

Rabbi Fine  
2<sup>nd</sup> Day Rosh Hashanah 5772

### Raising Up our Relationships

A couple of weeks ago, my mother shared with me a personal reflection that an old friend of our family from Indiana wrote to share with her synagogue community before the high holidays.

These are the words of our friend Julie:

***“This is a piece about apologies. I’m sitting in my mother’s room as I write this. She has been transitioning, as they say, for the past 12 days, and now she is actively dying of breast cancer.***

**The past two months have been especially difficult ones for my mother and me. For my mother, this once placid, loving, and very peaceful woman connected with a darker, angrier side of herself.**

**For me, well, I was the target of this. For two months I listened to (and resented) her accusations and negative assessments of me. Trying to explain my perspective of past events that caused her to feel such negativity made no difference. My mother’s narrative was fixed and there was nothing that would move her from it.**

**I felt stuck. How could I get her to understand me? How could she feel these things without me knowing it until now? How could I let her die with such resentment and misunderstanding?**

**There was little else I thought about these past two months. Two weeks ago I told my Richard, (*her husband*) that I couldn’t find the compassion inside myself for her and this made me feel heartsick.**

**I decided the next time she lambasted me I would just apologize for all the hurt and pain I’d caused her. I’d fake it, because after all, it wasn’t true, but I’d apologize anyway, give her what she wanted, and be done with it. I’d had it with her vitriol!**

**My chance arrived last Tuesday as she lay in her bed surrounded by the Hospice doctor, nurse, and social worker...For an hour and a half, my mother talked about grievances dating back to when I was 10 years old.**

**I tried hard to listen to the common thread running through these complaints. What was she really saying to me? What did she really want from me?**

**And then she said it: “I must have been a bad mother.” A bad mother? I thought. Nothing could have been farther from the truth. But that’s what she felt, and every painful memory served to confirm that belief.**

**So I said I was sorry and I meant it. I said how awful it must have felt to think of herself as a bad mother, when the opposite was really true. I said how sorry I was at not being able to appreciate her more, make her feel better about herself as a mother. Sorry that she carried this around for so long. Sorry for those things in me that contributed to her pain. I meant it all.**

**That was the last time my mother spoke in full sentences. A peace came over her that has lasted even to this moment of writing.**

**As for me, something unexpected occurred. All of a sudden I didn't seem to need her understanding. Didn't need her to hear me out. In fact, I didn't need anything. By apologizing for what was true for *her*, I was awash in compassion and love that had eluded me these past months.**

**Were her feelings of inadequacy my doing?**

**No, of course not, but my apology for *her* pain and my contribution to it, has allowed for a different kind of resolution for me.**

**No doubt I will always wonder about my mother and try to make sense of her, but my peace comes now from the gift apology has given me: to feel love for my mother again so, with heart, I can release her into the universe.”**

Yesterday I spoke about the unique power generated by this time period for reconnecting with God.

But the gates are not only open during these ten days for reconciliation with God.

We learn in the Talmud:

*Aveirot sh'bein Adam l'Makom, Yom haKipurim m'chaper*

**“Sins that are between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones for them;**

*Sh'beino l'bein chaveiro, ein Yom haKipurim m'chaper ad sh'yirtzeh et chaveiro*

**Sins that are between a person and his fellow, Yom Kippur will not atone until he appeases his fellow.”**

Our tradition is very clear. If we look to God to forgive us for what we've done wrong to one another, we're confused about how things work. We are at the wrong gate. We're knocking on the wrong door.

I asserted yesterday that our purpose on earth is to raise fallen sparks of holiness by making what is broken whole.

This task extends to *every* aspect of our lives, including the interpersonal realm. We have the obligation and opportunity during this time to restore wholeness to our relationships with one another.

Julie began what she wrote by saying “*This is a piece about apologies.*” But what Julie did was much more than apologize. Her apology was as much an act of forgiving her mother for how she was treating her as it was an apology.

What Julie really did was courageously find a way to bring greater dignity, maturity and holiness into her relationship with her mother.

This is our sacred task in all of our relationships. This is what it means to discover the fallen sparks of God in the interpersonal realm and to lift them up and restore greater wholeness to the world.

I chose to speak about this topic because I have seen this year how broken relationships can fracture families, communities, and the world at large, and because I have also been inspired by the power of reconciliation to create stronger and deeper connections between individuals and within community.

We are reminded by Julie’s experience, of just how painful it can be when there is anger and resentment in a relationship.

We are reminded that when there is a conflict, there are usually two different understandings of reality.

We are reminded that when someone is angry or bitter towards us, it can foster similar feelings on our side of the equation.

We also see here that powerful feelings of peace and resolution can result when one person in a conflict makes the courageous decision to step out of the cycle of negativity and raise up the relationship, even if they are the victim in the situation.

