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Temple Reyim
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“Failing and Falling”

Shanah tovah and gmar chatimah tovah

In the modern rabbinical seminary, you learn what we call *ministry* - that is, spiritual pastoral care, often in a clinical setting. It was in my ministry training at Massachusetts General Hospital that I learned about the relationship between failure and forgiveness.

Ministry in a hospital means, primarily, inviting patients into a conversation. Much of the time the task is to listen, or find shared words of prayer. When the relationship grows stronger, we talk - not about how to resolve and overcome feelings of sadness or hope, anxiety or fear, but to endure them, and to feel some measure of integrity and dignity in a vulnerable and exposing moment of their lives.

I am grateful to have met Esther, a sweet and exceptionally kind woman in her mid-sixties, who was dying after many years of suffering with a neurological disease. I have to admit that I checked in on her frequently, if even a gesture from the doorway as I passed by her room. We'd light electric Shabbat candles together on Friday late afternoon. What I called *hadlakat nerot*, lighting candles, in Hebrew, she called *lechtbenchen*. Somehow we figured out that we meant the same thing.

I briefly met her family but didn't get to know them, as they lived out of the area and could come only occasionally, though certainly as much as they could.

We had a medical and support team meeting about Esther very early on a Sunday morning and it became clear that she would soon die. I spent the morning with her, mostly just talking casually, accompanying her through this passage of time.

At the end of our lives, I have found, we rarely speak about the *chomer*, the stuff of life; but rather, almost always, about the way we have loved, and the regrets we have about the ways we have loved. She had spoken with her family quite a bit about what she would have done differently, and asked them to forgive her, and they did.

That morning she asked me about a prayer she had heard of called *vidui*. It is an ancient, traditional Hebrew prayer we recite at the end of life. It is also the core liturgy of Yom Kippur.

Ancient Jewish teachings are clear that you cannot stand before God on Yom Kippur and seek forgiveness until you have first turned to the person you have hurt and asked him or her to forgive you.

The teaching is very wise, shockingly so for its time. In the *vidui*, however, we don't seek forgiveness from other people, *but from God now*, and we say with clarity and intention, that we are made in God's image and that we will soon return to the earth.

The prayer goes like this:

May my prayer come before You.

Please, forgive me.

I regret many things I have done.

I have suffered because of it.

In Your great mercy, forgive me.

I acknowledge before You, Adonai my God and God of all those who have come before me,

That my healing and my death are in Your hands.

May it be Your will to grant me a complete healing.

If I am to die,

Shelter me in the shadow of Your wings.

Grant me a place in the world to come.

Protect my dear ones,

With whose souls my soul is bound.

Into your hand I place my soul.

Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu Adonai Echad.

Adonai Hu Ha'Elohim. Adonai Hu Ha'Elohim.

I have found that even for those who struggle with or are not interested in a religious or spiritual life, turning to God - however we might understand God - at one's death offers a sense of peace.

Esther decided she wanted to say this prayer but it wasn't quite the right moment, as her family would be there momentarily. I promised her I would come to her room again soon and we'd say the words together.

I spent the day seeing other patients and their families, and settled in my office in the evening, where I checked in on the logistics and practicalities of life, emails, texts, preparing dinner, kids pick-ups and all was good, no emergencies, everything in order. I was tired and needed to get home. I'd be back early in the morning to say goodbye to Esther and say the vidui together.

I arrived in the morning to the hospital and brought the text of the prayer with me. Her room, empty now, had been turned over, and her name erased from the board of patients' names.

I spent the rest of the morning walking along the Charles River waiting for our supervisory group to begin. In group we each shared an important encounter and offered both supportive and critical feedback to one another. I spoke about Esther. I told the group that she died overnight and that I had not returned to her to say *vidui*. Sensing my regret, they were supportive and rational and encouraged me to find ways to reach out to her family to see if they would like support with the loss.

