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KoI Nidrei 2017

Kehilat Reyim 5778

L'shanah tovah and g'mar chatimah tovah.

Happy new year, and may you be written and sealed into the book of life, health and love.

I learned everything I know about forgiveness, its pain and its grace, from my grandmother's night-time ritual.

Her name was Anne; we called her Bubbie - and she was indeed a Bubbie, with all the inherent paradoxes that that term of endearment carries. Like many Bubbies of her era, she was loving, protective and resilient - and more than a bit mischievous.

She'd do anything for you, and was honest and direct. But she was also a whisperer, having mastered the art of whispering those things she'd like to say, but knew probably shouldn't be said out loud. "If you whisper it, God doesn't hear you," she persuaded me.

She and her husband, my grandfather Max, raised my father Harvey in Mattapan.

My grandmother had three brothers, all of whom lived nearby, with their families. The youngest, Isadore, died in a tragic accident as a young man. As is often true in families, after the loss, smaller disagreements in their family became full ruptures. Unstated grief was expressed as anger and criticism.

In the late 1960's, my grandparents left Mattapan, moving south to Brockton. My grandmother's brother, Murray, and his family followed suit.

They moved the same week, and bought homes *directly across the street* from each other on Westhaven Drive - literally steps away.

Though changing the environment always feels so hopeful, it doesn't typically bring healing – it doesn't transform the underlying hurt. Not long after moving to Brockton, with their homes immediately across the street, the families had an argument that likely would have blown over in any other circumstance. But unhealed grief is a powerful force. The argument *sentenced* my grandmother and her brother to a complete, life long silence.

After her husband died, I spent a lot of time with my grandmother.

During law school, I would drive down to Brockton every Thursday evening to spend the night at her home. Living alone now, she spent her days talking to the pictures of her husband on the wall, and with God.

We had a *very* specific routine: after dinner together of roasted chicken, potatoes and onions, followed by our version of a nightcap - seltzer and orange juice with a twist of lime - I'd go to study for a few hours before coming up for air at exactly 9:58 p.m., when we'd rush to the den to watch the TV drama ER. We saw every episode together for 3 years. After ER, we'd go to bed, only to wake up a few hours later to begin carving our second full roasted chicken while only half awake, which I'd then pack with me, together with pastrami and corned beef and mustard and two kinds of bread, one pumpernickel, one rye, on my 5:00 am drive back up to Boston. My car smelled like a delicatessen for three full years. My law school classmates, who received the benefit of my overstuffed lunches, loved Fridays.

A few months into this weekly Thursday date, I noticed that as I'd get ready for bed, my grandmother would stay in the den. She would turn off the lights, stand by the window, quietly pull back the shades, and just watch the house across the street.

She waited - sometimes until quite late at night- until her brother turned off his own lights. She'd whisper "good night Murray," close the window shade, walk slowly to her room, and lay down to sleep.

I imagine this ritual must have been painful, as she waited longingly, torturously for the lights in her brother's home to merge into the darkness of the night. But it also was *so* full of grace.

That moment of watching and waiting contained the entire world of possible forgiveness: darkness together with light, alienation together with hope, fear together with the always-present possibility that life can change for the good by walking across the street. But forgiveness stayed, forever, in this state of potential.

My grandmother was intensely stubborn. But she was also principled. The challenge of forgiveness is that it's terribly hard to tell the difference between them. The line is fine between stubborn and proud, between unwilling to compromise and dignified; often we don't know whether it's better to lean into one or the other, or the effect it will have on our integrity when we do.

It seems to me it took enormous courage to stand by the window. I am sure my grandmother knew that her brother could see her as she stood there, exposed. But courage can soon lapse into complacency and routine, an inability to take the necessary next step forward towards reconciliation.

The ritual of standing at the window waiting, and watching contained all the challenges of forgiveness because somehow, paradoxically, impossibly, my grandmother was at her strongest and most vulnerable at the exact same moment, when she stood there, alone in the dark.

