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Agudas Achim Congregation  
Parashat Vayikra  
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### **We Need to Talk**

We need to talk. I can't think of any four words that have the power to cause so much anxiety. I've seen these words in short and cryptic emails, vague text messages, five-second voicemails, and even the occasional knock on the door. I have no doubt that I, too, have been guilty of sending that message. It makes us anxious because of the unknown. It leaves our imaginations running wild, often running into the darkest of places. What does the messenger want to speak about? What happened? Is everyone ok? Am I ok? The answer is no. We are not ok. I am not ok. And that is why we need to talk.

This has been the hardest and most difficult week of my entire rabbinic career. Before this past week, I thought I knew what the most difficult week looked like. A difficult week was the week before the High Holidays. A difficult week was consoling multiple families all at the same time. A difficult week was teaching too many classes and attending too many board meetings while trying to figure out something meaningful to say on Shabbat. A difficult week was always about me, how *I* was overwhelmed with too much to do and not enough time to get it all done. This last week was difficult not because of any limitation on time or quantity of work. This last week was difficult because of the collective hurt, pain, anger, frustration, disappointment, concern, distress, anxiety, and more that we *all* were feeling. I wear the feelings of this community on my heart, and we are all hurting. *I* am hurting. I am hurting because Jen, a dear friend, was hurt – a friend that was among the first people to welcome Jodi and me into her home with Hugh's killer smoked brisket, a friend that gave Jodi insight into Gesher in her first year as principal, a friend who led the Agudas preschool during Ilan's final year in the school – a place he loved every single day, a

friend who I visited in the hospital because of my care, love and concern, a friend whose son (big Ari) babysat my children for years, a friend who could not wait to tell me her Ari was enlisting in the Army, a friend who loves every child as if they were her own, a friend who is the friend of so many in our community. I am in pain because my friend and my community are in pain.

To be perfectly honest, when I sat down to write these remarks, I struggled to find the right words. I started on Monday with a whole lot of anger. By Tuesday night, I felt different, and the words changed once again. Wednesday. Thursday. Friday. Still changing. There are thoughts and feelings swirling around in my head and in my heart at a dizzying pace, all day, and all night. Even keeping track of days has been difficult. I have had more lattes at St Elmo's with preschool parents than I can count, and there have been numerous phone calls with past presidents, long-time congregants, board members, and Jen. Time moves differently after trauma. We know this collectively, and we know this individually.

"This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you" (Ex 12:2). I write these words quite literally at the beginning of the months, the month of Nisan. "When you leave Egypt," God says, "mark time anew." Restart your calendar. Why? Slavery was trauma. At the risk of making comparisons, we, too, faced our own communal trauma this week. We, too, need a restart. We, too, need to rebuild a community that places human dignity and trust at its core. We, too, need to work together for the common good of this sacred community. We, too, need to look each other in the eye and treat every person with *kavod* and *derekh eretz* – respect and decency. We need all of this, and we need it now. This is the first step in leaving *mitzrayim* – that narrow and dark place – on our road toward healing and redemption.

Glimmers of hope were in rare supply these last several days. Where would I look to find hope? Where could I look to find hope? On Tuesday night, many of us gathered in this sacred space – live and livestream – and witnessed the first rays of light. I saw the swallowing of pride and feelings of remorse. I saw a commitment to listening to one another. I saw direct, thoughtful, and civil discourse. I saw a promise to make sure appropriate processes would be followed moving forward. I saw constructive feedback to help our community grow stronger. I saw members of this community willing to roll up their sleeves and get to work. I saw our board deliberate for several hours Thursday night so that we can right this ship. I saw the note from our president moments before Shabbat announcing a positive conversation with Jen and the possibility of reinstating her as Preschool Director. I saw all of this and more coming from a place of love – love for this community, love for each other, love for our preschool, and love for Jen.

I made a commitment this week that I would do everything in my power to do right by our children, their parents, and our teachers, to do right by our community, and to do right by Jen. I also commit to giving clear and direct guidance to those entrusted with making difficult decisions. I commit to recognizing that if those entrusted with making decisions will not listen to my voice, I will go outside normal channels to make my voice heard. I commit to partnering with our new leadership and all of you to lead this path forward. I am here with you, walking through the raging waters of the sea. Together we can transcend our fears. Together we can have faith that each step we take is a step toward the Promised Land.

We need to talk. “וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּדְבַר ה' אֵלָיו מֵאֵהֶל מוֹעֵד לֵאמֹר – God called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying...” (Lev 1.1). God needed to begin a difficult conversation with Moses – a conversation about what to do when grave mistakes are made. Rashi points out that Moses was already in the Tent of Meeting. There should have been no need to call Moses first.

Just start talking. Rather, Rashi suggests, this calling, this invitation to talk, came from a place of tender affection. The invitation to talk was an invitation to love, an invitation to be fully present with one another. Like the *ohel mo'ed*, this sacred space must be a space that demands thoughtful, kind, and honest entry followed by words that exude friendship and partnership. This space also demands our words to be open, honest and transparent. There will always be conflict. There will always be many voices. After all, we're Jews. Learning how to talk to one another has the power to transform heated interactions into fertile ground for openness and respect.

Just over three and a half years ago, on a sunny July morning, I walked over to Monticello Blvd for the baby naming of a wonderful baby girl. The family was not a member of the synagogue and insisted they offer me compensation for the ceremony. I told them I didn't want a check or even a donation. What I wanted was for them to become part of the Jewish community, specifically the Agudas community. Six weeks later, they joined Agudas. They became involved with our young family programming; their eldest daughter is now enrolled in our religious school, and their youngest daughter (the little baby I named) is in the preschool. Those two little girls were the two little children sitting in the front row Tuesday night. They each made signs that said "We Love Jen" – signs full of glitter that can still be seen on the carpet in front of me. From the moment I saw them, all that mattered was those children, *all* of our children. Forget us grownups for a moment. What are we teaching our children? We are teaching them the importance of owning mistakes, the importance of learning and growing from our mistakes, the importance of taking the necessary steps to do what is right, the importance of always showing respect for one another, and the importance of community. My north star at this moment, the north star our new president is following, the north star we all must follow, is our children. They are standing upon nearly 110 years of history. They are our future. And our future depends on me; our future depends on you;

our future depends on all of us so that one day that little girl in the front row can bring her children to the place she calls home.