

Uncomfortable Conversations

High Holy Days 5779

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Rav Assi was the poster child for the mitzvah of *kibud av v'em*: honoring one's parents.¹ He lived in Babylonia during the third century, and we learn in the Talmud, our central text of rabbinic law, that he had a very demanding mother.

Approaching her son one day, Rav Assi's mother told him, "I want jewelry." Could Rav Assi afford such an indulgence? Was his mother celebrating any particular milestone or accomplishment? The text doesn't tell us. All we know is that Rav Assi immediately made jewelry for her. But there was more. Next, Rav Assi's mother pressed him for something trickier: "I want a husband." Any son can relate to his parent's desire for precious objects, but companionship is complicated. Even as a widow who evokes our sympathy, Rav Assi's mother treads near a confusing boundary as she alerts her son to her physical desires. But the ever dutiful Rav Assi forthrightly replies, "I will look for one for you."

"Wow!" we think. Rav Assi is willing to play the *shadchan*, the matchmaker, for his own mother. "Now that is devotion." But his mother, oozing with *chutzpah*, has one more stipulation about her future mate. She tells Rav Assi, "I want one as handsome as you." This is where the text takes a radical departure, where the son who lived to serve his mother's needs confronts a request he cannot countenance. So, what does he say? Nothing. The Talmud relates that Rav Assi leaves his mother for the Land of Israel. Later, when he finally resolves to confront her, Rav Assi learns that his mother's coffin is approaching. She dies in pursuit of her son, never knowing why he left.

Like Torah, Talmud is terse. Much is conveyed in the dramatic flight of Rav Assi nine hundred miles from Babylonia to Tiberias. While he could provide for his mother materially, and even try to find her a husband, he is unwound by her desire to marry someone who looks like him. Rav Assi shuts down when presented with a dimension of his mother that aberrates from his conception of the maternal. In running away to *eretẓ Yisrael*, he embodies a universal impulse to flee from, rather than confront his discomfort.

But we know, perhaps better than Rav Assi, that the repudiation of a conflict precludes its resolution. It is challenging to look at ourselves and those close to us in a different light, especially if we are encountering a new dimension that is painful or uncertain. How many of us have been tempted to bolt for another city, or at least another room in our home, when a challenging interpersonal topic arose? How often do we wish we could hide from the truths that are too messy, or too hard, or too upsetting to claim as our own? Rav Assi and his mother offer a cautionary tale about what we stand to lose if we fail to engage in difficult but necessary conversations.

¹ BT Kiddushin 31b

We are gathered here today reciting a liturgy that is the very essence of uncomfortable: In the *Unetane Tokef* we tell God, “In truth you are judge and plaintiff...You remember all that we have forgotten...You decide destiny; You inscribe judgements.”² During *Avinu Malkeinu* we beg God, *shema koleinu* “hear our voice” before admitting, *chatanu lefanecha*, “we have strayed and sinned before you.”³ And on Yom Kippur we recite the confessional litany of our sins and beseech our Creator, “Do not cast us away...do not forsake us...do not be indifferent...In truth, we have stumbled and strayed. We have done wrong...help us atone for all our moral failures.”⁴

What is more difficult than acknowledging we were wrong? What is more unnerving than admitting we do not have control? What is more humbling than naming our desperate need to be remembered and forgiven by God? Our High Holy Day liturgy is a difficult conversation with the Holy One about the ways we failed to measure up. And our new *machzor* also offers space and language to rebuke God for disappointing us: “Some of us are in pain...some of us bear the marks of human cruelty...All of us have seen suffering in our midst...*Avinu Malkeinu*, why? *Avinu Malkeinu*, are you there? Do you care?...Don’t make us bow or grovel for your favor. Give us dignity and give us courage....*Avinu Malkeinu*...Restore our faith in life. Restore our faith in you.”⁵

In prayer, we privately, albeit in the context of community, confront the most challenging dimensions of our spirituality. I have always related to God intuitively as Divine parent. I feel safe in the belief that there is a force in the universe that instinctively cares for me, whose wellbeing is contingent upon mine, who will search for me if I am lost. But having God as a parent means that my spirituality can reflect tropes of the relationships I share with my Mom and Dad.

I will admit that my parents are the hardest people on earth where *teshuva* is concerned. Not because they are tough or challenging, or because they rub my faults in my face. Just the opposite, actually – my parents are patient, compassionate people who need only gaze at me with a subtle expression to indicate that I’m not meeting the mark for *mensblechkeit*. It is difficult to apologize to Mom and Dad because I trust them most of all with my raw imperfection. As their daughter, I feel entitled to be my ugliest self with them; sometimes that harsh and uncaring person needs to express herself. I’m not proud of my inconsiderate side, but I feel safe sharing her with my parents.