She taught me everything I know about forgiveness, how courageous and heartbreaking it is to be willing to reconcile - to ask forgiveness, and to forgive.

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One of the great blessings of my work as rabbi is the opportunity to counsel people struggling with personal conflict. At the heart of so much conflict is the difficulty of asking for, and offering, forgiveness. I try as much as I can to bring the lessons of my grandmother's nighttime ritual to the conversation. Forgiveness is the foundation of a spiritual life. When the potential for forgiveness is before us, there's so much at stake.

It can be excruciating to ask for forgiveness.

But acknowledging that we've made a mistake, or that we have hurt someone else, particularly a loved friend or family member, is good for the soul.

Likewise, it's not easy to forgive. Letting go of our need to be right is a powerful but difficult and demanding spiritual stance: it requires patience, deep humility, kindness and grace.

A couple of years ago on a Shabbat morning, I shared one of my favorite poems, called Long Term, by Stephen Dunn. I hope it will ring familiar for some of you. I want to share it now as well, as it gets to the heart of forgiveness.

It goes like this:

“Everything that can happen between two people happens after a while

or has been thought about so hard there is almost no difference between desire and deed.

Each day they stayed together, therefore, was a day of forgiveness,

tacit, no reason to say the words.

It was easy to forgive, so much harder to be forgiven.

The forgiven had to agree to eat dust in the house of the noble and both knew this couldn't go on for long...

The forgiver would need to remember the cruelty in being correct.

Which is why, except in crises, they spoke about the garden, what happened at work, the little ailments and aches their familiar bodies separately felt.”

The poem shines a spotlight on the person who comes to say, “forgive me.”

He has to “eat dust in the house of the noble;” a recognition of the vulnerability and loss of pride one can feel in that moment.

Just as painful is the act of forgiving - not because it's hard to cull up compassion and understanding, but because it forces us to acknowledge the cruelty in *insisting* that we were correct.

Unlike my grandmother and her brother, there's no primary rupture or trauma for the couple in Dunn's poem. But still, there is so much left unsaid.

They have come to accept - or at least endure - the loneliness they both experience, even in the intimacy of a shared life. They talk about gardens and work and the ailments in their bodies. This is the great redemptive moment in this poem, captured by its title, “long term.” They can forgive only sparingly. They

feel lonely while together. But they are still together, sharing a life. There is not complete silence. Their relationship still holds enormous *potential* to transcend resignation and distance, and become, instead, a source for a sense of peace and renewal.

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Seeking forgiveness is *the heart* of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It's the fundamental mitzvah of our lives right now. Almost nothing else matters. Judaism *also* recognizes that the emotionally and spiritually complex dynamic of forgiveness makes it one of the hardest things we're asked to do.

This wisdom comes to life in a compelling, though slightly absurd, story in the Talmud, the ancient collection of Jewish law, stories, interpretation and legends. In the volume of Talmud called Yoma, which relates almost entirely to the themes of Yom Kippur, we read a story about repentance and forgiveness.

The story is based on the spiritual practice of a sage named Rabbi Zeira. When someone offended or hurt him, he'd respond by repeatedly passing by that person in the coming days, hoping that the person who offended him would see him, and ask forgiveness.

As it always does, the Talmud introduces a *story to complicate the story*, helping us understand just how imperfect and messy forgiveness is.

The complicating story goes like this:

The ancient sage known as Rav once had a complaint against a local butcher, who had mistreated him.

When he saw that Yom Kippur was getting close, and the butcher had not come to him to ask forgiveness,

Rav said to himself: "I will go to him, to make it easy for him to apologize to me."

On his way to the butcher, Rav ran into another Rabbi, named Rav Chuna. Rav Chuna asked him: “Where are you going?” Rav said: “To make amends with a person.”

Rav Chuna thought to himself: “Rav is about to cause someone’s death.”

