

**Temple Emanu-El YK 5781 Sermon**  
**“Estrangement and Reconciliation”**  
**Rabbi Spike Anderson**

*Gud Yuntif.*

Heneinu. Here we are.

Standing at the gates of Yom Kippur.

It can feel awkward. We have unfinished business. There are broken relationships.

Today some of us are missing family who are physically far due to the realities of Coronavirus.

Others are thinking about family who we have placed at a distance, on purpose.

As a rabbi, I have the honor of being with congregants through sacred life cycle events. This means that I also have an insider’s view of how family dynamics can be so deeply hurtful when someone in the family is estranged. The baby naming without the aunt who is not allowed to attend. The bat mitzvah without the grandfather who has not spoken to his adult son for a decade. The wedding where the bride must choose between pleasing her mother or her grandmother who are not on speaking terms. The funeral where the brother who is living cries uncontrollably for the one who is in the ground, each one stubborn to the very end.

I’ve been by the side of the congregant who is estranged from her sister...his mother...her daughter; and bore witness to true remorse. Never, when playing together as children...or tucking her in at night...or at his bar mitzvah, did it ever seem possible that you would be where you are right now... apart...with miles of twisty roads and harsh words between you, the way back so complex that it seems impossible.

The reasons for estrangement seem justified in any particular moment, and there is an assumption that when “they come to their senses, and apologize,” that there can be reconciliation. Maybe. If you are feeling magnanimous. But with the passage of time, they are as cemented in their narrative as you are in yours. So, the gap becomes a chasm and the sun begins to set.

I’m not speaking about cases where there is serious abuse. This is an entirely different category that may truly require permanent separation. But, I have found that these are the rare exceptions.

No, most of the time decisions to banish family members occur because of drastically different politics, lifestyle preferences, or having married the ‘wrong’ person. Sometimes it is around

money, or inheritance, or a family business gone sour. There are stories of difficult childhoods, or unmet expectations around the care for aging parents.

Like many families, we have estrangement in ours. My mother's brother and I share the same birthday in June, exactly twenty years apart. It was our thing, to celebrate our birthdays together. As a kid I remember that he was over at our house all of the time. He was fun, and funny, and was the highlight for me at every family holiday, which he would consistently show up for hours late. He is an artist, and not great with responsibility. Yes, we would get frustrated, but everyone accepted that was 'just how he is.' What was somewhat cute on a 20-year-old was not on a 60-year-old, and his sisters began to resent his lack of involvement with their aging parents. They begged. He ignored. And so, after my grandmother died, they stopped speaking to him. Family loyalties quickly took root, and out of 'loyalty' to my mother, I followed her lead. She never asked me to. I just did it. Others followed suit. The end result was that my uncle was cut off. None of my kids, my nieces or nephews, know him. They know of him. They have heard stories that involve him. And, that he is not welcome any more.

No one has contact with him.

Except for once a year, on our shared birthday in June, he would send me a text, "happy birthday." On that one day a year, I couldn't help but think of him. This once a year message was a reminder of the time that we had spent together, and that he was still there. But more than that, the 'happy birthday' was an open gate that I understood as an invitation.

I'll admit, that some years I texted him back, but most years I did not. To be honest, I thought that he deserved his estrangement. Part of me wanted him to FEEL the consequences of the choices that he had made. And it was easier to do nothing than to reach back. I now know that I was wrong. Wrong not only for him and for me, but for the example that we were setting for my kids.

A few weeks ago I was tucking in my 11-year-old, Moses, before bed. He had gotten in minor trouble over something and I was trying to comfort him before he went to sleep. As we lay there together in the dark, he asked me if I was angry with him. "No, not at all," I replied. "Do you still love me?" he earnestly asked. "Of course! Dude. There is nothing that you could ever do that would make me or mom stop loving you." And I meant every word. "Well," he hesitated, "what about your uncle?"

And in that moment, it hit me. And it left me cold. My son feared that what had happened to my uncle could happen, someday, to him.

Laying there in bed, I began to reel. "No way. Never!" And I meant it. But did my grandparents ever think that their son would be estranged from the family? It would have been their worst nightmare.

Without realizing it, our actions had set exactly the wrong example. I desperately wanted a different message for my kids to see. And...as the magnitude of what we had done settled in, I wanted my uncle back. I wanted a redo on all the lost time.

That night I found the last birthday text that he had sent to me, and three months later, I answered it. “Hey, it’s Spike. Hope you are well. I’ve been thinking about you lately. Can we find a time to catch up?” He texted me back, “Hello Spike, wonderful to hear from you. Hope everyone in the family is doing well. Let’s try to talk tomorrow.”

I don’t know where this is going to go. We’ve spoken a few times, including right before Rosh HaShanah. I’m not looking to hash things out. I’m not expecting him to change. And so, with open eyes, I’m looking to move forward.

Estrangement in families is more common than many of us want to admit. It is part of the human condition, and very much part of our sacred texts.

Abraham cast out his son, Ishmael.<sup>i</sup>

Jacob and his twin-brother, Esau, were estranged for 20 years.

Cain was threatened to be forever ‘cut off’ from God.<sup>ii</sup>

But rabbinic tradition does not allow the relationship to end in silence. It adds narrative showing heartfelt effort over years, even decades, to mend broken relationships, to not give up.

