

The Year of Hard Conversations - Yom Kippur 2018

**G'mar chatima tova.**

I'd like to ask you to do a little experiment with me.

I'll start with a gimme: raise your hand if you have the **best** children or grandchildren in the entire world.

That one is just to make sure you're listening and that your arms work. Now things get tougher.

Raise your hand if your family is entirely **free** of any dysfunction. <Pause>

Raise your hand if there is **nobody** from whom you are currently estranged.  
<Pause>

Raise your hand if you've had **no** relationships sour in the past few years because of politics. <Pause>

And finally... raise your hand if you have committed **no sins** in the past year.

I guess that settles it: (Other than <insert jokester who raised his/her hand on the last one>), None of us is perfect. We all have work to do.

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We began last night's service by granting ourselves permission to pray with the sinners. Rabbi Yaakov Ben Sheshet suggested that evicting sinners from the congregation would push out large swaths of people<sup>1</sup>. The uncomfortable truth is, WE are all the sinners that our machzor is talking about. As King Solomon wrote, "there is no righteous person who does [only] good and never sins<sup>2</sup>."

Nevertheless, we've done wrong this year. We've hurt others, intentionally and accidentally. In all of our many roles - as parents, as children, as spouses, colleagues, siblings, friends, congregants, and yes, even rabbis - we've made mistakes. We recite the *Al Chet* prayer in the plural form ("Al chet she'chatanu" - "We have sinned") because it's easier to admit to ourselves when a particular line applies to us if we know it applies to other people too.

The message that I want to share with you today is one that I also need to hear this year: how we go about repairing and rebuilding relationships. I struggled with writing this sermon, because the fact is that I really needed someone else to preach it to me. It's not an easy message, especially in our country and community at this moment, but Yom Kippur is the perfect time to talk about how we return to a sense of normalcy when our relationships are bruised, fractured, or even shattered.

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Remember the story of the Golden Calf? Moses descended from the mountain and saw that his people had built a huge idol and were

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<sup>1</sup> Shu"t HaRivash 172

<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:20

worshipping it. In response, he threw down the tablets he'd received from G-d, shattering them.

We like to emphasize Moshe's strong emotional reaction to witnessing a situation that deeply disturbed him. Seeing his People praying to a false deity cut him to the core - after everything he'd done for them, witnessing something that violated everything he believed was more than he could bear.

But we don't often talk about how all of the participants in that story - Moses, God, and the People of Israel - moved past that moment to form a holy community. For sure, each of the relationships in that constellation continued to experience strife even after they were repaired. But somehow they managed to come out of that incident stronger - and it is *how* they reconciled that is a model for us today. Their lesson applies to all of the many relationships in each of our lives.

After Moses threw down the tablets, they smashed into irreparable pieces. Moses went back up the mountain and prayed to God for forty days - the longest, most passionate prayer in our biblical tradition. And God ultimately relented, helping Moses craft a new set of tablets before sending him back down the mountain.

Rashi<sup>3</sup> teaches us that Moshe went up the mountain on Shavuot. On the 17th of Tammuz, he came down and smashed the tablets. On the 18th of Tammuz, he burned the Golden Calf and judged the transgressors. On the 19th, he went up again to pray for mercy. On the 10th of Tishrei - today's date

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<sup>3</sup> Rashi, Exodus 32:1 and 33:11

- God restored *God's own* faith in the Jewish people gladly and wholeheartedly. **וַיֹּאמֶר יי סִלַּחְתִּי כְדַבְרְךָ**, said G-d; "I have forgiven, as you ask," and he gave Moses (and us) the second set of tablets.

So Yom Kippur is not a day picked at random for us to ask forgiveness from God. Rather, today is the anniversary of God being able to whole-heartedly forgive our people for the largest sin in our collective history. And so it follows that today is the day God might be most generous, most open-hearted, most willing to forgive us as individuals for our transgressions.

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That's not where the story ends. It ends with the placement of the new tablets into the Holy Ark of the Mishkan... right next to the fragments of the first set of tablets.

Someone was brilliant enough to pick up the pieces of the tablets that Moshe smashed down - despite not knowing if they were easily replaced or if they were the last remnants of the potential society upon which everyone had pinned their hopes. Either way, the shards were part of history, so they were collected and placed in the Holy of Holies - the Ark of the Covenant, our most precious possession.

