

## Kol Nidrei 5783 - Return to Better Relations 5783

G'mar Chatima Tovah, A story is told about a particular mother-in-law and daughter-in-law with a very good relationship. The son of the mother-in-law realized that this is not so common. So, the man said, "I'm very lucky that my wife and my mother are so close. I realized just how close they are, the time I drove my mother to her doctor, which my wife usually does giving generously of her time and love to my mother. But I must admit I was very surprised when the doctor came into the room, and my own dear mother introduced me as her "daughter-in-law's husband."

Family relations and relationships with close friends who are often like family can be difficult to understand. When they sour, they are very difficult to improve. The challenges of the last few years have strained many of our relationships. The pandemic caused valid fears. We have been stressed by the fear of the virus itself. Some of us have financial fears. And others felt stressed by being locked in our homes. Irregular work hours and more time together or apart with our loved ones caused other challenges. Increased stress led to more stress on family life. Others were torn apart by arguments over Covid itself. More people come to me for counselling than ever before. Lifecycle events of all kinds have become more stressful. When Lissa, Naomi, and I were in London we took a tour of the city and saw where Harry and Meghan watched the Platinum Jubilee celebration of Queen Elizabeth, separate from the rest of the family. Large rifts have only begun to heal after the queen's passing. Even the British royal family is not immune to strife.

Now is the time to return to healthier and stronger relationships. The High Holidays give us a chance to build our relationship with God and with other people. Tonight, we will concentrate on the latter. Before looking outward, we must look inward. We must ask ourselves, what

have I done to hurt and what can I do to help? Sometimes the offended person must be the first to yield. The Torah teaches us *VeHavata Le Recha Kemocha*, love others as yourself. Judaism teaches us that this means to act on that love. No matter how difficult it is to be the first to give in when fighting it may be the best way to heal our strained relationships.

The British Royal family were not the first family to have issues. Nor will they be the last. It is no surprise that the Torah begins with strained family relationships. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of blessed memory wrote “Genesis begins with human relations... as if to say: This is the locus of the religious life... Something of immense consequence is being asserted here. We are told about relationships first because they matter most...”

Things did not go so well for the first two siblings in world history according to the Torah. Cain and Abel each made an offering to God. Abel’s offering was accepted, and Cain’s was not. After Cain’s offering is rejected, the text tells us “*Vayipelu Penav*,” “Cain’s face fell” and then he killed his brother. The late Brandeis University Bible professor Nachum Sarna comments on this, “This is a figure of sadness and depression.” God goes on to say to Cain “Why has your face fallen? Surely if you do the right thing, there will be uplift. But if you do not do the right thing, sin crouches at the door. Its urge is toward you. Yet you can be its master.” Sarna continues to comment that “it seems to be a foreshadowing to Cain of the dangerous potentials inherent in his present mood... man is endowed with real autonomy... He can subdue his primitive passions by an act of will, otherwise they will control him.” How many of us have allowed the challenges of the pandemic or other difficult events to control our families’ relationships?

The most well-known biblical sibling rivalry is that of Jacob and Esau. Jacob is not kind to his brother. He forces him to sell his birthright and steals his father’s special blessing through

deception. Esau sets out to kill Jacob. Jacob runs away and they finally return to one another after 20 years. Since Jacob's other name is Israel, Jacob is seen by the Rabbis as representing the entire Jewish people. Esau is seen as Rome, our archenemy and occupying force in the land of Israel. The late Bible professor Jacob Neusner wrote, "The sages found a place for Rome in Israel's history only by assigning to Rome a place in the family." Neusner also points out the Esau remains Jacob's brother. Our siblings are our family. Even when they do terrible things to us, they are still our family. There is no worse relationship than that of Israel and Rome. But family is family. Therefore, we must try to return to better days. When the two brothers meet each other decades later Esau who is successful, forgives Jacob and offers for them to walk together. But Jacob refuses and says you walk ahead of me. It is as if he acknowledges a state of brotherly peace, but not friendship. That may be the best we can ever hope for sometimes.

Just as biblical tradition is full of strained relationships, rabbinic and medieval tradition are as well. There is a story in Talmud Yevamot about Rav. It teaches us: "Rav was irritated by his wife. If he asked her to make lentils, she made peas. If he asked her to make peas, she made lentils. When his son Chiya became older, Chiya would reverse the request and then his mother would make what the father wanted. Rav said to his son, 'Things are going better with your mother. Chiya said to his father, 'I am reversing what you say to my mother.' Rav responded to Chiya, "You have helped us. But you should not do what you have been doing."