We see how ennobling it can be to take the high ground in a conflict, and how this can be deeply empowering and healing.

All of these lessons from this poignant human experience, remind us that there is no cookie cutter formula for lifting up our relationships. Every situation is different, every person is different, every relationship is different.

But there is no person in this room who hasn't experienced the brokenness as well as the beauty of relationship this year, and there is no person in this room who doesn't have the power to bring greater dignity into his or her relationships.

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So where do we begin?

We must start simply by becoming more aware of where there is brokenness in our relationships.

We may have dramatic rifts in close relationships, perhaps the all too common family member we don't speak to, or a marriage in crisis, or a child we are estranged from. Perhaps we have deep emotional pain from a relationship with someone who passed away already many years ago.

Or we may have smaller scale fractures of relationship. Perhaps something unsettling happened this year in a generally loving and healthy relationship that we never fully dealt with.

Perhaps we were hurt by a friend, colleague, or family member in some small but real way and are silently carrying those feelings around with us. Perhaps we know we did something to hurt someone else but didn't have the courage to own up to it.

We each have such examples in our lives, some of which we may be very aware of, others that may remain hidden beneath the surface of our consciousness, leaving us with a vague unsettled feeling.

To fulfill our obligation of doing *teshuva* with our fellow human beings, we have to begin by becoming more aware of these places of division in our lives.

It is human nature to shy away from what is hard or painful, and so sometimes we can't see what is right in front of us or within us. As you begin to reflect on this subject, it can be like looking for your glasses that it turns out are on your forehead.

The tools needed to find these broken places are simple. Time for stepping back and reflecting, openness and desire to discover our interpersonal spiritual work, and the humility to see our own human faults.

Seeing what is broken is hard and takes courage.

But it takes even more courage to take responsibility for mending what is broken.

I want to offer us three ways to do so as we reflect on our relationships today.

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The first, is by apologizing for things we've done wrong.

From a young age we're taught to say we're sorry.

As children or parents, all of us have seen or experienced a forced apology. "Sammy, apologize to your sister for taking her candy and making her cry."

Sammy, with a pout on his face, perhaps after a second or third command from the parent or even a threat of punishment, sulks up to his sister and says "sorry", then runs off.

With good intention on these occasions, parents try to teach their children the value of apologizing; of humbling ourselves and owning up to ways we've wronged others.

Apparently our techniques for teaching the art of apologizing don't always work though, because as adults we are often just as unlikely as kids to take the initiative to apologize.

How often are we still like Sammy, begrudging any admittance of our mistakes?

We feel the same essential emotions that kids do around apologies. We easily become defensive because we are uncomfortable seeing our own faults. Just like kids, we squirm at the idea of making ourselves vulnerable by admitting our flaws.

Unlike kids though, we don't have a parent there to force us to apologize, and so we often just don't do it. Or if we do, our apologies may themselves be flawed, coming too late or only in very general terms, without really taking responsibility for what we have done or said.

This being the case, the high holidays provide an incredible opportunity. Our society often prizes strength and confidence in an individual. But on the high holidays, we as Jews assert that the values of humility and honesty are of utmost importance to our lives together.

We create an atmosphere in which it is socially acceptable and encouraged to apologize and to forgive, an atmosphere in which we assert that vulnerability can in fact be a sign of strength.

The truth is that what really will teach our children to make amends when they do something wrong is if we model it for them ourselves. Our tradition tells us what this modeling might look like.

Our teacher Maimonides wrote as follows in his Code of Jewish law in the section about Repentance:

**Even if one only injured the other in words, he must pacify him and approach him until he forgives him. If his fellow does not wish to forgive him, the other person brings a line of**

**three of his friends who in turn approach the offended person and request from him that he grant forgiveness. If he is not accepting of them, he brings a second group of friends and then a third.**

We see here that apologizing is about much more than just saying you are sorry. The process of seeking forgiveness is exactly that, a *process*.

Empty words or an insincere effort won't do it, it has to be real. Reestablishing trust isn't easy or automatic.

This is why Maimonides tells us that if we fail to pacify someone, we must try two more times, and even apologize in front of friends, admitting our faults in front of others.

The sincerity of our effort is part of what enables the person who was hurt to forgive and reenter the relationship.

Who have you hurt this year?

Who have you let down?

What phone call have you been meaning to make for months?

Whose forgiveness do you still need to seek before Yom Kippur?

What effort is required of us?

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While it is true that the primary onus for mending what is broken lies with the person who has done wrong, responsibility also lies with the person who has been hurt.

The second way we can raise up our relationships to a greater level of dignity and holiness is by approaching someone who has offended or hurt us.

We aren't always aware when we have done or said something that was hurtful to another person. It is impossible for that person to right their wrong if they don't even know they did something wrong.

