

Rosh Hashanah Day One

Look behind me. Over there, at the ark.

Do you notice something missing?

Three Sifrei Torah - three Torah scrolls - are absent.

And before you say, "How terrible! This is Rosh Hashanah, and our ark should look full," I want to tell you about what those three Torah scrolls are out doing.

The first scroll we donated to a new start-up egalitarian minyan in Riverdale.

The second one we have on loan to a minyan for immuno-compromised people in Washington Heights.

And the third one is in Israel, at Kibbutz Na'aran. How did it get there? The Oct. 7 attacks took place on Simchat Torah, and this secular kibbutz, which had never celebrated Simchat Torah before and didn't even have a Torah scroll, decided it wanted to be able to dance with the Torah on this Simchat Torah - and we answered the call by donating. Mark Kohn and I jury-rigged my backpack suitcase to be a Torah holder, we found someone traveling to Israel - and yadda yadda yadda, I didn't realize I wasn't getting my backpack back until it was in the air, but the Torah is now safely at kibbutz Naaran.

Is our ark empty? On the contrary, I think it is more full than ever. Because the Torah scrolls in it are not sitting there - they are out doing mitzvahs. Sometimes, something that looks empty, might actually be full.

It's a paradox. They are absent from our ark in a way that actually makes Torah more present in our world.

Our tradition, in Pirke Avot, renders four paradoxes as important for us. The great rabbi Ben Zoma, a student of Rabbi Akiva's from the first century, said:

Who is wise? one who learns from all people.

Who is strong? One who overcomes their anger.

Who is rich? One who is satisfied with where they are.

Who is honored? One who honors others.

This Yamim Noraim, this High Holidays, my theme for the year is paradoxes.

Today, I'm talking about a paradox in how we relate to other people.

Tomorrow, I'm talking about the paradox of silence.

Kol Nidre, I'm talking about the paradox of joy.

Yom Kippur morning, I'm talking about the paradox of discomfort.

I'll start now by jumping in with a text from the Talmud. Twice in the Talmud a statement by the great rabbi Reish Lakish is mentioned. Reish Lakish did not grow up in rabbinic culture - before becoming a rabbi, he was either a bandit or a gladiator. He lived a real life.

And perhaps that's why he said the following: K'shot atzmecha, v'achar kach, k'shot acherim. Fix yourself - literally, put yourself together - v'achar kach, k'shot acherim - and afterwards, put others together. Fix yourself - and only afterwards, fix others.

Many, many people have problems. We all notice them. Think in your own life of all the people you'd like to fix or give advice to.

Reish Lakish says - no. Fix yourself first. Because I promise, you're not so perfect.

We know this intellectually, but we have trouble really taking it in. We want to fix others. We have words for that - being a busybody, a meddler, being up in people's business. Reish Lakish says: don't do that.

But there's more to what he is saying than just, don't meddle. Because very often, we are actually involved with other people, and we come to see their challenges because we know them well.

And so I think he is actually addressing the question: how effective are we, really, when we try to fix others? And what if the way we try to fix, the way we try to intervene, well, what if that is the thing that needs fixing? Picture a person who is meddling, who is trying to fix others - their meddling is itself what needs to be fixed. Perhaps this is you and your child, or your spouse.

And notice, just for my overall theme, that this whole thing is paradoxical.

But Reish Lakish is saying something here I think about the nature of helping. We have an egoistic fantasy that we can say exactly the right thing to change a person - but actually, the change has to come from the person themselves, and the egoistic aspect of the fantasy is what we need to fix. And that's why the service is so long, because your introspection on this issue takes time.

Reish Lakish is saying something about the nature of “helpful interventions.” That that desire to help others is not always so great. That a lot of that desire is actually ego stuff – I want to say my piece, I want to express my anger, I want to call them out, I, I, I – and Reish Lakish is saying: deal with your ego first. Deal with your own stuff first. The original context of the saying is a property dispute – my fruit tree is leaning into someone else’s yard, but I’m upset about their fruit tree which is overhanging a different boundary. Don't worry about their stuff – deal with your stuff.

I want to share another story, on a similar topic, from the Talmud, Kiddushin 70.