The late Rabbi Edwin Friedman taught about the dangers of family relationship triangling. An emotional triangle is formed by any three people. "The basic law of emotional triangles is that when any two parts of a system become uncomfortable with one another, they will focus upon a third person, or issue, as a way of stabilizing their own relationship with one an-

other. A person may be said to be “triangled if he or she is caught in the middle as a focus of unresolved issues.” Rav understood that his issue with his wife was not his son’s business. He knew that if Chiya continued to triangle into the relationship between his parents it would ruin the relationship with both of them with no benefit to anyone. Many families have bad triangles. It is easier in the short run, but worse in the long term. Some even think that triangles are the best way to solve a family issue. How often have you heard someone say, speak to your brother for me or tell your mother what she is doing. In a triangle everyone is hurt and no one heals.

One of my favourite texts is a Yiddish letter written in the 16th century from a mother in Jerusalem named Rachel Zussman to her son working and living in Egypt. The letter was found in the Cairo Geniza. As her financial condition deteriorated, she wrote her son Moshe:

“God only knows what will become of me. Don’t worry, my son. I always ask God that you not be sick and that I suffer in your stead. And I also ask God that I not die before I see your face again.... Don’t worry, my son, but don’t come now. If I died, I would not have a sheet to be brought down from my bed in...Maybe you can buy me one cheaply.. Come back to the holy city.

It is hard to believe that this letter was written 500 years ago and not last week. The letter probably did not endear Moshe to his mother. It just made him feel guilty. In Talmud Kedushin, Rava teaches us “that words that are in the heart are not words.” We assume that others know the intentions of our actions or our feelings without us telling them anything verbally. How can family members know that we love them if we do not state it regularly? How can they know that we are sorry for our mistakes or even malicious actions if we never state it out loud? How can someone know that another wants something from them if it is never stated clearly? Imagine if

Sarah had been more straightforward and less passive aggressive with her son. She would likely have influenced him to come home earlier without resentment.

To return to better relationships we need to be willing to give and ask how can I be flexible. Talmud Taanit teaches us, “One should always be as flexible as a reed and not as unyielding as a cedar.” It is important to remember that we have just lived through a pandemic. We need to be passionate with our compassion for others. My friend’s father once asked my opinion regarding his relationship with his brother. The man and his wife were very successful professionally and money was no concern. The man and his brother had received some inheritance from a relative who passed away and it was unclear who would receive the relative’s watch worth a couple of thousand dollars and some sentimental value. The friend wanted to know the degree to which he should fight his brother for the watch. My answer was quick and simple. I told him to forget it. The fight was not worth expense. Even if he received the watch, he would pay for the inheritance with something more expensive than its actual value. He would pay with a ruined sibling relationship. No material good is worth that cost.

In Talmud Sanhedrin we learn Ahava Mevatelet Shura Shel Gedula, love cancels the dignified conduct expected of the great. This is because in Rosh Hashana’s Torah reading Abraham is willing to sacrifice his favourite son because of his love of God. We should take this teaching one step further and say that the love of our loved ones should cancel out the expectation of a person to look out primarily for their sake. Thus, our love should enable us to look beyond hurt feelings, frustrations, insults and disappointments. We must rise above our desire for revenge or even need for an apology so that we can return to better relationships.

One of the most well-known Rabbinic texts comes from Mishna Yoma, that teaches that in order to atone for sins between us and other humans we must first obtain forgiveness from the

other person. In the text Chayei Adam it states that we “must try again and again expressing our request for forgiveness.” If we are going to do this with a friend or even an acquaintance, all the more so we must do that with a family member or someone close to us. In his commentary on the Musar text Date Palm of Devorah, that we are currently studying in our Musar class, Henry Abramson explains that a string that has been broken and retied is stronger than a string that has never been torn. The same is true with relationships. Fixed relationships can be stronger than those that were always healthy.

Please feel free to use this sermon as a Pitchon Pe, an opening of a conversation. You can say to a loved one or to a friend, I was at synagogue on Kol Nidrei and Rabbi Infeld spoke of returning to healthier relationships. That reminded me of the issues between us. Let’s talk and see what we can do to repair our bonds and return to the relationship of love that we once had. We have lost too much during Covid. Let’s not lose each other. Let us make this the year that we return to our family and friends and our special relationships in a way that we never did before.

G’mar Chatima Tovah