in a book that just came out earlier this month.

Steve Jobs' notoriously aloof coldness was evident in his relationship with his daughter Lisa Brennan-Jobs. He refused to have anything to do with her and for years denied that he was her father. While he was riding high, Lisa and her mother were living on welfare. When she was a little girl desperately looking for love, acceptance and a connection with her father, he cruelly crushed her when he told her that the computer Lisa wasn't named after her.

In her recently published memoir, she writes that at the end of his life Mr. Jobs said he was sorry he had not spent more time with her, and for disappearing during her adulthood, forgetting birthdays and not returning notes or calls. Ms. Brennan-Jobs says she understood, and accepted that he was busy. Rather than graciously accept the olive branch she extended, Steve Jobs is brutally honest and tells her it wasn't because he was busy, but because he was mad she didn't invite him to attend some event with her at Harvard.

Yet, despite this and countless other slights, Lisa Brennan-Jobs has forgiven her father, even though he never could bring himself to ask for forgiveness. She looks at the things he did as teaching her not to ride on his coattails. She is at peace because she has come to terms with the fact that her father just did not have the capacity to be sensitive or to be the father she would have liked to have.

I haven't spoken with Lisa since her book came out — actually I've never spoken with Lisa, and don't know her. But I would venture to say that if I were to speak with her, she would say she is in a better place because, like Joseph, she is framing what happened to her positively and not allowing herself to be a victim. She is not allowing the much deserved resentment she could have for her father to define who she is.

Linda Nielsen a psychologist specializing in parent-child relationships and who teaches at Wake Forest University writes, “Forgiving her father is a gift a daughter gives, not just to her father, but to herself. In choosing not to allow her bitterness about his failings as a father to consume

her, a daughter is choosing not to deprive herself of whatever pleasure she can still derive from their relationship. She does not deny the past, but she does not dwell in it. Forgiving does not mean forgetting,”

Over the years, I have heard people seek sympathy as they enlist the support of others for the things someone did to them. They want to impress others with their victimhood, how much they were wronged, and how much they hurt. But it is rare for any good to come from holding onto such resentment and pain, and speaking ill of the person who caused the pain does not make it any easier. The better path is - Let it go. And if possible, control and change how you frame what has happened to you.

I read an amazing story last week about an extraordinarily courageous act. Jim Piazza whose son died in a terrible hazing incident at Penn State University last year decided to reach out and contact the leader of a national association of fraternities to ask for a meeting. At first Judson Horras, president and chief executive of the North American Interfraternity Conference was afraid and reluctant to meet. But he agreed to meet with Piazza and a few other parents whose sons had also died as a result of college fraternity hazing incidents. The grieving parents shared their pain. But they did not dwell on their loss, and suggested changes fraternities could make. As a result of the tough heartfelt discussions, over 100 fraternities and sororities representing over 6,000 chapters have agreed to work with the parents to promote education, limit or ban alcohol at their events and to work to pass laws against hazing.

The head of the organization, Judson Horras said that when they first reached out to him he did not want to meet, but after he left the difficult first meeting with the parents, he felt it was a gift from God.

Such is the power of forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. It can feel as if the hand of God is present.

I want to conclude with a story.

Once upon a time there was a vasser trager, someone who made his living bringing water to the people in his village. He had two pots and a very long pole, which he balanced across his shoulders. Each day he left his home with his pole and two empty pots, and made his way to the stream where he would fill both of his pots with water. Then he put the pots on either end of the pole and walked along a path back home. It just so happened that one of the man's pots had a hole in it, and every time he came home the cracked pot was only partially full of water.

One day, the pot that was cracked felt guilty so it spoke up and said, "Excuse me, sir. I hate to bother you, but I think it is only appropriate that I apologize to you and ask your forgiveness."

The man was puzzled and asked, "Why do you need to apologize?"

The pot said, "All the years I have helped you, and you work so hard, but I have never been able to deliver a full load of water for you because of the crack in my pot."

The man did not want the pot to feel bad and said, "It's okay. Really, it is. In fact, the next time we go to collect water, as we walk along, I want you to look down on your side of the path."

Sure enough, the next day, as the man made his way back from the stream the pot looked down on the path, and was amazed to see a field of beautiful flowers.

The man stopped and explained, "Do you see all the gorgeous flowers? They are only on your side of the path and are here because of you. I knew that water leaked from your crack, and so I planted seeds along the way, which you watered every time we walked the path. Without your crack we would not have all these colorful flowers to brighten my day and bring beauty to the world. So it is I who needs to thank you."

The High Holidays is this wonderful gift we are given reminding us to pick up the threads of unraveled relationships and mend the cracks. Someone has to make that first step.

Not dwelling on past grievances can liberate us. This is the time to reach out to loved ones before it is too late. All of us have cracks and flaws. Let us transform them into blessings, which in turn can give birth to flowers and beauty.

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