

Kol Nidre 5777, delivered by Rabbi David Novak  
10 Tishri 5777/11 October 2016

One day recently a man, we'll call him Jonathan, urgently needed to speak with his best friend. He sent a text and left a voicemail:

"We need to talk, soon."

Unfortunately the text and voicemail were not returned.

His best friend, we'll call him Max, was inundated with work that day. Unfortunately he missed both the text message and the voicemail. A mistake that happens, we hope, rarely, but does happen. We're human.

Wondering why Jonathan never got back to him, Max became hurt, upset, and angry. He felt that his friend had ignored him purposefully. When Jonathan finally sees Max, he gives his best friend his usual warm greeting.

Max responds tepidly.

Why?

Jonathan has no insight as to what he has done.

Max, whether he realizes it or not, is seething.

Jonathan, noticing the difference in Max, asks him "what's wrong?" A respectful, supportive approach.

Max responds, "how could you do that to me!"

Puzzled, Jonathan says, "Do what??!"

Max: "I needed you, urgently, and you couldn't be bothered to get back to me."

Scene

There you have it.

A classic misunderstanding between two people, leaving hurt feelings. One party, Jonathan, had no idea what he had done. Max, on the other

hand, only knew that he has been in touch and had not heard back, leaving hurt feelings.

Ah yes. Misunderstanding, miscommunication. How easily one human being mistakes another's intentions. Here Max is angry at his best friend and Jonathan has no idea why.

The disruption of what was a strong friendship.

Imagine a triangle.

One side of the triangle is the consciousness-raising that I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah. As I said then, this level of introspection is challenging and change is slow. Only 8% of people who made new year's resolutions in 2015 had kept them by the end of the year. I suggested that self-punishment is not a corrective, but self-understanding and love, the love of self in relationship with God who will always be there for you in love, no matter what you have done to yourself.

The second side is begins tonight with Kol Nidre.

Kol Nidre, the only evening of the year when all of us don our *tallitot* for worship, where we wear non-leather shoes that resemble times of old when the rich wore leather sandals and the poor did not--tonight, we are all equal standing before God.

Kol Nidre, with Aramaic words chanted three times to its ethereal melody, penetrating our beings.

This is the last thing that we do as the ninth of Tishri fades.

As a legal incantation, they are recited three times, before all of us, in front of all of our congregation's *sefrei* Torah.

We leave the Ninth of Tishri clearing the slate as the Kol Nidre states:

"All vows, resolves and commitments,

"vows of abstinence and terms of obligation,

"sworn promises and oaths of dedication--

"That we promise and swear to God, and take upon ourselves,

“From this Day of Atonement until next Day of Atonement, may it find us as well:

“We regret them and for all of them we repent.

“Let all of them be discarded and forgiven, abolished and undone; they are not valid and they are not binding.

“Our vows shall not be vows; our resolves shall not be resolves; and our oaths--they shall not be oaths.”

Our words are consequential to God especially when they are issued as vows or sworn in God’s name.

Which is why so many in the Jewish world when they take on an obligation they also said, “B’li neder,” meaning “I am not taking on a vow.

Throughout Kol Nidre and the subsequent time we spend together tomorrow we will strengthen our sense of the powerful nature of repentance, of t’shuvah, to produce growth, personally and spiritually in our understandings and relationships to and with God.

This is the triangle’s second side.

Now the third side, the hardest side:

Reconciling with other human beings.

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When we human beings experience hurt caused by other people, we often devolve into emotions that are a toxic mix of anger and sadness.

When human relationships break down, suffering prevails.

This is why our ancient wisdom, written down in the Mishnah, one of Judaism’s oldest rabbinic sources, recognized the primacy of reconciliation with one’s fellow human:

“For transgressions done between a human and the Holy One, the Day of Atonement atones.

“For transgressions done between humans, the Day of Atonement atones only after a person has regained the good will of the other.”

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We have work to do on our relationships with other people.

We were complicated at the time of creation.

We were complicated at the time of the Mishnah.

We remain complicated now which is why sometimes we hurt others, intentionally or unintentionally and need to rebuild relationships.

Even though we have all internalized these two premises:

Love your neighbor as yourself and

What is hurtful to you, do not do to others.

They are a lot easier to contemplate than to achieve.

Most of us, I would venture to say, do not live our daily lives intending to say or do things that hurt other people.

We do not want to be in pain ourselves.

We do not want to cause pain in others.

Yet through words and deeds, intentionally and unintentionally, we harm other people.

Take a moment to reflect on your life.

Have there been times that you have felt insulted by other people?

If you are a member of the human species,

Then the answer is most definitely yes.

We get insulted, we get hurt, we misinterpret, we mishear--

Which leads us to react whether or not we truly understood the intention of the other person.

The Mishnah's wisdom is confirmed in recent research by

Gabrielle S. Adams, an assistant professor at the London Business School and a visiting fellow at Harvard University, who found in her research that empathy and forgiveness play a role in resolving human conflicts that occur in the work environment.

Misunderstandings often exist between the victims of harm and the people who committed the harm. In many cases, the transgressors did not intend a negative effect, whereas the victims tended to think that the damage was intentional. They don't understand what was happening when it happened.

Remember Max and Jonathan?

Echoing the mishnah, Professor Adams said, "Before you can even offer forgiveness, there needs to be some kind of mutual understanding of the transgression. If that can be achieved, then forgiveness can help both parties move forward."

Moving forward is all we have in life. When there is conflict, when we become aware of it, we need to acknowledge it so that we are able to move forward.

So how does one go about reconciling?

Often I hear being said:

"If I have done anything to injure you or said anything to hurt you in the past year, please forgive me."

That is a traditional way of invoking forgiveness from others.

It is said by individuals to cover all hurts that you may or may not have caused in the course of your relationship with them over the last year.

Yet I think we need to move beyond that. A blanket request for apology is like creating a painting by throwing a bucket of paint at the canvas and saying you are done. One size fits all.

Rather, when we may think we have insulted someone with our words or behaviors,

we owe it to the other person and ourselves to apologize in a more meaningful formulation.

“If I have done anything that you have found hurtful or injurious to you, please make me aware of it so that I may have the opportunity to obtain your forgiveness.”

Because every human makes mistakes in relating to other humans. None of us are exempt.

Instead of the paint bucket approach, this approach is granular, like the Pointillists, artists like Georges Seurat who painted the marvelous A Sunday on La Grande Jette hanging in the Art Institute of Chicago. His work created a whole by dipping his brush into various shades of paint to create a whole from thousands of points.

We humans are the thousands of points.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are many of the points that can make us whole.

Brokenness is healed. No defenses. A sincere apology.

I am sure that many of you will reflect on times where you should have been there and you weren't, calls that you never made or answered, times when you said the wrong thing, even if it was not your intention.

Because we are human.

Reconciliation is one of the most empowering modes for human experience. We have within our beings the opportunity to create harmony out of brokenness.

This mishnah points to a higher value:

As much as God will always forgive us for what we do to ourselves, for what we do in our relationship to God,

We need to act like God in our willingness to reconcile with those human beings who may have hurt us or we them.

This is *elohut*, Godliness, the predicate of God. When we forgive each other, we bring our understandings of Godliness into the world and in so doing have the capacity to repair human beings.

One other important point:

Don't wait.

Life is finite.

This is the season of healing and return.

Be in touch with people who mean something to you.

See how powerful this will be for you--and for them.

As we work on this third side of the triangle, we should all be able to be empowered in all of our relationships to self, to God, and just as importantly, to the human beings in our lives.