

Yom Kippur Sermon
*Do You Know What Hurts Me?*¹

Monday, September 28, 2020

A high school teacher decided to honor her seniors by telling them the positive impact each of them made. Then she told each of them how they made a difference to her and to others in the class and presented each of them with a blue ribbon imprinted with gold letters which read, "Who I Am Makes a Difference."

She decided to give each of them an assignment. Each student received three more ribbons and they were instructed to go out and spread this acknowledgment ceremony to others.

One of the students honored a junior executive in a nearby company and honored him for helping him with career planning. He took one of the blue ribbons and pinned it on his shirt. He then gave the executive two more ribbons for him to keep this acknowledgment ceremony going.

Later that day the executive met with his boss. He told him that he was an inspired leader. The boss was surprised. The executive took a ribbon and placed it right on his boss's jacket above his heart. He gave the last ribbon to him and said, "Would you do me a favor? Would you take this last ribbon and pass it on by honoring somebody else? The young boy who gave me this wants to keep this recognition ceremony going."

That night the boss came home to his 14-year-old son and sat him down. "The most amazing thing happened to me today. One of my junior executives told me that I had inspired him and pinned a blue ribbon on my jacket. Then he gave me a blue ribbon and told me to give it someone I would want to honor. As I was driving home, I thought about the person I wanted to honor and I thought about you.

"My days are so hectic and I realize I do not pay enough attention to you. Sometimes I get mad at you that your grades are not good enough and you don't help enough around the house. But I thought about it and I wanted to let you know that you do make a difference to me. Besides your mother, you are the most important person in my life. You are a great kid and I love you."

The startled boy started to sob and sob, and he could not stop crying. His whole body shook. He looked at his father and said through his tears, "I did not know if I could live another day, Dad, because I didn't think you loved me. Now I know you do."²

¹ This sermon was inspired by a most important conversation that I had with Rabbi Uri Herscher, Emeritus Director of the Skirball Museum, in September 2020.

² Adapted from *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, 1993, pp. 19-21.

I know that the High Holy Days are to remind us that our words and our actions have consequences both good and bad. We do not realize the impact we have on others as this story clearly illustrates: the students on their teacher, the junior executive on the student, the boss on those who work for him, and the father on the son.

We take a lot for granted and many live a relatively unexamined life except perhaps for the month of Elul leading up to the High Holy Days.

Centuries ago in small villages in Germany a man known as a “clapper” would take a wooden hammer and during the thirty days before Rosh Hashanah would “clap” on the doors of Jews and call out to those in their homes to examine their lives and their deeds, for God’s Day of Judgement, Rosh Hashanah was soon to be at hand.³

Each day Jews are supposed to do a *chesbon hanefesh*, literally an “accounting of the soul.” We are to count up all the actions we have done throughout the year: how many good, how many bad, how we were generous, how we wasted time, how many times we did something useful. Then we are to decide what we will repeat, what we will dispense with, and for which actions we need to seek repentance from others and from God.

We read during the High Holy Days that God will judge our deeds and determine whether we are to be written into the Book of Life or the Book of Death. We are taught that there are steps involved in repenting and seeking forgiveness from those whom we have harmed:

1. Recognize you made a mistake.
2. Regret and vow never to do it again
3. And finally, ask for forgiveness and wait to receive it.

We are told that for wrongs against others, God will not forgive; for wrongs against God, God will forgive if we truly repent.

What is so interesting about this is that these Holy Days are so easy for God -- but being a Jew is much more difficult. Why? God only judges us one day out of the entire year (Rosh Hashanah). We, on the other hand, are not just to judge ourselves and do an accounting of our actions during the thirty days before Rosh Hashanah, we actually are to account for our actions the other 364 days of the year as well!

Each night before going to bed, the Chasidic master Nachman of Bratzlav would make a list. At the end of each day he would write down all the wrongs he had committed against people, against God, the ways in which he did not live up to his own character. Once he finished writing, he would read the list over and over again with increasing agitation and remorse, until he welled up with sorrow. He did that every single night of his life.

³ As told to me by Rabbi Uri Herscher.

During our Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services we are reminded through our prayers of all the possible sins we may have committed during the year.

We are reminded of the times we exposed others to our **anger, belittling, criticizing, doubting, finding fault, harboring** resentment, **quitting** when there was still fight left, saying, “**What** difference does it make?”, and spending **zero** time with those we care for. There is an alphabet of sins we have committed.

But for today and tomorrow and this week and this year, I want you to think of only one sin of which you may all be guilty and have done little to redeem yourselves from repeating time and again.

It is a singular sin (but perhaps the most egregious) and, at the same time, it is aligned with the greatest virtue found in our Jewish religion. It is exemplified in the following story. This is a story that applies to two people: two men, two women, a man and a woman, a parent and a child, and even two co-workers. Gender and age are not important in this story:

The Hasidic Rabbi, Levi Yitzhak of the Ukraine, observed two individuals in a country tavern.

While chatting with the owner of the tavern, the rabbi saw the two embracing and declaring their love for one another.

One told his companion, “I love you. I love you so much.” Suddenly the other hearing this, said to his companion, “Do you know what hurts me?” Sobered by such a startling remark, his friend replied, “I have no idea what hurts you?” The answer was immediate, “If you don’t know what hurts me, how can you say you love me?”⁴

The revelation of this story is that we can be hurting someone we care for without realizing it.⁵ That is the sin.

The virtue aligned with this sin, referred to earlier, is what we need to embody fully: above anything else, Judaism is about *Teshuvah*/Repentance. The idea of *teshuvah* means turning from the path you are on because it is unsustainable. It is unsustainable because you cause harm and because you are harming a person with whom you have a relationship. And, because there is harm, then the relationship is unloving. To love someone means knowing what hurts them.

