

Chaplain's Corner
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"Healing the Soul's Wounds/Yom Kippur 5782"

Yom Kippur is punctuated by many wails. The *Yom Kippur* liturgy aims for our hearts more than our minds. I had the honor of opening our shul's *Yom Kippur's* Healing Service with a parable, a poem, and a short introduction of extemporaneous remarks. I share here the remarks, now in written form.

Because *Yom Kippur* asks us to look inside for a one-year period, our *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh*, we have a tendency to reduce our emphasis on healing that takes longer. More profoundly, we may avoid facing healing for which we pray year after year, for perhaps our best efforts were not good enough, or for perhaps we made minimal or no efforts.

There is a special healing to bring to the forefronts of your minds. It is the healing of family relationships. We confront this in professional chaplaincy daily. The fancy term for it: estrangement. It generally takes the form of, "I have a son/daughter/brother/sister, but she/he has not spoken to, me for *nn* years, *nn* to reflect two-digit significance, because these wounds tend to go on for very long times. Sadly, the longer two people do not talk to each other, the easier it is to add another year to this suffering.

I asked our congregation, "I suspect many of you have this wound in your hearts." I was overwhelmed by the number of heads that nodded in the affirmative.

A hospital badge does not provide immunity from what we treat. I listen to stories of estrangement every day. I carry similar wounds. In Professional Chaplaincy Education, one tool taught is to challenge the face in front of us with, "What role did you play in this?" Too often, the face in front of us is the face in the mirror. Too often, the pebble in the shoe has become a boulder.

With modern genealogy tools, your family looks like an organization chart, with solid lines between relatives. Drawn with a *genogram* tool instead, lines between relatives are drawn in pencil, and you use an eraser to truncate some lines or zig-zag some lines. The result is a map where the shape of the connecting lines reflects the quality of the relationship, the results staring at you.

Many creative synagogues are augmenting High Holy Days communal confessions. One way is trying to persuade *HaShem* to at least consider balancing our personal scales with the *mitzvot* we have performed in the past year. We used the Rabbi Telushkin version, which includes, "For the *mitzvah* we performed when we heard an ambulance siren and offered a prayer to G-D on behalf of the sick person inside," and "For the *mitzvah* we performed by returning a lost object to its owner." Yes, we have also done this. Another creative augmentation is to attempt to balance the scales by thanking *HaShem* for the blessings received in the past year because of the actions of others. Perhaps

you were sick and someone cleared your driveway, brought food, helped you to a medical provider, showed that you were not alone.

The creative augmentation I want to build up in your minds as we begin 5782 is the *mitzvah* work that often takes more than a year, longer than the gap between two *Yom Kippur* pauses. This is the attempt to work on estrangements. Rabbi Tarfon teaches in The Talmud (*Pirke Avot* 2:16) “It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.” I like this translation (safari.org) because it uses the powerful verb, “to neglect,” as does jewishboston.com, “... you are not free to avoid it.”

Healing estrangements can take a long time, has many speed bumps, and is often not successful. I get it. As a professional chaplain for many years, at many venues, I have more than enough fingers and toes to count the few “Hollywood Endings” in which I have been blessed to have a role. Once, an Intensive Care Unit patient stopped me as I was walking past his room. “Chaplain, can I ask you a question, please? When can I tell my daughters that I am dying?” We processed that and the next day the patient cried to me that he told one daughter, who had told the sister, and both were en route to visit. Another time, I went to visit a patient scheduled for major surgery the next day. The patient, a very robust man, the last type our conditioning teaches would want to cry in public, had already consumed a half box of tissues when I entered. When I invited him to share, he related that his wife had called the estranged son about the serious surgery approaching and the son was en route.

Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, who opened so many eyes to the reality of dying, had her own beautiful equivalent phrasing of the *Pirke Avot* quote, “... when you live as if you’ll live forever, it becomes too easy to postpone the things you know you must do.”

On Yom Kippur morning 5782, a Rabbi at the Reform Shul Hevreh in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, preceded the *Al chet* with the powerful sermon, “Naming the Problem: For The Sin of Avoidance.” (Source 1) This Rabbi (unnamed in the Internet posting) “nailed it,” with the subheading, “Consequences of Avoidance: Polarization and Estrangement.” His sermon reminded us of Biblical references to G-D prolonging estrangements.

These avoidances are so common, that even our biblical ancestors were guilty of them: Isaac and Abraham never did speak again after their experience together up on Mt. Moriah. Our ancestor Jacob was said to have tzaar gidul banim, a complex relationship with his children and his parents—or more literally, big tzuris with his children”. Even God is culpable. Just as Abraham and his son never find the words to reconnect after the Akedah, God is also silent in Isaac’s life, going forward. These are difficult conversations, for us all.

