

Yom Kippur Morning 5779-2018

A Mi Shebeirach for America

Rabbi Kim Harris

One year when I was teaching first grade, we had a day of professional development. Rather than subjecting us to another boring workshop, our principal took us to complete a R.O.P.E.S. course, R.O.P.E.S. meaning **R**epetitive **O**bstacle **P**erformance **E**valuation **S**ystem. A ROPES course is an outdoor experience designed to promote team building through working together to solve mental and physical challenges. The program progresses from fun, problem-solving games to balancing on ropes, going through a maze blindfolded, and one of the most memorable challenges, the trust fall. You must fall into the arms of your partner, trusting your partner to catch you. I remember being afraid that my petite partner would not be able to hold me once I fell back, but we did it. Our faculty brought back many nice memories and lots of laughs from that day, and though we were already a close-knit group, the experience brought us even closer to one another. The main point of the entire exercise, I feel, was to develop and foster trust – trust in one’s own abilities, trust in your fellow teammates, trust that you can handle the unknown, and trust that whatever happens, it’s going to be OK...difficult perhaps, but OK.

Trust is essential for a good relationship, crucial to mental health, and truly paramount for one’s overall self-confidence and the ability to function well as a human being. Imagine what it would have been like if my friend behind me hadn’t caught me during the trust fall exercise.

I would have been humiliated for one thing, and it certainly would have been quite difficult to regain my trust in my friend and subject myself to the exercise again. These feelings are basically the same for individuals who are victims of a disappointment or failure, or for those who have experienced defeat, shame, or physical harm at the hands of someone who was supposed to care for them. These feelings can make one feel not only abandoned by society but by God as well. Once a trust or confidence has been broken, it can be very, very hard to restore it.

This morning we read the story of Cain and Abel – Kayin and Hevel – two brothers of opposite vocations – one a farmer and one a shepherd. All through the Torah there are stories about siblings, and they never seem to get along very well. You have Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Leah and Rachel, Joseph and his brothers ... We could spend all day discussing just this, and even though we sort of have all day, we'll save that for another time and focus only on Cain and Abel. The story of this conflict is essentially a teaching about trust and what can happen when it is lost.

Our story is a continuation of the story of Adam and Eve (Adam and Chava). Eve as the mother of all life is ecstatic at the birth of Cain, exulting that she has gotten and created a man, the name *Kayin* meaning both “to possess” and “to create.” As an afterthought is the birth of Abel – Hevel - his name meaning “breath that vanishes.” Cain becomes the pride of his family, going into the family business, one could say. He controls his world through his taming of the earth and fencing it off into parcels. Abel, as a shepherd, dwells in the open peacefully guarding the sheep. The sheep graze and roam about, producing their wool and milk. Cain, in his desire to succeed seeks notice, and hopefully reward, from God

by bringing an offering from his crops. The text gives us an insight into Cain's intentions by citing his waiting until "*miketz yamim*" (the end of days), which probably means the harvest season was waning. Abel follows suit, bringing his most choice and fattest of firstborn lambs, and we learn that God finds favor with Abel's offering but does not accept that of Cain. Cain explodes in anger, his face crestfallen. God tries to encourage him, but Cain will have none of it. We see Cain's hubris and assumption that his offering would be perfect, but we also see the shame, vulnerability, and loss of trust that Cain is feeling. We know what happens next, and Cain, his brother's blood soaking the ground he cultivated, is sentenced to a life of wandering, condemned to till earth that will not yield to his will and will not produce anything for him. He settles in the land of Nod, literally "the land of wanderers." He can only depend on his wits and what he knows, for he has lost all trust in God, nature, and what was his family. He is consumed with doubt and fear and doesn't want to hurt or be hurt again.

This day, *Yom ha-Kippurim*, is literally the Day of Atonements – plural. Perhaps this is because there are two processes involved here to achieve repentance: the first, that we must seek forgiveness for the sins committed against God, and the other, that we must make amends with our fellow human beings for any harm that we may have caused them. As we discussed on Rosh HaShanah, undertaking these processes and doing *t'shuvah* is not easy and involves great soul searching and accountability. One of the reasons why, I think, is the issue of trust. When we have been hurt, and inversely when we have done the hurting, one of the things that we lose is trust. The loss of trust can make us vulnerable, and we may fear to try to ask for forgiveness because we may get hurt again.