The Torah does not record an apology between the People of Israel and God (or Moses or Aaron). Instead, our tradition recounts a change of behavior, an act of forgiveness, and a reconciliation of God's vision for the Israelite people with who we really were. *Luchot v'shivrei luchot munachim b'aron*<sup>4</sup>, the

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<sup>4</sup> Talmud Bavli - Bava Batra 14b

Talmud tells us - both sets of the tablets sat in the ark. The two sets of tablets sitting next to each other, one broken, one whole, is a metaphor for our entire history, and indeed for each of us as an individual: we have moments of brokenness and moments of wholeness. We make mistakes and we get some things right.

In Judaism there is no such thing as “forgive and forget.” For us, it’s “forgive, and then incorporate the event into our collective memory and move forward.” That is what God is asking us to do this holiday. It is a wake-up call to those of us whose hands stayed anchored to our laps earlier; whose lives have dysfunction and estrangement, arguments and feuds, sin and imperfection. If God can remake a relationship with the people who betrayed Him, right after He redeemed them from Egypt, then surely we can begin to build bridges with the people with whom we have experienced rifts that are so petty by comparison.

Without doubt, there are relationships that should not be rebuilt - I would never suggest that you repair toxic or abusive relationships or engage with dangerous people. While those bonds may have caused us pain, they lie outside the scope of our conversation this afternoon.

Instead, focus on the people whose hurt was deep, but not irreconcilable: someone who disagree with your lifestyle choice, be it personal, professional, religious, or familial; who unrepentantly espouses different political views; whose petty grudge or passive-aggressive remarks have devolved into a years-long Cold War. Family members, in particular, have a way of hurting us more than anyone else; the people who know us best often hurt us the deepest - and many of those are the relationships most in need of healing.

We owe it to ourselves, to our community, and to God to pay forward the forgiveness. To do for others what God did for us.

This doesn't mean that you'll be able to pick up a relationship where it used to be. Things were said that cannot be unsaid, and injustices and hurts were committed that cannot be undone. But we *can* still tenderly gather the broken pieces and add them to the new pieces - those that we create together - and carry both with us as we move forward.

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Of course, there remains the question of "how." How do we move ahead without holding onto the hurt?

Megan Phelps, a former member of the Westboro Baptist Church, offers some suggestions. In a TED talk<sup>5</sup>, Megan told the story of growing up in the WBC: protesting at funerals, cursing Jews and gay people, and generally spreading hatred to those around her. She left the church in 2012, after engaging with really thoughtful people on Twitter.

Here's a piece of what she said:

My friends on Twitter didn't abandon their beliefs or their principles -- only their scorn. They channeled their infinitely justifiable offense and came to me with pointed questions tempered with kindness and

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[https://www.ted.com/talks/megan\\_phelps\\_roper\\_i\\_grew\\_up\\_in\\_the\\_westboro\\_baptist\\_church\\_here\\_s\\_why\\_i\\_left#t-611457](https://www.ted.com/talks/megan_phelps_roper_i_grew_up_in_the_westboro_baptist_church_here_s_why_i_left#t-611457)

humor. **They approached me as a human being, and that was more transformative than two full decades of outrage, disdain and violence.** I know that some might not have the time or the energy or the patience for extensive engagement, but as difficult as it can be, reaching out to someone we disagree with is an option that is available to all of us. And I sincerely believe that we can do hard things, not just for them but for us and our future. Escalating disgust and intractable conflict are not what we want for ourselves, or our country or our next generation.

I shared the rest of her TED talk on my public facebook page - and I encourage you to listen to the whole thing.

Seeing the humanity in every person is what will bring us back together. Megan Phelps is not the first person to tell this story. A year and a half ago, The Times published an interview<sup>6</sup> with Derek Black, a former white nationalist and the son of the man who created Stormfront, the largest white nationalist website. He too tells the story of coming out from his place of hatred when someone engaged in dialogue with him. For Megan, it happened first on Twitter and then on the picket line; for Derek, it happened at college over a Shabbat dinner table. There, he found people who were willing to *engage* with him - not forgive him, nor willing to accept his reality, but also not spewing hatred and anger at him.

