

G'mar Chatimah Tova.

A year and a half ago, I was very closely following two storylines from China. Obviously one was COVID; I'm sure you remember it as well as I do - the fear, the anxiety, and the trips to the grocery store to stockpile toilet paper & hand-sanitizer.

But as we scrambled, panicked, and pivoted, there was a second emerging story that I was tracking from that region. We were getting reports of a massive increase in couples filing for divorce. The backlog was so high that according to a report in mid-March on a city government website, “staff members didn't even have time to drink water” because so many couples had lined up to end their marriages. Clerks were struggling to keep up, processing record numbers [of divorces] in a single day.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, any rational person understands that a virus, even a very bad one, does not automatically lead to a divorce. But remember that by the time we first started going remote in March and April, China had been dealing with the virus for months already. They had quarantined, panicked, and seen their lives change long before Covid-19 ever crossed our borders. So you can see how my anxiety wasn't entirely misplaced - for the most part, China's experience with Covid was a bellwether for ours. So despite no indicators that my marriage was in trouble, there were moments when my “irrational fear index” for divorce was just as high as it was for contracting COVID.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-31/divorces-spike-in-china-after-coronavirus-quarantines>

What caused the spike in divorce rates? Well, as we know, the pandemic exacerbated and laid bare many issues that we had previously been content to ignore, in so many aspects of our lives. Marriages built on shaky foundations quickly became untenable when the two members of that relationship were suddenly stuck inside a shared space with only each other as company. It is easy to hold onto an idealized version of our lives, tricking ourselves into hearing only what we want to hear, in order to maintain a more picturesque version of our reality.

Until it all comes crashing down.

Now there does seem to be more context here: divorce rates in China have been climbing for a while now, so this sudden surge wasn't entirely due to COVID. And it turns out that American (and international) couples didn't need to fear: the uptick in divorce rates in early 2020 seems to have been localized, for the most part, to China. But we can all recognize the impulse to avoid that hard truth until it smacks us in the face - and it shouldn't surprise anyone that relationships that were already teetering on the edge would fall apart when confronted with an insurmountable test.

I imagine that we've all found ourselves in unhealthy relationships at some point: a job that made you hate going to work every day; a friend whose very presence felt toxic, but to whom you could never say no; or a significant other whose best quality was that being with them was better than being single. We go to great lengths to delude ourselves into thinking that the reality isn't as bad as

the evidence demonstrates. We opt for imaginative explanations or inventive solutions to avoid facing the harsh truth: we've made a mistake. And in doing so, we justify continuing to make the same mistake over and over again.

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The Al Chet confession, that we will say 8 times over the next 25 hours, begins with the lines:

עַל חַטָּא שְׁחַטְאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּאִנּוּס וּבְרָצוֹן:

וְעַל חַטָּא שְׁחַטְאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ בְּאִמּוּץ הַלֵּב:

*For the sin we committed before You unwillingly and willingly, And for the sin we committed before You by callously hardening the heart.*

We are accustomed to hardening our hearts, to pushing back against that which we do not want to recognize as the truth. And we are equally used to watching others harden their own against anything that challenges their image of reality. We have watched corporations and communities do this for years: the Catholic Church, the tobacco industry, USA Gymnastics, and Penn State University all ignored mounting evidence, sacrificing individuals deemed expendable for the supposed sake of the “greater good,” until the truth slammed into them with the force of a Mack truck and they were made to face consequences for their actions - or inaction.

Owning up to making a mistake is at best embarrassing, and often downright painful - which is why a central theme of Yom Kippur is pushing ourselves to encounter that which we would rather forget. Owning our character flaws and examining how we went wrong - and more importantly, *why* we went wrong - takes a level of self-awareness that we do not usually grant ourselves. More importantly, it takes a level of self-vulnerability that we almost never allow - for all of our barriers against showing the ugly truths about ourselves to others, we have many more that allow us to rationalize our actions and continue to see ourselves as good and righteous. Asking the hard questions and taking ourselves to task for our flaws, opens us up to doing the hard work of changing - or to the guilt of ignoring the status quo, thus perpetuating it.

Perhaps the biggest, most consequential example of our tendency to avoid the hard truth is Climate Change. Scientists have been screaming from the rooftops for years that we're nearly out of time when it comes to undoing mankind's damage to the environment. Evidence is mounting - sometimes literally in the form of water at our doorsteps - and we, as a whole, still aren't shifting our way of life because doing so is monumentally challenging. It is easier to avoid the topic altogether than to engage with it. And it is far easier to live our lives the way we want to - to think of our own wants and needs- rather than feel guilty for all the decisions we make every day that continue to exacerbate the climate crisis.

Nothing about our tendency to ignore or avoid is a new phenomenon.