Just as it is difficult to apologize, it is also difficult to tell others when they have hurt us. But if we don't, our feelings are often channeled in a more destructive fashion.

In the Torah in the book of Leviticus, we find a remarkable set of three verses that address interpersonal relations.

We read as follows:

**You shall not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people; neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of your neighbour: I am the LORD.**

**You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall surely rebuke your neighbour, and not bear sin because of him.**

**You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.**

This last verse – love your fellow as yourself - is well known. But what does it really mean to love your fellow as yourself?

The Torah recognizes that there are two possible paths to take when someone wrongs or offends you.

The first path is that you can talk badly about the person behind their back, hating them in your heart, bearing a grudge and seeking vengeance.

The second path involves approaching the person and telling them how you feel.

To love your neighbor as yourself is to recognize that our fellow human beings are imperfect just as we are, and therefore instead of only resenting them and harboring anger about their faults we need to take the mature stand and approach one another when we are upset about something, with an intention to fix what is broken.

This is particularly important in our close relationships. Allowing resentment to fester in our hearts can ruin something that is precious. While confronting one another can be difficult, it can lead to deepened understanding and connection.

I experienced this with an old friend not long ago. Due to a bunch of weddings of common friends, we spent more time together this year than we had since we were kids, and we were both happy to reconnect. After one occasion of spending time with him though, I realized I felt hurt by one of the ways he had treated me that I knew he was unaware of.

After living with those feelings for a few months, I decided that his friendship was too important to me to just continue to hold on to the feelings. I wrote to him and told him my experience, and that I was writing because his friendship was really important to me.

He wrote back, having reflected on the situation, apologizing for what had happened, explaining what he thought led to it, and expressing how important our friendship was to him as well.

In the end, moving through this moment of difficulty together not only allowed us to maintain the friendship we already had, but actually made it deeper and more open.

I have likewise found myself on the other side of the equation this year. It is always difficult when someone is honest with you about something you've done that is upsetting to them.

It's uncomfortable and it doesn't feel good. But it is a necessity if we want to have the healthy real relationships that help us grow as individuals and that make life meaningful.

When there is a difficulty in a relationship, if it isn't talked about it can grow until it creates real ruptures. But if it is talked about honestly and with willingness to hear the other person's experience, a misunderstanding can turn into a new opening for love and a deepened bond.

The truth is that while sometimes in conflicts one party is the victim and the other is in the wrong, it is often not so black and white. Usually the truth is somewhere in the middle.

When we approach another person, it requires us to also be open to discovering a truth that is different than the way we see things.

We are all human and all make mistakes. If we approach one another not only out of anger or hurt, but also with compassion and caring for one another, we can rediscover our shared humanity.

Who have you been harboring a grudge against?

Who have you been speaking badly about?

Would it be possible to approach them and have an honest conversation?

I do need to add a very important caveat to what I have just said. The imperative to seek reconciliation doesn't apply in every case and at every time.

Sometimes the only way to raise up a relationship is not to engage but to *disengage*.

Sometimes the best thing we can do in a relationship is to extract ourselves from it; to disentangle ourselves.

In some cases this might mean ending a relationship entirely, as in abusive relationships. In other cases, maybe some space and time is needed before reconciliation or forgiveness can be achieved.

This principal holds true even within healthy relationships at times. Sometimes the most mature thing to do is to choose to stop playing our part in a pattern that is dysfunctional, or to step back during a moment when emotions are running high until we are able to approach the other person with receptivity.

Sometimes a simple decision to disengage from a pattern of negative behavior with another person can entirely change the muddy playing field that we have been stuck in.

These patterns are like a game of tug and war. You're both tugging and pulling, and then you realize that if you just drop the rope the game is over.

Hopefully you can do so in a gentle enough way that the other person doesn't fall.

Are there any relationships or cycles within relationships in your life that fit this bill?

What can you do to step out of the unhealthy cycle?

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The last framework for bringing greater dignity and holiness into our relationships that I will discuss is through forgiveness.

Maimonides, after describing the obligation to apologize 3 times if you have done something wrong, goes on to say, **"If he still does not wish to grant forgiveness, one leaves him and goes his own way, and the person who would not forgive is himself a sinner."**

In our prayers we say to God, if you were to recall all of our wrongdoing, we would be unable to stand before you for an instant. So too in the interpersonal realm.

If we never forgave one another, or ourselves for that matter, letting go and moving on, we'd be constantly stuck. We'd be frozen by our imperfections, unable to move forward as individuals, families, communities and as a world as a whole.

As stated earlier, despite the virtue of forgiveness, it is not something that comes automatically. It is an intensely personal process that can't be forced upon anyone.

Sometimes people view forgiveness as a sign of weakness. But this often stems from a misconception of what forgiveness is. Forgiveness does not mean foregoing justice, nor does it mean condoning or excusing the hurtful action.