For us, this revelation could happen anywhere that we open our minds, speak with generosity, engage with curiosity, and embrace the recognition that within each person is a spark of the Divine.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/22/podcasts/the-daily-transcript-derek-black.html>

This is not about trying more kindly, in a more gentle way, to convince someone that you're right; the chances are that you're not dealing with a member of the Westboro Baptist Church whose entire worldview ought to be challenged. In all likelihood, this is someone with whom you no longer see eye-to-eye on an issue that has become fundamental to you. I'm not asking you to change your views; rather, I'm suggesting that you take a moment to remember the value you place on community, family, and friendships. And in that moment, recall that the rift exists between you and a person that you care about - and that is sufficient for you to want to repair it.

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Perhaps you're lucky enough to *not* be calling to mind a child, parent, sibling, or close friend that you need to forgive. Instead, you may be thinking about a relationship that was damaged over current events. As a country, we seem to have lost some of our sense of decorum; that is, we no longer know how to talk civilly about that which divides us. Sharing views has become fraught with tension, anxiety, and uncertainty. There doesn't seem to be any room for discussion of the middle ground.

The American Jewish community is feeling particularly fractured over the topic of Israel. The Holy Land has become a hot-button issue for many of us, damaging relationships with friends and causing us to question things we used to take for-granted.

I want to share with you something that we're hoping to bring to Temple Israel this coming year. We are engaging with a group called "Resetting the



Table,<sup>7</sup>” which is dedicated to building meaningful dialogue and deliberation across political and communal divides - most specifically around Israel, although their techniques are certainly applicable in other settings as well.

Details aren't finalized yet, so we'll keep you posted over the course of the year. But I tell you about it because on this day of reconciliation and forgiveness, I want you to know that we here at Temple Israel see the schism - and that we are *all* committed to healing that divide.

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This isn't easy, this thing I'm asking you to do. I know because rabbis are not immune to family drama, hurt feelings, and old wounds that still bleed. As I mentioned before: this is the sermon I need to hear this year, too.

Opening up to this conversation is challenging. It requires putting aside grudges; and it requires humility and vulnerability - especially if the rift is so old that we hardly recall its origin. Everything from admitting that we were wrong, to putting the past behind us. requires a change in perspective. It requires us to break down walls that we have put up as a protective force, to stave off attacks - real or perceived - against our beliefs, our actions, or our entire way of being. It means reliving old pain and opening ourselves up to new hurts. And that's so hard. But it is also so worth it.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.resettingthetable.org/](http://www.resettingthetable.org/)

Chances are good that when you approach someone to apologize and make your relationship right, they too will have some apologizing to do. The Talmud tells of the time that Rabbi Yirmeya insulted Rabbi Abba, so he “went and sat at the threshold’ of Abba’s house, seeking to apologize. While he was sitting there, Rabbi Abba’s maid accidentally poured out the sewage onto Yirmeya’s head. When Abba heard about this, he went and sought Yirmeya’s forgiveness. Each rabbi was eager not to be put in the wrong by refusing to apologize<sup>8</sup>. While we laugh at the healing power of sewage, it’s hard to ignore the metaphorical sewage we dump on people. Perhaps worse, think of the verbal sewage we gleefully share with others, as we try to rationalize our position to make ourselves feel better.

Would it be possible, do you think, for you and the other person to *both* say you’re sorry? If you took the lead and made the first approach, it might be possible that they’ll follow and have their own apologizing to do.

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I’d like to conclude by sharing a poem by Marcia Falk called “Opening the Heart<sup>9</sup>”:

At the year’s turn,  
In the days between,  
We step away  
From what we know  
Into the spaces

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<sup>8</sup> Talmud Bavli - Yoma 87a

<sup>9</sup> The Days Between, Marcia Falk

We cannot yet name.  
Slowly the edges  
Begin to yield  
The hard places soften,  
The gate to forgiveness  
Opens.

Let this be a year of hard conversations. Let us take time to put away our accusations and assumptions; instead, let us ask questions and listen - really listen - to answers even if we don't understand or agree with them. Let us build bridges again: in our community, in our relationships, in our hearts.

I wish an easy fast to those of you fasting and a good conclusion to this holiday to all of us. Even more, I hope we are all blessed to have yielding edges and softened hard places as we enter spaces we cannot yet name. May we learn the value of carrying those broken tablets with us, alongside the whole ones. And may we offer others the same forgiveness that we expect from God.

**G'mar Hatimah Tova.**