The idea of love, the Hebrew word *ahavah*, found in our scripture, does not mean an intense feeling of deep affection or a deep romantic attachment. Rather, when we read the verse “You shall love the

⁴ Story told to me by Rabbi Uri Herscher.

⁵ “*You always hurt the one you love, the one you should not hurt at all;
You always take the sweetest rose, and crush it till the petals fall;*

You always break the kindest heart, with a hasty word you can't recall;” — The Mills Brothers

Eternal your God with all of your heart, mind and soul," the love of God is about respecting who God is and being grateful for the divine gifts bestowed upon us: "Respect" and "Gratitude".

We are told also to love our neighbor, love the stranger. Love in Judaism is respecting those with whom you are in relationship. Respect is less about "honor" than it is about "knowing" what gives that person joy, but also knowing what hurts them.

Now we can learn from this story of two companions.

We cannot not truly be grateful for the loving gifts we are receive from another person, when we do not respect the person. And we are not respecting that person when we do not truly allow ourselves to

know them,

discover what motivates them,

what inspires them,

but also ... what hurts them.

If we cannot do all of these things, then it is not really love, is it?

The interchange between these two companions in our story underscore that a relationship of love involves much more than gazing into your soulmates eyes and feeling an overwhelming passion for them. The true meaning of love involves humility.

Humility is when we recognize that we have harmed the ones we love, those whom we teach, and the ones we should respect -- sometimes on purpose and sometimes inadvertently. We have harmed those with whom we have meaningful relationships, and too often, we do not give it but a fleeting consideration.

From a humble position, we recognize the hopes and needs, the hurts and fears of the other. When we view others with this kind of humility, love can be offered and service can be rendered, not with an air of condescension but with the warmth of compassion.

The key to loving others is to keep in mind their internal feelings and thoughts. No one is a mind reader, I know that. Being respectful is having the awareness that there is sometimes more to what is going on than mere words and deeds. You can no longer get away with, "You didn't tell me!" or, "I didn't know."

And, when we have brought harm into that relationship, there is more to repentance and forgiveness than the steps given to us by tradition.

The catchphrase, “love never means having to say you’re sorry”⁶ is just not true. Love does mean saying, “I am sorry,” but there is more.

1. Recognize you erred.
2. Regret and vow that you will try to never to do it again
3. Ask for forgiveness and wait to receive it.
4. Most importantly, recognize that we are not to judge another person based on who we are and what we know. We are not to judge them at all. We are to listen and learn and respond to their desires and needs.

I am not suggesting that every relationship is reconcilable. But ones that must be reconciled are between those to whom we are truly devoted.

Today, we read of Jonah who harmed his relationship with God and the vow and commitment he had made. It took for him running away, hiding from his responsibilities, being cast into the ocean, and being swallowed by a whale for him to utter:

Those who cling to empty folly forsake their own welfare; but I will sacrifice for You. What I have vowed I will fulfill. Rescue me Adonai.

and God commanded the fish, and it spewed Jonah out on dry land.⁷

Jonah repented. He changed his direction for the sake of his relationship with God and his vow to God. It made a difference. He saved an entire kingdom. More importantly, he preserved his relationship with God and understood his relationship to other people.

Today, I am asking you to do the same. You have a kingdom to save as well, if only you will listen and learn. You have made commitments/vows. They need to be salvaged in a different way.

Listening and learning does not mean that you can go back and change the past.

You can remember what you have done and use that information to be better tomorrow than you were yesterday.

Being human means, you struggle to love. You fall flat sometimes, and other times you make miraculous breakthroughs.

You can recognize and be grateful for the sense of belonging and love you have received that is not earned. Love has poured into your lives at times of great celebration and in those moments of sadness.

⁶ Erich Segal's novel, *Love Story*.

⁷ Jonah 2:9-11.

It is up to you now to greet others as they are, not as who you expect them to be.

Treat others with the kindness they deserve.

Treat others with kindness when they do not deserve it. That is the *teshuvah* gift of turning toward a new path.

Change is hard and it is about interrupting old habits and patterns that are no longer serving your relationships. The most meaningful way to respond to a hurt you have caused is to come to grips with the understanding that you are capable of hurting others by your words, your actions and your behavior.

Do not make the mistake of judging the behaviors of others by your own standards. The person you love, respect, and teach has standards different than yours.

We are each different and the years together with someone does not hide but reveal those differences. We need to learn from them and accept them.

The sign of a healthy relationship is when you have the ability to clean up the hurts you have caused:

1. When you acknowledge the hurt “you have caused,” you are acknowledging the person. That is the most important part of the relationship. Not the action or what led up to it. That you know the person standing right in front of you.
2. Show kindness and willingness to be humble before the healing process can begin. If it is a repeated behavior that has resulted in harm, then the person may feel you lack trust in their relationship because you do not understand the harm you have caused to them over time. *Teshuvah*, changing direction completely by tuning in, may be the opportunity for trust to start and be earned.
3. Say, “I hear you.” Ask, “What do you need?” When the other understands that you are truly listening and that when you ask what is “needed” you are open to the pathway to resolve the problem.

In uncertain times relationships matter even more.

The world is chaotic and we turn to our partners for security, acceptance, love, and stability.

This year may we make the extra effort toward humility, listening, and healing. Then and only then will we earn the blue ribbon, “Who I am Makes a Difference.”

G'mar chatimah tovah, may you be sealed for a good, sweet and healthy year.