Rav went to the butcher, and stood before him, and remained standing there while the butcher was standing and chopping. The butcher looked up and saw Rav, and yelled: “Go away! I have nothing to say to you!”

While he was chopping, a bone flew off, struck the butcher, and killed him.

I am not sure PJ Library will be illustrating this one anytime soon. But isn’t it great? The Talmud is so rich and compelling because it always contains multitudes of meanings.

Let me try to unpack this story a bit for us.

Rav has been offended by the butcher and he goes out of his way to make himself available for the butcher to apologize in time for Yom Kippur.

Were his intentions good? Did he want the butcher to be free from the weight of the offense he had caused by Yom Kippur, so he could be sealed in the Book of Life for the coming year? Or just the opposite - did Rav go self-righteously, harboring aggression, knowing that just standing there would infuriate the butcher?

I tend to understand the story according to this second interpretation. Rav runs into Rav Chuna on his way to the butcher. Rav Chuna sees Rav, and knows this will not turn out well. There must have been something about the way that Rav was presenting himself, perhaps agitated and keyed up, moving harshly as if knowing he’s right, rather than the gently, as if seeking repair.

The butcher, of course, is still furiously angry, unwilling to talk, and certainly not inclined to apologize. He interprets Rav's coming as pressure to seek forgiveness and reconcile before he is ready, which of course makes him even angrier.

The pain of that moment was so severe that it caused the butcher's death. Though expressed in a bit of an absurd way, with a bone flying off and hitting him, in the ancient rabbinic eye, the conflict involved in that moment was so deep, so painful, one's soul can depart this earth. The rabbis saw it as unbearable, unsustainable, for a human to carry that much weight.

Forgiveness requires a deep human emotional interchange, with flexibility in timing and sensitivity to shared needs. We need to be ready to forgive, and be forgiven. Without readiness, without mindfulness, forgiveness cannot take root.

Saying "I'm sorry" is a great opening, but not the end - and certainly not the heart - of forgiveness. The heart of forgiveness is letting go - letting go of being right, and letting go of being hurt. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "Forgiveness is an action that is not a reaction. Forgiveness breaks the cycle of stimulus-response, harm and retribution, wrong and revenge."

Our tradition understands that this is not easy. Still, our high holy days offer us this amazing gift, an intentional time to dedicate ourselves to repairing fractures and resetting our relationships. We have been hurt and we have hurt others.

We will spend the next 25 hours chanting ancient prayers and sacred texts, which are full of yearning, longing for solace, and seeking God's forgiveness. But Judaism insists that we cannot receive God's forgiveness until we have first sought forgiveness from the people we have hurt.

Waiting and watching until the lights turn off, and then going to bed, is a beautiful and redemptive image of my grandmother. But she didn't cross the street. Neither did he. I'm sure there were lots of good reasons for that; and truthfully any time fracture in relationships follows a trauma or tragedy, as it did for them, the only thing I feel is unconditional compassion.

But how painful to live in that space by the window.

The morning after an ambulance carried my grandmother's brother to the hospital, their neighbor stopped in at her home, and found her disoriented and crying.

"What happened to my brother?" my grandmother asked.

Learning he had a massive heart attack, she got dressed and drove to the hospital. She approached Murray. He was in intensive care. She leaned over, took his hand into hers. "Murray, it's Anne." He squeezed her fingers and tried to talk but couldn't. She sat there as long as the medical team let her, then returned home and got a call later that night that he died. Two days later she sat in the front row of the chapel, with a few other family members, at his funeral.

I'd love to think that squeeze held a lifetime of I'm sorry's. I'm sure it did not.

But his hand was in hers. In the remaining years of her life, that made a little bit of difference.

Hevre:

may you take the hands of those you love and have hurt.

May you let your hand be held.

That is where you can feel the *raz oIam*, the secret of the world
and the beating heart of Yom Kippur.

The rest of this intensive and very full day... is commentary.

L'shanah tovah, gmar chatimah tovah.

May you find strength and blessing in the holiness of this day.