

**Yom Kippur 5783 Sermon**  
**Spiritual Growth In Relationship**  
*Rabbi Spike Anderson*

Gud Yuntif,

Year after year, I get questions about that moment during High Holiday services, at the Great Aleinu, where your rabbis, in our white robes, not only bow in front of the open ark, but fully prostrate to the ground.

It always brings a hush to the congregation.

It only happens twice a year, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and feels unexpected in the context of Jewish worship. The prostration is a symbol of communal fallibility and guilt. On behalf of the congregation, we acknowledge the harm we have done, and vow to do better.

But there is an important theology that is conveyed through the prostration itself.

While God wants us to acknowledge our guilt and fallibility, the rebuke that we hear in the liturgy does not demand that we collapse in shame.

But rather, the important part of this symbolic ritual is our ability to rise again; and in doing so, to be transformed.

The guide of spiritual growth is to first acknowledge the harm you have caused and apologize to the victim. Then you must do the hard work to try to repair the damage. To help us, spiritual work is not done alone, but rather requires us to stay in relationship with the 'other'.

I am a student of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (z'l), in part because he has a wonderful way of grounding theology in everyday stories. I really like one in particular, because it demonstrates Judaism's formula for transformation through relationship with another.

On his honeymoon, Rabbi Sacks wound up almost drowning. The waves were above his head, and he could not swim. He tried to call for help, but no one was close enough to hear. In a final effort, perhaps as a plea, he reached up his hands... and... someone took hold of him and swam him to shore. Rabbi

Sacks lay there in shock, almost unconscious. By the time he regained his senses, the man was gone. He never did find out his name.

“That has always been what help is like,” says Rabbi Sacks. “You put out your hand, and someone seizes it and lifts you to safety.” Self-help would not have worked at all. I was the problem, not the solution. Help, for me, has always been ‘other’ help.”<sup>i</sup>

Judaism emphasizes that help for self-transformation may originate with you, but that we depend on something, or someone, outside of ‘us’ to act as a catalyst to reach the next level of our potential.

Classically, the Torah text that rabbis share with engaged couples before their wedding is that of Adam and Eve. We present it as an active metaphor, not as literal history. At the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> day of creation, God saw that Adam was alone and declared his aloneness to be *Lo Tov*/not good. And so, God created a partner, **לְעֵזְרָא כְּנֶגְדּוֹ**/to help him by both challenging and supporting him.<sup>ii</sup>

The term ‘*neged*’ in Hebrew conveys the idea of two boards leaning against one another. By pushing against one another, they support each other. This snapshot of Adam & Eve is held up as a model of how a married couple should ideally interact; with reciprocated love that supports who they each are as individuals, and, at the same time, promotes constructive challenge to help them grow, and make the relationship stronger. Approaching each other with both love and respect allows the challenge that they offer one another to be constructive, rather than destructive.

Another example of transformation through relationship is the vital practice of *havruta*, the Jewish way of studying sacred text in pairs. This, say our sages, is the way to bring out the very best in each student. The classic image of hundreds of pairs arguing fine points of Talmud conveys the energy that studying in *havruta* brings to both. By approaching a subject from two different perspectives, each student is forced to actively focus and sharpen their reasoning powers.

For instance, the Talmud sage, Rabbi Yochanan described his interactions with his *havruta* partner, Reish Lakish: “With Lakish, whenever I would say

something, he would pose 24 difficulties and I would give him 24 solutions, and as a result (of the give and take), the subject became clear.”<sup>iii</sup>

Throughout our vast history, yeshivas would suggest that the best ‘pairing’ for *havruta* were two people who could engage one another with plutonic love, but also provide real challenge.<sup>iv</sup> Love without the challenge would make both students dull. Challenge without the love would make both students brittle. It is that combination of ‘love’ and ‘challenge’ that bring out the best in both.

On Yom Kippur, we are taught that *Teshuvah* (repentance) and *Slichah* (forgiveness) first requires a catalyst from the ‘outside’ to help us realize where we have fallen short. In our liturgy, this term is known as *Tochechah*, which translates as ‘rebuke.’ As in, from Rebuke we can Repent, and eventually get to Forgiveness.

Our Viddui confessional, which is chanted in the plural, calls for our attention as a rebuke: *Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi/* We betray. We steal. We scorn. We act perversely, and the list goes on. Individually, I may feel that I haven’t done these things, but the goal is a collective rebuke, which is why we say ‘we’...so that we can help one another, and our society, change for the better.<sup>v</sup> In taking responsibility for the transformation of self and community, this act becomes noble.

Judaism is very clear that when someone is doing something that is blatantly harmful to the group, or to you, or even to themselves, we are obligated to give a rebuke.<sup>vi</sup> Otherwise, we are complicit in their actions.<sup>vii</sup>

But our wisdom tradition instructs us that we are to use the rebuke as an instrument for ‘guilt’, as opposed to ‘shame’.