It’s really tough, therefore, to say “sorry.” “Sorry for being imperfect.” “Sorry for taking it out on you.” In other relationships, I want sorry to mean “I’ll do better,” or “This won’t happen again.” With Mom and Dad, I know I’ll keep stumbling. *Teshuva* with my parents, just like *teshuva* with God, involves the recognition and acceptance of my chronic missteps. Sorry is not a promise, it’s a confession.

Every year that I meet God, *panim el panim*, face to face, in the sanctuary, I carry the intense weight of everything I have not said out loud. My naked, heavy soul confronts my Divine parent. But

² “Untane Tokef,” *Mishkan HaNefesh Rosh Hashana*, pp. 174-6.

³ “Avinu Malkeinu,” *Mishkan HaNefesh Rosh Hashana*, p. 223.

⁴ “*Shema Koleinu*” and “*Vidui Zuta*,” *Mishkan HaNefesh Yom Kippur*, pp. 294-8.

⁵ “*Avinu Malkeinu* – A Prayer of Protest,” *Mishkan HaNefesh Yom Kippur*, p. 113.

through the gentle liturgical unfolding of our *Yamim Nora'im*, I move from embarrassment or fear or confusion to acceptance, relief and clarity. Our prayers—our apologies and our questions—strengthen my relationship with God by surfacing my truth out of silence. The words I am too stubborn to tell my Mom and Dad, or too timid to ask my colleagues, or too headstrong to admit to my husband, are the words that our *machzor* has me practice first with God. By *Ne'ila*, God feels closer and confronting everyone else feels less scary.

Whether you relate to God as parent or judge, confidante or sovereign, something else, or nothing at all, reciting the High Holy Day liturgy is a brave act. No one escapes these Days of Awe without acknowledging some burden of fear or wrongdoing. To step into this hallowed space on Rosh Hashana means we are tacitly agreeing to rehearse a script with God that prepares us for uncomfortable conversations with each other.

Discomfort, the Talmud tells us, is not unique to Rav Assi and his mother. They are paragons of familial tension known to everyone. Rav Assi's story occurs in the section of Talmud about the mitzvah of honoring parents to illustrate how hard this commandment can be. "Relationships between parents and children are challenging!" the Talmud geshries.

Rav Assi flees the murky, domestic realm of Babylonia for the highly regulated, public sphere of the academy in Israel. A contemporary version of this story takes place between home and synagogue. A married couple enduring incessant conflict refuses to make eye contact as their daughter discusses her Torah portion with the rabbi. Their fractured relationship takes a back seat to their child's upcoming milestone. A teen covers her scars by curating an enviable social media profile. Her friends and teachers wonder why she only appears happy in photographs. The adult son feels angry and isolated as he cares for his mother amidst Dementia. No one, including her, can see how taxed he is by her decline. Having lost her job, a mother begins picking up her child from religious school. Her son celebrates while she grapples with shame and guilt.

We want you, our congregants, to know that you can bring your challenging dilemmas to Rodeph Sholom. In 5779, we are turning our attention toward uncomfortable conversations: how to have them, and how they can, in fact, strengthen us emotionally, spiritually and communally. Three areas where we face tremendous interpersonal discomfort include adolescent mental health, our fraught political climate, and death and dying. This year, we are growing our supports in these areas to equip you with tools to engage in difficult but necessary conversations.

The youngest generation of Americans is facing a mental health crisis. One in five children ages three through seventeen—about 15 million—have a diagnosable mental, emotional or behavioral disorder, and research indicates that serious depression is worsening in teens.⁶ The number of kids

⁶ Kate Snow and Cynthia McFadden "Generation at risk: America's youngest facing mental health crisis," *NBC News: Kids Health*, 11 Dec 2017 [accessed 3 Sept 2018] <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/kids-health/generation-risk-america-s-youngest-facing-mental-health-crisis-n827836>.

and teens hospitalized for suicidal thoughts or attempts more than doubled in the U.S. from 2008 to 2015.⁷

As families battle heroically for their children’s lives, speaking hard truths, engaging expert guidance and care, shuttling between therapists and hospitals, our synagogue has a sacred obligation to listen and bear witness. We must ensure every parent and child facing mental illness knows that we are walking this road alongside you, and you are not alone. And for those who might not know—teens searching for words or parents unsure of next steps—the religious school is partnering with clinical psychologists, social workers and artists, to navigate the challenging territory of adolescent depression, anxiety, peer pressure, and more. Under the auspices of our mental health initiative, teens and parents will have opportunities throughout this year to meet in discussion forums with experts, to ask questions, to learn, and to connect to important resources. Recognizing mental illness in ourselves and in our children is not a cure, but the path forward can begin inside our walls.