Tomorrow afternoon we'll read the story of Jonah - the ultimate Jewish avoider.

He literally ran away rather than speak truth to power - even though he was told to do so by God! It was only after spending 3 days in the belly of a whale and then being vomited up, that he was willing to acknowledge that *maybe* he had a responsibility that he had been going to great lengths to avoid.

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A few weeks ago, an article in The Times of Israel brought to light decades of sexual abuse that took place in the New York region of USY.

Since its publication and subsequent follow-up piece, dozens, if not hundreds, of people have come forward to say “I should have seen it” or “I always suspected something was off about him” or most painfully, “me, too.” There are always going to be bad people in the world; but perhaps as bad as those who committed these heinous acts are the ones who had the power to stop them and made a deliberate decision not to. These individuals casually, even carelessly condoned the problem, allowing it to continue for years or decades longer than it should have; they ran away from their responsibility, instead of towards it. They hardened their hearts, avoiding the truth that was right in front of them, and doomed even more innocent people to suffer because of their selfishness and inaction.

On second thought - I misspoke; I said that “Me, too” is the most painful thing that people have said in response to the story. In retrospect, even that terrible truth is not as painful to hear as the many replies that say something to the

effect of, “I’m not surprised - that’s how youth groups are.” How terrifying is it that so many people could hear about a behavior so vile that it scarred some of these kids for life - and remark that it’s simply par for the course? Which means that it’s a known fact - accepted by most, if not all. THAT is what haunts me most about this story: the sheer volume of adults who could have brought the abuse screeching to a halt with a single sentence. How many otherwise well-meaning adults could have protected their vulnerable charges and instead ignored - and thus helped perpetuate - this heinous violation of trust?

When we avoid hard truths, people end up getting hurt. It is easy to empathize with the potential whistle-blower’s hesitance to put themselves on the line, to recognize in ourselves the instinct to say, “I’m sure it wasn’t as bad as that.” It is much more difficult to force ourselves to reconcile the facts with our perception of a situation or a person, and to still Do The Right Thing - rather than becoming complicit in the outcome.

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Last week, Rabbi Gordon shared a beautiful Talmud story at the healing service that is relevant here.

In Masechet Brachot, there is a story of a time when Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill and Rabbi Yohanan went to visit him. Rabbi Yohanan asked: “Are your sufferings precious to you?” Rabbi Hiyya replied no - and so Rabbi Yohanan healed him.

But what do we make of the question that Rabbi Yohanan asked before he healed Rabbi Hiyya: “Are your sufferings precious to you?” It’s easy to ask, “Why in the world would his suffering be precious to him? Isn’t all suffering terrible and thus undesirable?” In response, Rabbi E. Noach Shapiro<sup>2</sup> notes that this question exposes a deep truth about humans: that “we are psychologically and spiritually complicated and have complex relationships with all sorts of aspects of our lives, even our suffering.” Even if his illness brought him pain and hardship, Rabbi Hiyya may have come to feel attached to it in some way.

Ultimately, Rabbi Yohanan’s question speaks powerfully to the nature of the relationship between an agent of change and those who would be changed or transformed. Rabbi Shapiro wrote:

In a way, the specifics of the answer don’t really matter. What’s important is that Rabbi Yohanan asked it. The overarching message of Rabbi Yohanan’s asking that question was, “to heal you, I need first to know your relationship to what is happening right now. Before I can help you move forward, I need to know at least that much about you and your life.”

(it should come as no surprise that Rabbi Shapiro is a practicing psychotherapist!)

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.jtsa.edu/precious-sufferings-the-dynamics-of-transformation>

This question - is our suffering precious to us - is at the essence of Yom Kippur. We all have hard things we know we must do, yet are actively choosing to ignore. Is our avoidance of that thing precious to us? Does it make up the core of who we are - as an individual or as a community? Do we choose the path of self-righteous victimhood, of suffering from the **sin of certainty**? Do we feel justified in our inaction by assuring ourselves that we are in the right or doing our best, even as we ignore any evidence to the contrary?

If we are willing to face that truth - even if we do not like what we see - then, as Rabbi Yohanan understood, we can be healed.

But if we will not allow ourselves that self-awareness - that self-critique... if indeed our suffering is core to our self-image, so much so that we are wedded to the answers of the wishful imagination... then we are destined to remain spiritually ill until we are ready to reverse course and accept the need for change.

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How can we examine our sufferings, to determine if they are precious to us, and to then take the appropriate actions?

First, we must ask ourselves why we are dwelling in the land of avoidance. And while there are, of course, as many answers as there are situations, chances are good that we're living in the world of denial, defensiveness, and avoidance because we think we can predict (or even control) the outcome if only all the

pieces can fall into place in the way that we want them to. We don't want to believe the truth because it shakes the foundation of everything we believe.