What is the difference? ...Quite simply, the intention.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, he of the near-honeymoon-drowning, suggests that there are two types of cultures, Guilt culture and Shame culture. Guilt culture aims to correct, and its critique is meant to be constructive. Like our high holidays, it values personal responsibility, repentance, and forgiveness. It emphasizes that people are not their sin, and their fallibilities should not condemn them to be destroyed from public view. It distinguishes between bad behavior, (which can be changed) and their worth as a human being.

Shame cultures, on the other hand, value conformity and appearance over substance and truth. Rebuke from Shame culture seeks to punish people beyond recovery, to put a scarlet letter above their name in perpetuity, and to cancel them from the public eye. It has no interest whatsoever in their rehabilitation, or fulfilment as a human-being. In contrast to Judaism, Shame cultures maintain that people are disposable.

Rebuke is necessary, but our intentions behind the rebuke determine what type of people we are, what type of homes we live in, and what type of society we create. Already, 'we live in an era of intense social discord and distrust. Political disagreement tears apart family dinners and splits our country asunder. The need to conform to the in-group has caused those with differing opinions to remain silent, afraid of cancellation for uttering the 'wrong' viewpoint. We have forgotten how to disagree and forgive,'<sup>viii</sup> and we have forgotten how to constructively rebuke.

Here, the Torah gives us some really good advice. In Leviticus we read:

לֹא־תִשְׁנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחֵהוּ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ

"You shall not hate your brother in your heart; (only then) can you rebuke him..."<sup>ix</sup> Meaning...If you are going to reprimand someone, first, check in with your heart. If you hate them, you will objectify them. It may make your ego feel better to punish with your words, or destroy, but nothing grows in the garden of shame.<sup>x</sup>

Nachmanides, the Sephardic medieval philosopher, takes it a step further. In essence, he says that for people to hear our criticism as constructive that we must do more than simply 'not hate' them, we actually have to love them.<sup>xi</sup>

In Jewish terms, this means that we see them as having been created *b'zelem Elohim*,<sup>xii</sup> in the image of God (just like us). When both sides comprehend that the foundation of the relationship is love, then the rebuke can be received from a place that feels safe, and understood with the intention to help, not to destroy. Our goal is not to 'win', but to change.

Making this point on the Divine level, there is a midrash that states that before the creation of the world, there was *Teshuvah*.<sup>xiii</sup> In other words, even God,

who serves as the 'outside' catalyst of transformation for us all, is predisposed to forgive. And the atmosphere in which human beings were created, the same one in which we exist this Yom Kippur day, is one of love. Love is the foundation and knowing this offers us a pathway towards spiritual growth.

We shouldn't be afraid of rebuke when it is done with wisdom. In this way, we become one another's loving *havruta* partner in this study of life.

And we should be open to receiving 'constructive criticism' for the sake of our growth and transformation. For we are not static beings.

A final thought: our rabbis ask a profound question about the nature of God as it relates to Yom Kippur. How can God be both merciful, and just? For if God was only merciful, and did not hold us accountable for the harm that we have done, how is that justice? And, if God was only 'just' but showed us no 'mercy', then none of us would stand a chance.

Their answer is that when we hear the call to change, and fully do the hard work that *teshuvah* requires, that we transform to the extent that God considers us a different person.

In this way, God can always show mercy because we are being judged not for who we were, but for who we have become.<sup>xiv</sup>

When we are standing as a community, and pounding our chests, the rebuke from our liturgy is the invitation from God, to us, to transform.

If only we would hear it.

Gud Yuntif.

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- <sup>i</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Morality*, p37
- <sup>ii</sup> Genesis 2:18
- <sup>iii</sup> B. Talmud [Bava Metzia](#) 84a
- <sup>iv</sup> Rabbi Hama b. Hanina in midrash Bereshit; b. Talmud Taanit 7a
- <sup>v</sup> Rabbi Mordecai Finley, Aug 30, 2017 lecture: *Wisdom of Rebuke, Apology, Working Through...*
- <sup>vi</sup> Thanks to Dr. Tanya White for the ideas and sources that came from her Shiur with Valley Beit Midrash, Sept 8 2022, in a lecture titled: *Repentance Through The Transformation Of Self Through The Call Of The 'Other'*.
- <sup>vii</sup> Leviticus 19:18 "...and do not bear sin because of him."
- <sup>viii</sup> [Thelehraus.com/scholarship/guilt-and-shame-cultures-in-the-thought-of-rabbi-jonathan-sacks](https://thelehraus.com/scholarship/guilt-and-shame-cultures-in-the-thought-of-rabbi-jonathan-sacks). February 28, 2022
- <sup>ix</sup> Leviticus 19:17
- <sup>x</sup> Rashi, commentary on Leviticus 19:17
- <sup>xi</sup> RambaN, commentary, Onkelos rendition
- <sup>xii</sup> Genesis 1:27
- <sup>xiii</sup> Rabbi Kolonymous Kalman Shapira (1889-1943), *The Piasezner Rebbe, Derech Hamelach*, Rosh HaShanah 1925
- <sup>xiv</sup> Rabbi Mordecai Finley, Aug 30, 2017 lecture: *Wisdom of Rebuke, Apology, Working Through...*