

Reproach Your Neighbor as Yourself

Yom Kippur 5774

Rabbi Barry Block

Today, we seek atonement in the presence of a large community. At the same time, Yom Kippur is a day of renewal for each of our individual souls. Repentance would seem to be a solitary experience, a time for each of us alone with God. How can we be expected to bare our souls in the presence of hundreds.

This morning, as last night, we confess our sins in public, and we will do the same later today. We do so in the plural: *ashamnu*, "We have sinned." *Al het sh'hatanu l'fanecha*, "for the sin that we have committed against you. . ." The emphasis is on the word "we," not "I." On this holiest day of the Jewish year, we must be concerned not only about our own sins, but those of our family and friends. We must prepare for penitence, not only for ourselves, but for all who worship with us.

The process of repentance requires community. We are taught: *Kol Yisrael areivim zeh bazeh*, the whole Jewish people, indeed all human beings, are responsible for one another. To cleanse our individual souls, we need to be concerned about one another.

As we prepare for Yom Kippur, then, let us think not only of what we can do to repair our own souls; let us take responsibility for the repentance of others as well.

To do that, we must perform a most difficult mitzvah. Torah teaches: *Hocheiah tochiah et amitecha*, "You are required to rebuke one another." We will read those words in the holiness code this afternoon.

Jewish law prescribes the manner in which we are to issue a critique when another has sinned. When we are aware of the sin of another individual, we must let that person know in private. We are required to minimize the other person's embarrassment. On balance, though, helping our neighbor to repent is primary. We must offer the correction even when entirely avoiding that person's humiliation may be impossible.

That's hard to do. Some of us have a tough time being assertive. We are loathe to tell other people when we disapprove of their actions. We rationalize: Who am I to tell her how to behave? She'll never change anyway. Even more, we're frightened of being critical. If I tell him what I really think, no matter how gently, our friendship will never be the same. We tell ourselves that we're being judgmental, and we imagine that thinking badly of sin is somehow wrong. And we certainly don't want to be judged ourselves!

Jewish tradition is resolute, however. Our High Holy Day liturgy, quoting Abraham Joshua Heschel, constantly reminds us: "although some are guilty, all are responsible." When people we care about do something wrong, we do have a task to perform.

The hard part, though, is actually doing that. I wasn't sure I would be able to make the point effectively today. Accordingly, last month, I decided to try out the sermon's main idea. My discriminating audience was Shabbat Kids Club, our gathering of preschool kids and their parents.

I introduced the children and their parents to Leo the Lion and his friends, Ellie the Elephant, Flora the Fox and Sammy the Snail. First, Leo and Ellie play "ring around the rosie." As they "all fall down," Leo bites Ellie on the leg. Furious, she tells him off, saying she would never again be his friend. Then, Leo and Flora play the same game. This time, when Leo bites Flora, she squeals in agony, but doesn't complain to

Leo. In fact, they keep playing, and Leo keeps biting. Finally, enter Sammy the Snail. Once bitten, Sammy has the temerity to address the Lion directly. Sammy says that he doesn't like being bitten, and that he will never play with Leo again, unless Leo apologizes, promises never to bite again, and keeps his promise. The process works. Leo learns his lesson, because Sammy has confronted him, head on.

How many of us, like Flora the Fox, have let a friend or family member, even a community leader, hurt us repeatedly, but have never raised a voice in protest? What is the result? We bear resentments, some of them never resolved. The other person may imagine that hurtful words or actions don't bother us, or even that they aren't harmful at all. The behavior is repeated, and we become angrier. The relationship is ruined, not because we have issued a rebuke, but because we have failed to do so.

In the process, the person who has hurt us is also harmed. She or he is not given the opportunity to repent and to change. The sin has estranged the perpetrator from us and from God. Since the misdeed is likely to be repeated, other people may be victimized. Nobody is helped by our remaining quiet.

Some of us tend to behave more like Ellie the Elephant. We won't forget the harm done to us, and we will walk away from the person who has hurt us. We don't give our relative or friend the opportunity to apologize, to repent, to change. We forfeit a relationship that might have been meaningful, and which could potentially have been repaired, had we the courage to express ourselves.

Of course, not all sins that we should bring to others' attention are like Leo's. We are not always the victims.

We may have the greatest difficulty in cases that arise most often: when we see the people closest to us doing things we think are wrong. What does a woman say to her husband, when she thinks he has been rude to a waiter? What does a parent say to his adult child, when he finds out that she has stolen from her employer? How does a close friend and business partner respond, when seeing an employee treated poorly? We know that, if we do not speak up, our loved ones may cause greater harm in the future, to themselves as well as to others. And yet, we fear trouble in our own relationships, if we say something, even privately and appropriately.

Many of us also have a hard time in the most distant of encounters. Take this test: You are on an airplane. The person behind you repeatedly kicks your seat. Would you say anything? If you did address the matter, would you turn around and address that person in a calm and gentle tone of voice, not conveying that moral turpitude is behind the seat-kicking?

And what of our friendships? When a friend has committed adultery, will we tell her or him that we disapprove? Our neighbor's domestic employee is an impoverished laborer, underpaid and under-the-table. Can we issue some kind of censure? And how often do we speak up when a friend tells us a racist joke? Or slanders another with gossip?

And what of our interactions in the public sphere? How many of us tell our doctor, when we feel that we have been treated shabbily? How often do we complain about our child's teacher, but don't speak to the teacher directly, to let her or him know how best to help our child to learn? When a salesperson is rude, do we return rudeness with rudeness, or do we offer a more appropriate rebuke?

Tanakh, our Hebrew Scripture, offers moving examples of heroes who speak up boldly, at their potential peril, for the good of others. Abraham is not afraid to rebuke even God, in the cause of justice. The father of our people argues that God should not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, if even just a few righteous people dwell there.

And who can forget Esther? Like many of us, Esther is reluctant to speak up. After she is cajoled by Mordechai, though, Esther confronts her husband on penalty of death. She forces the King to take note of his own foolish decree, putting the fate of the Jewish people in the hands of the wicked Haman.

This afternoon, I will read the words that I quoted earlier, the commandment to rebuke one another. The injunction appears in a Torah reading that begins, “You shall be holy, for I Adonai your God am holy.” Offering a helpful criticism is a path to achieving holiness. God, for example, rebukes Miriam and Aaron, when they insult Moses’ wife. And God reproves Moses, when he lets anger get the best of him. Like God, we can be holy, when we help one another to repent.

That same Torah reading also includes words so sacred to us all: “Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself.” When we rebuke another properly, with the goal of helping that person to achieve repentance, we are living our love.

Rebuking another person is hard to do. We can all think of good reasons to refrain, to keep our thoughts to ourselves. And yet, on this Yom Kippur, let us cleanse our own souls and assist others in their repentance as well. Remember: When Esther makes her husband aware of his foolish evil, she saves the Jewish people. Emboldened, let us endure short-term discomfort for the sake of healing and salvation. Then, may we all be forgiven on this Yom Kippur. Then, may we be a holy community, blessed in the sight of God.

Amen.