My supervisor was fairly quiet through the exchange. She was a German Episcopalian reverend, trained in multi-faith ministry, and she became my rebbe, an essential spiritual teacher. She asked me to sit with her after the group's session. I met her in her office.

"Dan," she said, "I want to tell you three things."

"Yes?"

"First, you're not responsible for her dying."

"I know," I said.

"Second, she didn't die alone. You had a serious and significant relationship with her. And her family loved her."

"I know."

"Third, you promised her you'd say *vidui*."

“Yes,” I replied.

“And you didn’t.”

“Right.”

“This was a fundamental failure,” she said.

“Yes”

“How will you ask her forgiveness?”

I was confused. “She died,” I said.

“I know,” my supervisor responded. And then we sat quietly for what seemed like hours. It was less than a minute.

Echoing an ancient Jewish teaching about hurrying off to fulfill *mitzvot*, she said: “There are patients here who need your support today. Go.”

This was 12 years ago and it doesn’t go away, the knowledge and memory of having failed to be with a person dying and offer a prayer seeking forgiveness.

So much of what we tend to hear during these days of teshuvah, of repentance and renewal, are beautiful images of repair and reconciliation. I believe in this time of year. It is real. It feels different. When we begin a sentence with the words, “this is a time of year when we seek forgiveness,” we can be courageous in ways we are not often courageous, honest and reflective and grateful in ways we otherwise have a hard time being honest, reflective and grateful.

But there are fewer messages about living with the shame of having failed, or the loss of opportunity to meaningfully seek forgiveness for our failures. How do we live with that?

At the end of the clinical unit, every student meets one-on-one with our supervisor for a long, multi-hour session of reflection and evaluation. My unit, which extended through the summer, ended just before the High Holy days. Jarringly honest and candid as always, my supervisor asked how I had decided to seek Esther's forgiveness. I reached out to the family, I said, to let them know of my sadness from the loss and invite them to be in touch if they needed anything.

"I want to know how you asked forgiveness from Esther," she said.

We talked about the possibility of continuing her legacy. She loved particular Yiddish melodies. I decided to learn them, and teach them to my classmates at the seminary, who, I hoped, would teach their communities.

My supervisor loved that *and* could sense it felt incomplete.

"How you will lighten this burden you are carrying," she asked.

"I don't know."

She stood up, went to her bookshelf, took down a machzor, a Jewish High Holy Day prayer book.

"Tell me the story of Yom Kippur," she said. "How does atonement happen?"

Many hours later, we were still there, a German Episcopal Reverend and a rabbinical student studying the rituals of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, trying to understand the roots of Jewish forgiveness after I failed to offer a dying woman an opportunity to say, "God, forgive me."

There was a study done just a few years ago on forgiveness. For the senior psychologist and his students and colleagues, the essential experience in forgiveness is the “movement from a sense that something is fundamentally wrong with one’s life and a feeling of estrangement from oneself and others to a feeling of being at home in one’s self in the world. The person moves from an attitude of judgment to embrace.” The study showed that forgiveness requires a social context, some form of human interchange; it is particularly important to experience acceptance from others.

But that is not always possible. There are many reasons a person may not be able to accept an apology and offer forgiveness. The heart might still be too hurt, or so much time has passed that the rupture in the relationship has grown too strong. There is space Jewishly for deciding not to forgive.

In a talk on forgiveness, a teacher of mine shared that he failed to repair his relationship with his mother before her dementia caused her to forget that they had ever been estranged. During the months before she died, he told her he was sorry many times, and she comforted him as a mother comforts a son, not knowing why he was so insistent he had hurt her. Of all his failures, he said, this one was particularly cruel.

How do we endure it when we cannot be forgiven?

It’s here, I think, in this frail place, that Yom Kippur stands as our most important, most relevant day. Everything we do on this day is ancient in origin, drawn from the central religious ceremony in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

In ancient Israel, there was *one time* during the year when the High Priest would enter the *kodesh kodashim*, the Holy of Holies, the innermost sacred space in the Temple. It was understood to be the meeting place of the High Priest and God.