Also on Yom Kippur 5778, Rabbi Stephen Weiss of B’nai Jeshurun, Pepper Pike, Ohio talked on the tendency to avoid the time to work on relationships. (Source 2) Rabbi Weiss related, “A rabbi waited in line to have his

car filled with gas just before a long holiday weekend. It was a full-service station and the attendant worked quickly, but there were many cars ahead of him. Finally, the attendant motioned to him to move forward to a vacant pump. "Rabbi," said the man, "I'm sorry about the delay. It seems as if everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip." The Rabbi chuckled. "Oy. I know what you mean. It's the same in my business!"

Rabbi Weiss summarized the moral lessons of this type of estrangement: What those we care about need most from us is not things. What they need most is us. They need us to be fully present in their lives. If we are absent from our relationships, how can we expect those relationships to flourish? If we fail to be present in the lives of those we love, how can we expect them to feel our love and be transformed by it? How many times have we left a family member or friend under the wagon," knowing they need us but not making the time to be present for them? Ask the ingenious teenager who, tired of reading bedtime stories to his little sister, decided to record several of her favorite stories on tape. He told her, "Now you can hear your stories anytime you want. Isn't that great?" The little sister looked at the machine for a moment and then replied, "No, not really. It hasn't got a lap."

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Another Rabbi's Yom Kippur Sermon 2018 was "The Year of Hard Conversations."

This sermon included another Torah teaching (Rashi) of how G-D was faced with estrangement and worked on it, after the golden bull was formed, the initial tablets were broken, and Moses re-ascended the mountain to plead. God restored God's own faith in the Jewish people gladly and wholeheartedly. כדברך סלחתי יי ויאמר, said G-d; "I have forgiven, as you ask," and he gave Moses (and us) the second set of tablets. In Judaism there is no such thing as "forgive and forget." For us, it's "forgive, and then incorporate the event into our collective memory and move forward." That is what God is asking us to do tonight.... If God can remake a relationship with the people who betrayed Him, right after He redeemed them from Egypt, then surely we can begin to build bridges with the people with whom we have experienced rifts that are so petty by comparison. (Source 3)

Psychology Today (August 17, 2019) reported a study that the average parent-child estrangement is nine years (5+ for mothers and 7+ for fathers). As a professional statistician by my first training and career, averages mask the extremes that create them. How do you calculate an average when the highest value is not a number but the hurtful word, "never?"

Lily Coltoff suggested a modern variation of *Al Chet* in "A New Prayer for the Sins We've Committed Against Ourselves," which included, "And I have sinned against myself by holding on to the past and grudges." (Source 4)

The Rabbi of Belz, Shalom ben Elazar Rokeach of the 19th century, wrote: There are three types of exile. The first is when Jews are in exile among the nations. The second is when Jews are in exile among Jews. And the third is when a Jew is exiled within himself.

There are Jewish families whose members are in exile; alienated from each other, families whose members do not speak to each other. There are parents who do not speak to their children and children who do not speak to their parents. There are siblings who do not speak to each other. There are long time friends who are estranged from each other. There are families who live in exile. How do I know? Because my study is a window on the world.... Heal the pain! Our sages said, Who is the hero? He who makes an enemy into a friend, an adversary into an ally. You can find a hundred reasons for not reaching out. But outreach keruv begins now, with me. Close your Prayer Book. Get out of your pews. Look into the eyes of the other – Papa, Mama, son, daughter, brother, sister, friend. Did we not hear the same song and prayers today, the words of the prophet Jeremiah? "Is not Ephraim my beloved son, my beloved child? Even when I speak against him, I remember him with affection. Therefore my heart yearns for him. I will surely have compassion." Extend your hand, embrace the other. The services are not over with the singing of Adon Olam. The true service begins when you come home and look at the mezuzah on your doorpost. God forgives. God seeks reconciliation. Dare we not? Source 5)

May our next year's *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh* include, "At least I tried."

Sources

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3. (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/568c3b5c0e4c114023d4ce8e/t/5babc2ad53450a04d6193f4b/1537983149620/The+Year+of+Hard+Conversations+-+Kol+Nidre+2018.pdf>)
4. (<https://faithcounts.com/a-new-prayer-for-the-sins-weve-committed-against-ourselves/>)
5. Rabbi Harold Schulweis of Valley Beth Shalom (Encino, California) dedicated his entire Rosh Hashanah sermon to this in 2000. (https://www.vbs.org/worship/meet-our-clergy/rabbi-harold-schulweis/sermons?post_id=1021382)