Our Sages acknowledge how difficult it is to reconcile. They emphasize the spiritual practice of seeking and offering forgiveness, which takes tremendous courage precisely because it gives no guarantees. Yet it is the essence of this High Holiday season.

According to Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer,<sup>iii</sup> despite what the rest of his family was doing, Abraham decides he must see his son, even if he does so in secret. The past can’t be undone. Their relationship will never be the same as it was before. But he and his son can try to make the most of the time that they have left together. And they do.

The two brothers, Jacob and Esau, each realize that they can be ‘right,’ or they can make peace, but they can’t have both. Decades apart have aged them. They have a turbulent history. They have tried to hurt each other. But as kids, these brothers shared a tent, their dinner table, jokes, and celebrations. Jacob made the first overture. Esau’s reaction was guarded. Again and again, messages were sent. “I’m coming to you. Would you meet with me?” Every step of this fragile dance exposed real vulnerability, but when they finally saw one another, Torah says:

“Esau ran towards him, embraced him, fell upon his neck, and kissed him. Then they wept.<sup>iv</sup>”

Cain's desire for reconciliation with God was so singular, so heartfelt, and so desperate, that God concedes enough to show mercy. Whatever Cain 'deserves', God does not 'cut him off' from a way back from his mistakes. In Judaism, when we want to try to understand our relationship with The Divine, usually we look to human relationships as the model; but in this case, when it comes to estrangement, perhaps we can look at God's compassion as a model for a pathway forward.

On Yom Kippur, our angst is one that reflects what my son expressed that night as I was tucking him in.

*Aveinu Malkeinu, Na Al N'shiv-Aynu Ray-kam Mil-Fan-Necha/* Our Parent, our Example, do not turn us away from you (leaving us) with nothing.<sup>v</sup>

Or: *Shema Koleinu...Al Tash-Licha-Nu Mil-Fan-Necha/* Hear our call. Do not cast us away from Your presence, or cut us off from Your holy spirit. Do not cast us away when we are old; as our strength diminishes, do not forsake us...With hope, Adonai, we await you.<sup>vi</sup>

The Hasidic parable for teshuvah tells of a king and his son. The son left and years later found himself stranded in a foreign land. The prince sends his dad a message, "father, I want to come home. But I am so lost, and so far, that I don't know how to begin." To which, his dad replies, "my son, take but one step towards me, and I will come the rest of the way to you."

I love this parable, for those who feel estranged from God, or their Judaism, it provides a way back on intention alone. 'Take one step', the parable tells us, and God "will come the rest of the way to you."

But this year, with family estrangement on my heart, I appreciate this parable even more.

The parable does not tell us of the anger and frustration that both son and father might have been feeling, whether the prince stormed out of the door, or if the King cast him away... All we know is that after years they are far, far apart.

The parable does not tell us that this is the first message the son sent to his dad, but only that this is the first time that the King responds. I could see this being the second time that the son reached out to his father, or the fifth time, or even the twentieth.

It reminds us someone needs to start. A message needs to be sent. But, reconciliation requires that the other is also ready to receive it.

In the parable, the timing for the prince's message is not specified, but I imagine that it was sent on a day where they were both thinking about the other, maybe a birthday, or on Yom Kippur.

The power of the Yom Kippur day is that we are all in this together, thinking about our lives and our relationships, what we can change, and what we need to do for that change happen. This is the predictable and dependable once a year check-in that we have with The Divine, but also with ourselves.

Yom Kippur is made up of a few different services, each one with a different purpose.

Kol Nidre sets the tone for reverence that life is precious, as is our time on earth.

Yom Kippur morning reminds us that we have free-will to make choices, to make amends, and that we can re-orient ourselves to live the most beautiful, meaningful life that we can.

Minchah sets the course for transformation.

But my favorite part of Yom Kippur is the concluding service, Ni'ila.

For those who, every year, skip Ni'ila in order to get to break-fast, you are missing out. It's like you are watching the same sad movie over and over again, but never stick around to experience the amazing ending of forgiveness and redemption. There is an urgency to Ni'ila, imploring us to 'enter the gate, before it is too late.' Today we are here. Tomorrow we might be gone. Right now we are focused. Tomorrow our attention will be elsewhere.

The liturgy cries out to us:

If there are amends to make, make them now. Even if you've tried before. Try again.

If there are messages of reconciliation to send out, send them now. Even if you have tried before. Try again.

If there is forgiveness that you can find, find it now. Life is short. Let go of the wish that the past was different.

Ni'ila ends, every year, with a grand reconciliation.

*Pit-chu-lanu shaarei-tzedek navo vam, nodeh yah<sup>vii</sup>*

Open the gates of righteousness that we may enter and praise the source of Eternal Life.

Open the gates of sacred community that we may enter and feel its healing power.

Open the gates of forgiveness that we may enter and offer our humanity.

Open the gates of kindness and compassion that we may enter and offer our love.

*Kayn Yehiyeh ratzon*, may it be God's will.

Shana tova.

---

<sup>i</sup> Gen 16

<sup>ii</sup> Gen 4:14

<sup>iii</sup> Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, 29

<sup>iv</sup> Gen 33:4

<sup>v</sup> Mishkan Tefillah, YK morning, p 253

<sup>vi</sup> Mishkan Tefillah, YK morning, p 98

<sup>vii</sup> Mishkan Tefillah, Ni'ila, p 670