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Congregation Emanu-El of the City of New York
Yom Kippur 5782

“Shalom Bahar, Shalom Babayit”

Mother and daughter had just left my study. They had come, they claimed, to reconcile; and not for me to mediate the dispute that decades earlier estranged them and now embroiled the grandchildren. But as soon as they entered, each began to chronicle her grievances and her hurt and blame the other for them, unwilling even to consider the other might be hurting too. When the door closed behind them, I realized, not for the first time, how old histories and narrow perspectives rend our personal relationships much as they tear at our nation and our world.

We live in two worlds: the one out there, rife with injustice and conflict; and our more private worlds of family joys and personal achievements, but just as often sickness and grief, loneliness and alienation. A rabbi’s calling is to address both worlds. The first century sage Hillel counseled: *Im ain ani li mi li*, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” But he also cautioned: *Uch’she’ani l’atzmi ma’ani*, “Yet if I am only for myself, what am I?” At times, the two threads of Hillel’s admonition pull in tension with one another: what is good for me and what is good for the community don’t always align. But at other times, the anguish of the age and the yearnings of our lives are very much in sync. And we can learn from our broken world how to heal our broken hearts.

That is my hope tonight. And I begin sharing two encounters that concern one of the world’s other tenacious viruses, anti-Semitism.

Fool Me Once

In November 2019, a visiting professor lecturing at one of the Hill Schools in the Bronx asserted that Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians epitomized how victims of violence, in his words “Jews who suffered in the Holocaust,”¹ can become perpetrators of violence.² Controversy erupted, and that January the school invited me and my colleague Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch of the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in to reflect on the Holocaust, anti-Semitism historically, and its frightening resurgence. We contended that anti-Semitism today emanates from the right, in an ethno-nationalism that once hid beneath Ku Klux Klan hoods; and that it manifests on the left in an Israel-bashing far exceeding criticism of other countries. But I fear, for many, our remarks fell flat. The Jews have made it in America. And Israel is strong. Or so goes the thinking.

The second encounter occurred last spring. Recall how anti-Israel sentiment in America was triggering one anti-Semitic attack after another. The intense fighting between Israelis and Palestinians divided interfaith alliances. Fault lines appeared within the Jewish community itself. And the brewing enmity on high school and college campuses spewed into the open. The

¹ Eliza Shapiro, “Fieldston, Elite Private School, Faces Backlash From Jewish Parents,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 2020

² “‘Victims Becoming the Perpetrators’: Remarks about Jews at Elite Private School Spark Outrage,” *The Washington Free Beacon*, November 26, 2019

head of one of Manhattan's private schools wrote me: "We have more cautionary tales than constructive examples of...teaching the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," she observed. "[We need]...best practices for navigating...difficult conversations and finding common ground that will allow us to work together, and stick together." I was invited in to recap the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and answer questions. I brought with me my friend, Islam scholar Dr. Hussein Rashid. But having learned from experience what doesn't work, and how polarizing recitations of past history can be, I suggested we speak instead of our distress, our fears, and our future hopes for two states living side by side with dignity in peace. I pray we were helpful in laying that "common ground." The appreciation on the students faces suggested we had been.

This is not a sermon about Israel or anti-Semitism as much as they matter to us, or any other global or tribal schism. This is a sermon about personal reconciliation; about disagreeing with those we love without becoming alienated from those we love. But in taking measure of the aggravated tensions in the world, I have reached three conclusions: first, in instances of entrenched conflict, incessant recitations of history fall on deaf ears; second, most of us are already deaf to any narrative other than our own; and third, trying to prove why we are right leads only to a dead end.

Let me explain...beginning with the obstacle of history.

History

The epicenter of last spring's turmoil, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem is, according to our tradition, the site of the First and Second Temples. For us that plot of land is known as *Har Habayit*, "the mountain of the house." Today, *Al-Aqsa* Mosque and the Dome of the Rock occupy those heights. In many ways *Har Habayit* is a metaphor for our own homes,³ where age-old histories still cause great pain, and long-term grievances block reconciliation.

No wonder then, that the writers of the Bible situate the origin of ancient Middle Eastern land disputes in family narratives! Few quarrels equal in animus or stubbornness those between family members. And few are as enduring.

Isaac and Ishmael, the two sons of Abraham, are prototypes of other siblings I've encountered through the years. Alienated as boys by a struggle over inheritance, they meet again only to bury their father. Neither had instigated the rivalry. They were proxies in the conflict between their mothers Sara and Hagar. Their relationship though, like so many in which family members are compelled to pick sides, became collateral damage. And reconciliation remained beyond their reach during their father Abraham's lifetime.

In his recent opinion piece appropriately titled, "What's Ripping American Families Apart?" David Brooks cites a Cornell University study revealing that twenty-seven percent of Americans over eighteen – sixty-seven million people – are estranged from one or more members of their family. And most of them long to reconnect.⁴ How sad!

³ Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson "Old Gates and New: Relationships and Reconciliation," Yom Kippur Evening 2000, Temple Beth-El of Great Neck

⁴ James Dean, "Pillemer: Family estrangement a problem 'hiding in plain sight'," *Cornell Chronicle*, September 10, 2020, in David Brooks, "What's Ripping American Families Apart?," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2021

The predominant rift is intergenerational, an adult child cutting ties with one or both parents. Sometimes the break begins with the child's need to separate, to create his or her own life, which the parents in their intense devotion but unhelpful interference had not recognized. Sometimes the rupture involves physical or emotional abuse. Psychologist Joshua Coleman, author of the book *Rules of Estrangement*, writes: "In my practice, I have found that accusations of emotional abuse from the adult child are often the area of greatest confusion for parents. As Robert and Becky, two...parents...estranged [from their daughter asked, 'What do you mean] emotional abuse? We gave our child everything. We read every parenting book ...took her on wonderful vacations, went to all of her sporting events.'"⁵

We each summon our own version of history: their fault, our innocence; their stupidity, our common sense. A gulf widens between us. We stand on one peak; they on another. Our animosities and resentments become hot coals⁶ we hold on to waiting for just the right moment to throw at them, all the while burning our hands, poisoning our relationships. It happens between spouses too.

Tillie Olsen's classic novella *Tell Me A Riddle* recalls the story of Eva and David married forty-seven years, but worn down by life: she from the exhaustion of rearing seven children; he from the burden of supporting them all, which leaves him eager to sell their home for a spot in a retirement community, worry-free.

Finally their pent-up bitterness and frustration boiled over, and the argument wasn't pretty:

He began, "For once in your life...[you] have everything done for you....They buy what you ask, and cook it how you like. *You* are the one who always used to say: better mankind born without mouths...than always...[having] to shop...to cook, to wash, to clean."

She returned the challenge: "How cleverly you hid that you heard [me]. I said it... because eighteen hours a day I ran [cooking for everyone]. And you never scraped [one] carrot..."

But he parried her: "Look! In their bulletin. A reading circle. Twice a week it meets..."

And she retorted: "Now, when it pleases you, you find a reading circle for me. And forty years ago when the children were [young] and there was a circle, did you stay home with them once so I could go? Even once?..."

For forty-seven years they had been married. How deep back the stubborn, gnarled roots of the quarrel reached, no one could say – but...now...the roots swelled up visible, [and] split the earth between them....⁷

"How do you keep the past alive without becoming its prisoner?"⁸

Some years ago, a colleague sought my feedback on her Yom Kippur sermon. Its theme was "forgiving and forgetting." I asked her whether she believed people really do forget the wrongs they've forgiven. I know I struggle with it. We all carry around a catalogue of hurts.

⁵ <https://aeon.co/essays/modern-culture-blames-parents-for-forces-beyond-their-control>

⁶ Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, "Ghosts," *Faith and Family*, pp.119-20

⁷ Tillie Olsen, *Tell Me A Riddle*, pp.63-67

⁸ Ariel Dorfman, "Afterword" from "Death and the Maiden"

Some of us bury it on one of the lower shelves of our consciousness and don't reach for it often. But for others, it is always in hand, ready for recitation. Either way, it is there.

My Way

If getting past old histories were not difficult enough, we also struggle to see a reality beyond our own view of the present. As sensitive or as sympathetic or as empathetic as we try to be, our vision is limited. We cannot truly know another person's experience, see the world through another person's eyes. And when we feel we have been wronged, our indignation can eclipse our sensitivity, sympathy and empathy altogether, as our perspective is narrowed by the need to be right.

It is a sadly-familiar storyline which husbands and wives, parents and children repeat again and again. "The rabbi asks, 'Okay, what has to change for you two to be able to get along better?' And the husband answers, 'She has to change! She has to admit I'm right.' So the rabbi says, 'You have no power over her. You only have power over yourself. What can each of you do to make things different?' And they both think for a moment or two, and the wife responds, 'If he admitted he was wrong, I would forgive him.'"⁹

For the sake of our families and our friendships, we need to consider that our way may not be the only way. And when conflicts arise we should ask ourselves: Really? Is this difference of opinion all that important? Is a fundamental principle at stake? Or am I simply reacting to an approach I hadn't considered before, one that merits a little patience, even a little of my "silent suffering?"¹⁰

Cornell University sociologist Karl Pillemer, author of *Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them*, suggests that to understand better the perspective of the other side we should try to imagine the story the other side would tell¹¹ – not just their point of view, but also their feelings. It's an effort most of us don't want to expend. But Martin Buber insisted that our most consequential relationships, what he called I-Thou, require it.

When we learn to see more than our own way, we begin to perceive nuance we hadn't before. We become less judgmental and more compassionate. We know when to stand firm, but also when we can bend. And the path to *teshuvah*, to reconciliation, opens up before us.

At-one-ment

And now to the heart of this Day of Atonement, of "at-one-ment."

We may believe we can make whole our broken relationships by convincing others we are right. But reconciliation is not a debate competition. Healing is not achieved by scoring points off one another. We do not repair rifts by compelling others to admit they are wrong.