In our polarized political atmosphere, it is not only our teens who are strained. In 2017, *The New York Times* published an article entitled “Therapists Offer Strategies for Postelection Stress,”⁸ and PBS reported on a “‘Post-election stress disorder’ sweep[ing] the nation.”⁹ And now the midterms are just around the corner.

As we buckle under the weight of our personal political anxieties, we are moving farther away from the people with whom we disagree, making it ever more difficult to engage in meaningful debate and to find common cause with fellow citizens or congregants who think differently than we do. Our CRS community cannot stand idly by these deepening divisions in our nation, and we know that you are looking toward the synagogue to serve as a bastion of civil discourse where we traffic in ideas rather than judgements. In January, we will welcome Resetting the Table, an organization dedicated to building meaningful dialogue and deliberation across political and communal divides. This program, which is open to the entire community, will equip us with tools to better listen and share our stories with honesty, mutual recognition, and respect so that even the most charged topics can be surfaced in the context of covenanted community.

As we navigate the challenges of growing up and living together in tense times, Rodeph Sholom is also devoted to the sacred task of shepherding each life, with dignity, towards death. Did you know that while approximately 80% of Americans would prefer to die at home, only 20% do?¹⁰ Serious illness can, of course, exceed our capacity to care for loved ones alone or at home, but these statistics reflect an information chasm in the United States about how we hope to conclude our

⁷ “Big spike in U.S. kids, teens attempting suicide,” *CBS News*, 16 May 2018 [accessed 3 Sept 2018] <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/big-spike-us-children-teens-attempting-suicide/>.

⁸ Lesley Alderman, “Therapists Offer Strategies for Postelection Stress,” *The New York Times*, 29 Mar 2017 [accessed 6 Sept 2018] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/29/well/how-to-follow-the-news-in-a-political-age-of-anxiety.html>.

⁹ Jenny Gold, “‘Post-election stress disorder’ sweeps the nation,” *PBS News Hour: Health*, 23 Feb 2017 [accessed 6 Sept 2018] <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/post-election-stress-disorder-sweeps-nation>.

¹⁰ “Where do Americans die?” *Stanford School of Medicine: Palliative Care* [accessed 6 Sept 2018] <https://palliative.stanford.edu/home-hospice-home-care-of-the-dying-patient/where-do-americans-die/>.

lives. Noted author and surgeon Atul Gawande insists that we must “refashion our institutions, our culture, and our conversations in ways that transform the possibilities for the last chapters of everyone’s lives.”¹¹

Heeding Dr. Gawande’s call, the Jewish community has launched What Matters: Caring Conversations About End of Life, an initiative that invites groups or individuals into guided dialogue about advanced care planning. Here at CRS we have a cadre of trained What Matters facilitators who are available to walk you through a gentle and reflective conversation about how you imagine end of life, and what your values are around death and dying. In this way our loved ones, caretakers, and physicians will have a better sense of our wishes as they care for us. What Matters will launch later this fall through a series of exciting programs, and we hope everyone over the age of 18 will consider participating.

Our tradition makes it eminently clear that challenging conversations are not panaceas for the problems they address. In the Torah portion we just read, Sarah confronts Abraham about her discomfort sharing a home with Hagar and Ishmael. “Expel the servant-woman and her son” (Gen 21:10), she demands. Abraham heeds Sarah’s wishes, but Sarah never speaks again. We only learn, after the dramatic near-sacrifice of their son, Isaac, that she dies at the age of 127 in the land of Canaan. Difficult conversations can surface painful truths and they can lead to agonizing resolutions. Despite these high costs, they are still essential to our relationships. God tells Abraham, “Whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice—for, through Isaac, your seed shall go forth” (Gen 21:12). No matter how challenging it is to hear and heed the words of those we love, we can only move forward by listening to their voices.

During these High Holy Days, let’s pay attention to the words we pray to God, and ask ourselves how we might apply these sentences to our relationships. And let us remember as well that the prayers, even in their Hebrew and Aramaic foreignness, feel familiar for a reason: because we’ve recited them before. Difficult conversations with God, just like uncomfortable dialogues with each other, are ongoing. Our willingness to engage, to open lines of communication, is exactly what the *Unetane Tokef* means when we pray that *teshuvah*, *tefila* and *tzedakah* will transcend God’s harsh decree. Through honest self-reflection, spiritual seeking, and connection to the other, we nurture our resilience and strengthen our relationships to better meet our challenges. With open hearts, minds, and ears, let us face this new year, embracing the complexity of life, and certain that the path forward, however strenuous or smooth, is not found on a map, but in our voices.

¹¹ “What Matters: Caring Conversations About End of Life,” *Marlene Meyerson JCC: Advance Care Planning* [accessed 6 Sept 2018] <https://www.jccmanhattan.org/jewish-living/advance-care-planning/>.