He took great pains to prepare himself. He washed and meditated. He took off his clothes from the week and put on his holy garments. When he was ready, the High Priest would call out God's name. We don't know how to pronounce the name now, its true sound either unsayable or lost to us over time.

"We have transgressed," the High Priest prayed, "me and my household. I plead before you, *Yud heh vav heh*, forgive what we have done."

Outside the holiest site, all the other priests and the entire community filled the Temple courtyard, and when they heard the name of God explicitly enunciated, they would bow and fall on their faces, calling out "*baruch shem kavod malchuto l'olam va'ed*." Praised is the name of the One who endures forever." This is the phrase we say quietly after reciting the *shema*. Except on one occasion, on Yom Kippur, when, like angels, we say it out loud.

The High Priest would purposely prolong his utterance of God's Name, while the people, fallen on the courtyard floor, called out in praise of God, and the Priest would then bless them with three words: "you are forgiven."

Yom Kippur is not magic. It is an invitation to get out of the monologues that run through our heads and turn, instead, to the One who transcends us. When the ancient High Priest called out the name of God, it was as if he brought the Sacred down to earth. It was not the enunciation of the name

that generated that sense of the Sacred, but rather the *faith that there is meaning in* doing so. As if God's name contained a much fuller cry: "God, we are standing here at the courtyard, all together, waiting for You. Meet us here. Take from us the burdens we are carrying, and in their place, plant within us the sacred qualities of humility, gratitude, and compassion. Forgive us."

The moment overwhelmed the people; they fell to the ground from the existential dizziness of standing and praying, openly, honestly, painfully, for forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not only a human exchange; forgiveness is also a prayer.

There are three Jewish concepts of forgiveness.

The first, "selichah," usually translated as "forgiveness" is the first step in a process. To ask for forgiveness is to say "I am sorry for what I did; I sincerely regret having done it." When possible, the person who has been hurt can open the door and invite the seeker of forgiveness in.

The second, "mechilah," usually translated as "wiping away" is the response to the question, "Can we return to our relationship, as it were, before I hurt you? It will not be the same because this is a part of us now, but can we rebuild together?"

The third, "kapparah," is usually translated as "atonement," as in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This is a matter of a person's conscience; it is beyond human capacity to forgive. It begins with a prayer for forgiveness and it is only God who can offer a *response: may you find comfort.*

"Kapparah" is why we're here on Yom Kippur.

This is a day centered on the experience of *lightening and releasing* some of the weight of living a human life that fails and falls. There is only the slightest mark between these two words; a mark that can be either written in, or scratched out. We fail and we fall.

We have failed this year to be kind, generous or patient. We have fallen this year into sadness, shame, longing.

An ancient midrash, a rabbinic story, imagined that on Yom Kippur true holiness happened not when the Priest called out the name Hashem, not when the people then fell on their faces, but rather, as they picked their heads up, looked around, and recognized that they had *all* fallen, they reached out to *lift one another up* and *accompany* each other home. *Hakohenim v'ha'am*, the priests and the people, walked home together. *It's here, in lifting up and in accompanying home*, that we can begin to heal for having failed to be the person we always imagined we'd be.

Much of Jewish spiritual teaching focuses on the inner spiritual life of every individual. Tonight it is a bit different. Tonight we pray in the plural.

Ashamanu. Bagadnu. Gazalnu. Dibarnu dophi.

We pray not only with those in this Sanctuary but also with Jews across the globe who are turning inward to access a more mindful, more open-hearted life, and to acknowledge, in all its agony, “We have failed. We have fallen.”

I know how hard this is, how countercultural we need to be to trust this moment.

But I promise you - because I know this community by now - we will lift you up and we will accompany you.

Tonight it's a *shared* prayer we offer:

Hashem, we are here in our courtyard, together, waiting for you.

Take from us the burdens we are carrying, and in their place, plant within us humility, gratitude, and compassion.

Forgive us.

Gmar chatimah tovah.