⁹ Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson "Old Gates and New: Relationships and Reconciliation," Yom Kippur Evening 2000, Temple Beth-El of Great Neck

¹⁰ Rabbi Jack Stern, "Anger," *The Right Not To Remain Silent*, p.75

¹¹ James Dean, "Pillemer: Family estrangement a problem 'hiding in plain sight'," *Cornell Chronicle*, September 10, 2020

Almost all those in Dr. Pillemer's study who reconciled with estranged family chose not to press for an apology or to change anyone else's mind. Rather they discovered that tolerating a bit of disagreement for the sake of harmony could be a win-win for everybody.¹²

But let me be clear on two points. First, setting history aside and acknowledging other perspectives does not necessarily assure conflict resolution; it does, however, make it more certain that we can stay in each other's lives. Second, not every relationship should be sustained, especially when emotional or physical abuse is involved. And even in less extreme cases, it is, at times, healthier for people to separate. Martin Buber taught that when a relationship requires us to relinquish so much of our individuality or sacrifice so many of our convictions that we lose the essence of who we are, then that relationship must be recalibrated or ended. We should never cease to stand up for what we believe – about Israel, anti-Semitism, the survival of the Jewish people or any other cause important to us. History does matter. And airing the truth can be critical to reconciliation in societies where injustices have been perpetrated and never fully acknowledged. There are moments to stand on principle....

But we must know when – because healing may mean deciding what matters more: our relationships or proving ourselves right. The unity of a family, or a community, or a nation, or a people means making room for alternate views we don't agree with but can live with for the sake of the harmony we hope to achieve.

Shalom Bahar, Shalom Babayit

According to legend, the *Akedah* we read last week – the binding of Isaac, or Ishmael depending on the story you tell – unfolded on *Har Habayit*, the Temple Mount, the “mountain of the house,” what Muslim tradition calls *Haram al-Sharif*, the Noble Sanctuary. A midrash suggests that one horn of the ram Abraham sacrificed in his son's stead will ultimately trumpet the final redemption, the end of all suffering when, as Malachi prophesies, “the hearts of the parents [shall turn] to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents.”¹³ The Talmud instructs that its blasts echo the weeping mother of Sisera, the Canaanite general, Israel's enemy, when she learned of her son's death.

We learn that reconciliation, the redemption of our relationships, depends on hearing the anguish of others¹⁴ – on sharing our sorrow, feeling their pain, and recognizing that both, at once, can be legitimate. As it must be for Israelis and Palestinians, so it must be for us.

It is also taught that the ram had always been there, only Abraham had not seen it. Even as the animal tugged on his robe, he did not see it. Rabbi Norman Cohen concludes in his beautiful retelling of the tale: “The vehicles for holiness and redemption are not only ever-present, waiting for us to open our hearts, minds and eyes to them, but they constantly beckon us to reach out and take hold of them. As resistant as we are to doing good and improving our

¹² James Dean, “Pillemer: Family estrangement a problem ‘hiding in plain sight’,” *Cornell Chronicle*, September 10, 2020

¹³ Malachi 4:6

¹⁴ Rabbi Edward Feld, “What Are We Supposed to Hear When We Listen to the Shofar?” on *BT Rosh Hashanah* 33b

relationships and our lives, the divine in the world echoes around us and within us, demanding that we respond and fulfill our highest selves.”¹⁵

Yom Kippur lays a choice before us. If we choose, we can leave our fragmented relationships behind on whatever altars of pride or principle we have constructed knowing the chance to repair them will recede with each passing year. Or we can decide that now is the time to set the past and our recollections of the past aside, consider there may be more to the story than we perceive, and not go on fighting about it. Hillel’s injunction, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? Yet if I am only for myself, what am I?” ends with its most important imperative of all: *V'im lo achshav ei'matai?* “If not now, when?”

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav tells of a prince who over his father’s objection abandoned the royal palace in search of independence and to find himself. Months went by. Then years. The prince became homesick. He yearned to return, but given the king’s resentment at his leaving, believed he was no longer welcome.

Then one day a messenger brought him a letter from the palace, which only made his pain more acute, for it reminded him of his home and of what he had left behind. He would have given anything to see his father again, to embrace him or touch a fringe of his royal robes.

He was crying soundlessly when suddenly he realized he need not feel sorrow any longer. Didn’t he have a letter in his hand, a link to his past and proof that his father had not given up hope of seeing him again!

Reb Nachman’s message is clear: no matter how far apart we have grown, *teshuvah*, “returning,” remains possible. The New Year implores us to reach out, to make the call, to try.

Tomorrow night may the shofar call out from one mountaintop to the next and close the distance between us. May each of our homes become noble sanctuaries of love and friendship, patience and forgiveness. And may *Har Habayit*, the mountain of God’s house, our people’s most sacred home, at last know peace.

Amen.

¹⁵ Rabbi Norman J. Cohen, *Self, Struggle and Change*, p.86