In the experience of many victims, achieving forgiveness is just the opposite of an act of weakness, it is tremendously empowering.

Marina Cantacuzino, founder of [the Forgiveness Project](#), which records stories of meetings between victims and perpetrators, states about forgiveness, **"For many it is a liberating route out of victimhood; a choice, a process, the final victory over those who have done you harm. As Mariane Pearl, the wife of murdered journalist Daniel Pearl, said of her husband's killers,**

**"The only way to oppose them is by demonstrating the strength that they think they have taken from you."**

Some of you may be familiar with a growing form of justice known as restorative justice. Restorative justice supplements the criminal justice process by bringing victims together with their perpetrators with a mediator if they so choose.

One such story in the Forgiveness Project was that of a woman named Kathleen Key. Kathleen had been with Darryl, her husband and father of her four children, for 28 years when he was killed by a drunk driver.

He was biking home from work when a man in a car did a u-turn across moving traffic and hit him head on. The man responsible for his death was immediately arrested and later found guilty of drunk driving. Kathleen told the second half of her story as follows:

**I started having bereavement counseling from victim support. My counselor asked if there was anything that would help and I told her, 'I need to see the guy who did this.' A lot of people were upset that I wanted to see the offender. It was about something here, in my heart, saying I needed to do this. It was about closure; moving on.**

**I met him in Standford Hill prison. I don't know why but I had no qualms. I was probably the calmest I'd been since the day Darryl died. There were two people from mediation service, myself, a prison officer and the offender all in the same room together. My first words to him were: 'If you think I'm here to forgive you, you'll rot in hell first. I can't forgive you for what you've done to my children.' Probably not a very good opening! Then I said, 'Tell me what happened. Not what the courts have said, you tell me what happened. Why were you drinking?'**

**He said he'd been drinking because his wife had died and he couldn't cope with her death, living in the house they shared, surrounded by her memories.**

**I said, 'That's very selfish. If you can't deal with living in her house, then you should move, not sit there drinking. By doing that you caused devastation in my life.' I asked him what he would do when he got out of prison.**

**He looked uncomfortable. He said he would never drive again. I said, 'What does that solve? It's always going to be your family running around for you. What you need to do is not drink again. Are you going to go back to work?'**

**He said he wasn't. He was retired. He had an army pension. I said, 'What are you going to do? Sit and drink yourself to death?'**

**He said, 'No'.**

**I said, 'Please don't let my husband's life be worth nothing. Don't sit and dwell, move on. If**

**you're not going to work, then help with your grandchildren. Please don't sit and drink your life away.'**

**He was crying by this point. In fact, everyone was except for me. When we left I was able to give him a hug and say, 'I don't hold you any ill feeling. I just don't want you to waste the rest of your life.'**

**I was studying at the time, and I went into college that day and I felt really elated. I actually slept that night too. It was the first time I'd slept since my husband had died. It was very empowering. I was able to find closure."**

What we see in Kathleen's case is that forgiveness is not about letting a perpetrator off the hook. Kathleen's confrontation with the man who killed her husband in fact forced the perpetrator to more fully face the results of his actions, and it was this that allowed her to find healing and forgiveness.

We see here, and also in the story of Julie that I began with, that forgiveness can be a force that not only liberates the one who is forgiven, but perhaps even more so the one who forgives.

In the words of one leader in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa after apartheid, forgiveness involves **"drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence."**

This not just hyperbole. If it was, there wouldn't be an entire section on forgiveness on the Mayo clinic website where it describes the health benefits of forgiveness.

This leading hospital tells us that forgiveness supports our personal health because it can lead to less stress, lower blood pressure, fewer symptoms of depression, anxiety and chronic pain, lower risk of alcohol and substance abuse, healthier relationships, and greater spiritual and psychological well-being.

Letting go of anger and hatred within ourselves is not only for others sake, but for our own.

During Kol Nidre we will ask God to release us from vows that we have made which bind us. We need to include the silent vows that we make...I will remain angry. I will remain a victim. I will remain resentful.

What silent vows are you living with?

What hurtful actions or words from the past continue to negatively impact your experience of life?

What would allow you to let go?

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None of these paths to greater wholeness in our relationships are easy to walk down.

It is not easy to apologize to someone we've hurt, to confront someone who has hurt us, to pull back from an unhealthy relationship, or to forgive someone who has hurt us.

But it is deeply rewarding to do so.

I chose to speak about this topic today and not on Yom Kippur because now is the time when we have a unique opportunity to do what is hard but healing. The gates are ready to open, but it's up to us to knock on the right doors.

If we take the steps to lift up our relationships with dignity, maturity, and caring, our efforts will only add to the merit with which we stand before our Creator on Yom Kippur.

May we days do so with courage, compassion and humility, and may we be blessed to we leave this high holidays more connected with one another and with the best of who we are.