Over the past decade and a half since 9/11, and especially over the past few years, just asking for forgiveness, not even in a Jewish or Yom Kippur context, has grown more difficult to achieve. Though there was a strong bond of unity following the fall of the Towers, that unity quickly turned to division. The beautiful quilt that was America, or the America I thought I knew, was unraveling, its squares and patterns coming to pieces. I was not around to witness the Jim Crow years or “No Irish need apply” or the turning away of the *St. Louis*, or the internment of Japanese citizens. None of these events – NONE of them – were in MY history books, neither in high school nor college. I honestly, and with great shame, must admit that I am only just learning of them over these past few years; and the realization that I *didn't* know these events happened, embarrasses me, hurts me deeply, and frightens me. Yes, it frightens me, for if I, a fairly-educated individual who has lived in 9 different cities, doesn't know these things, imagine the mindset of those individuals who have lived in little bubbles of sameness and whiteness all their lives.

We have become a nation where trust has eroded, where anger holds sway, and where fear of one another keeps us in our houses. The spreading of lies, the fear-mongering from our politicians, the normalization of hateful rhetoric, the rise of anti-Semitism, and the denial that any of this is even happening – all of these are obstacles to our *t'shuvah*. *Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha* – for the sin we have committed before You ... There are many more *al cheit's* that we can add to an already extensive list.

Our loss of trust has become a barricade in our lives. There is so much anger on social media, and sometimes the lies that I see being perpetrated by friends and family that I love make my day frustrating, sad and full of dismay.

Y'all know I love facebook. I joined to keep up with my children and later my grandbabies and to keep up with my high school and college friends, teacher friends, rabbinic and cantorial colleagues... It used to be a pleasant and exciting part of my day. Now it has become a forum for he said / she said and for one side to counter the lies of the other side. That angry emoji? It gets a lot of action. The sad emoji, too. That's what America, the land of *e pluribus unim*, has devolved to. We are no longer "out of many, one." We have lost sight of our vision and our purpose, having sold our ideals to the highest bidder. We are now the land of what's mine is mine, you're different from me so you're not a true American, and those angry emojis. We shoot first and ask questions later. There is no attempt to even learn about other points of view because they differ from what we are convinced to be correct. Truth has become perception and perception has become truth. Well, my friends, we know if we CAN trust anyone, it's honest Abe Lincoln who has been quoted as saying, "You can't believe everything you read on the internet."

So what can we as Jews and as Americans do to try to bind these painful wounds and to heal the rifts that have cracked our friendships, destroyed our family Thanksgivings, and made us angry, sad, and untrusting? We can never truly heal until we've fully faced up to and acknowledged what our actions have caused. I would like for us to offer a *Mi Shebeirach* for America, a blessing for healing and wholeness for us and our country and then take on the difficult work of a collective *t'shuvah*. To this end, I have adapted an offering by Rabbi Victor H. Reinstein as follows:

Mi shebeirach Avraham, Yitzchak, v'Ya'akov, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel v'Leah, hu y'vareich et ha-neshamah shel Artzot ha-Brit shel America.

May the one who blessed our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah bless the soul of the United States of America, the Lands of the Covenant. Compassionate One, fill our hearts with love and compassion for each other, that in truth we may return to be one nation indivisible. Bless our country, its government, its leaders, and all who dwell here. Bless the vision that is America and help us all to make it a reality.

Lead us on a new path to the Prophet's vision fulfilled, of swords turned into plowshares that we shall at last learn war no more. Let not our confidence become arrogance, nor might the measure of right. Mature enough in our independence, may we celebrate with all nations the interdependence from which a greater good will come.

Thirsting for peace, help us to sing an anthem now, not of bombs bursting, but of amber waves of grain and purple mountain majesties; May your blessing be manifest not of destiny, but of goodness spreading out from sea to shining sea. Not upon us alone Your blessing bestow, but upon every nation and people in the world of Your creation.

Help us to see that we the people, all the people, are America the beautiful, in the grandeur of all our colors, and in the symphony of faiths and tongues by which we sing to You and call each other by name. The Pilgrims' pride of roots diverse, each one of us from other lands have come, not only on a Mayflower across the sea, but in steerage passage and in chains and through sweltering desert sands,

wretched and poor, yearning to breathe free. Let us be the strength of heart and mind to lift the lamp beside the golden door.

In our caring for the earth, the sky, and water, may we honor those who first dwelled upon this land, and in small measure so atone for all the wrong done to them.

With liberty and justice for all, let that freedom not ring hollow. May health and knowledge, bread and roses, be the birthright of every child born, each one free to be and become, dreams deferred no more.

Bring near the day, soon to rise, when in rainbow chorus we shall sing, we have overcome. May it come to be speedily and in our day. And let us say: Amein.

When the last *t'kiah g'dolah* has sounded and we have filled our bellies and quenched our thirst, let the work of healing and *t'shuvah* continue through these doors, into our streets, and into the hearts of all Americans.

G'mar chatimah tovah! May we all be sealed for goodness, for life, and for healing!