Imagine learning that your best friend, your favorite employee, or your revered mentor is abusing children. Of course your first instinct would be to deny it! Learning that people who we thought we knew (and maybe who we were even inspired by or looked up to) aren't who we thought they were is a jarring experience - perhaps the very definition of cognitive dissonance. Naturally, our minds will fight hard to avoid that confrontation.

Understanding and naming why we are practicing willful ignorance is an important part of the healing.

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The next step is making a different choice; in choosing to engage rather than to avoid. Rambam says that the highest level of teshuva is being put in the same situation where you sinned or made a mistake - and this time making a different choice, affecting a different, more just, outcome. If we hardened our hearts last year, against a person, a process, or a reality, it is our job to make sure that the same thing doesn't happen a second time, when presented with a similar situation. To make sure we don't avoid the hard truths that challenge our perspective and rather lean into the hard work that we must do. And sometimes this means revisiting an old situation and addressing it differently, preemptively, before it becomes an issue again .

On Rosh Hashanah I shared with you Brene Brown's phrase "call to courage." A key way to stop living in the realm of avoidance is by establishing a call to courage: bravely stepping into the unknown and leaning into the hard stuff.

Individually, this might mean finally admitting that counseling or medication could help you live the life you've always wanted to live. Or that changing jobs isn't about being disloyal to others but rather about embracing loyalty to your own happiness.

Communally, this might mean opening our eyes to the community that we actually have, rather than the one we think we should be or wish that we would be - and starting to effect change from there.

Globally, this certainly means recognizing - and acting on - the real threat of climate change. This likely means changing the types of food we eat, the modes of transportation we choose, the companies we invest in, and possibly, even where we live and what our houses look like.

Friends, these are **HARD** changes to make. They take immense reserves of courage to even begin to contemplate. **AND**, I believe that we are up to the challenge.

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I want to conclude by sharing the story of a man who answered a “call to courage,” even at great personal cost.

I assume you are familiar with the mass shootings in Columbine, Parkland, Orlando, Fort Hood, Aurora, and Pittsburgh. The one you likely don’t know about is Fort Worth, TX.

You don’t know about it because it didn’t happen.

On September 9, 2019, a man called the Fort Worth police department to report that he knew of a 27-year-old who was intent on killing people, mimicking a recent mass shooting.<sup>3</sup> The young person withdrew hundreds of dollars from his bank account and went from gun shop to gun shop, looking to buy weapons. When he failed the background checks and was denied the ability to get a gun legally, he attempted to buy one through other means.

Thanks to the tip, police were able to catch him, prevent a mass murder and bring the would-be perpetrator to a health clinic, rather than a jail cell or the morgue.

Why did it take a call-to-courage to make this phone call and turn this person in?

Because the tipster was the would-be-killer’s own father.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nbcdfw.com/news/local/possible-mass-shooting-averted-in-fort-worth/1963752/>

Put yourself in that father's shoes. Imagine coming face-to-face with the reality that your child, whom you love dearly and would do anything for, is mentally ill and possibly violent - perhaps even likely to kill others. Rather than bury his head in the sand, wishing for a different outcome or telling himself that his son would never do such a thing, he mustered up the courage to reach out to law enforcement - averting a potential disaster, and likely saving many lives in the process. What incredible courage that took!

How many times do we hear, after a shooting, about the warning signs that had been obvious all along? So many times we fail to act on the messages our friends and family are sending us. This dad was clear-headed enough to believe his son, to recognize the signs, and to do something about it.

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Certainly, we hope that none of us will encounter a situation with such life-or-death consequences as that one. But we will likely continue to encounter high-stake situations in the future.

We have to be asking ourselves - what are we missing because we are so sure that our perspective is the right perspective? Which voices are we ignoring, sure that they don't exist, because they do not line up with what we think should be? What truths do we not want to face because they are too difficult or overwhelming for us to encounter?

Having devoted so much time and energy to one specific outcome, it is natural to feel resistant to change. Let us remember that the sin of our certainty costs lives and destroys communities, while openness to change and a sense of curiosity has the potential to reward us richly.

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For the sin we committed before You unwillingly and willingly, And for the sin we committed before You by callously hardening the heart.

For the sin we committed before You by hoping that people would change into who we wanted them to be. And for the sin we committed before You by ignoring red-lines and wishing they would go away.

For all these sins, God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

This year, let us call ourselves to courage and open our hearts, challenging ourselves to accept the reality of the situations we find ourselves in and deciding how we want to engage with them.

As we pray to be written into the Book of Life, let us spend the year striving to be worthy of that goal.

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