One day a man entered a butcher shop. **He said to them: Give me meat. They said to him: Wait until the servant of Rav Yehuda bar Yehezkel has taken his meat, and then we will give it to you.** The man **said** to them in anger: **Who is this Yehuda bar Sheviske’el, a derogatory name for a glutton for meat, that he should precede me, that he should take before me? They went and told Rav Yehuda what the man had said. Rav Yehuda excommunicated him,** in accordance with the *halakha* of one who disparages a Torah scholar. **They also said** to him that the same man **was in the habit of calling people slaves.**

Rav Yehuda **proclaimed about him that he is a slave** and may not marry a Jew. The

Gemara continues the story: That man went and summoned Rav Yehuda to judgment before Rav Nahman. Rav Nahman inquired: What is the reason that you proclaimed about him that he is a slave? Rav Yehuda said to him: Because he is in the habit of calling people slaves, and it is taught: Anyone who disqualifies others by stating that their lineage is flawed, that is a sign that he himself is of flawed lineage. Kol ha-posel pasul.

Another indication of his lineage being flawed is that he never speaks in praise of others.

And Shmuel said: He disqualifies with his own flaw.

Rav Nahman retorted: You can say that Shmuel said this *halakha* only to the degree that one should suspect him of being of flawed lineage. But did he actually say this to the extent that one could proclaim about him that he is of flawed lineage?

The Gemara continues the story: Meanwhile, that litigant arrived from Neharde'a.

That litigant said to Rav Yehuda: You call me a slave? I, who come from the house of the Hasmonean kings? Rav Yehuda said to him: This is what Shmuel says: Anyone who says: I come from the house of the Hasmonean kings, is a slave. As will be explained, only slaves remained of their descendants.

Now, this is a very important text, with a lot going on, and I'm not going to get into all of it. But one thing it brings us is the important concept of, "kol ha-posel – pasul." The person who claims of another, "they're a bastard, they're from a nonkosher family," that person should themselves be at least suspected for the problem they are claiming in others, and perhaps, in fact, can be deemed guilty of it.

The family lineage and Jewish status implications of this are for a different sermon – but I will just note that the Talmud here offers a very powerful rebuke and even threat to those who question the lineage of others. This is something that happens in our Jewish world very often.

What I want to get back to is the idea that in criticizing someone else, you actually might be projecting your frustration about that flaw in yourself. This happens all the time in our relationships. I want to talk about this for a minute, and I'll do so by quoting Rabbi Shlomo Slatkin, who is a therapist

(<https://www.covenantrelationships.org/2012/11/projecting.html>):

Projection serves to protect ourselves psychologically from the unconscious pain and discomfort that we may possess a trait that is unsavory. Rather than dealing with the trait in ourselves, we deny it and project it onto others.

One way to know if you are projecting is to witness how much negative energy you feel about that characteristic you're noticing in the other person. While

most people are rubbed the wrong way by someone who is arrogant or greedy, some get more fired than others. If your blood boils when you think of such a person, it's a good sign that you have struck a golden growth opportunity!

Becoming aware of your projections enables you to become more conscious about yourself. It can transform your negative reactions towards others by realizing that much of your reactivity is coming from a deeper place within. As you look into the mirror that the other person is reflecting back, you can discover the missing parts of yourself that you may have once seen as unacceptable.

Allow yourself to take ownership for those negative traits you see in your spouse that may actually be within you. Instead of focusing on your spouse's selfishness or disorganization, see what you can do to be more other-focused or organized. While it may be true that you may be selfless or organized in many areas, perhaps you are weak in others. As you begin to work on yourself, you will have more compassion for your spouse and be less annoyed when s/he displays the trait you hate. Use this projection as an opportunity to discover new ways for you to improve and grow in your relationship.

So we've got this with individuals. What about as groups?

For many, many years, there has been an internal fight going on in the Jewish world between at least two camps over Israel and Judaism. How you name these camps and describe this fight is part of the fight. I tried many times to write out what these camps say to each other in a non-biased way, but it adds another ten minutes to the sermon and will just make everyone mad at me.

So I'll summarize it by skipping to the end of these arguments - and they almost always devolve into this place - in which one side is called kapos, and the other side is called Nazis.

First, I want to hold up and name that, essentially, at the end of these major fights, both sides are accused of the same thing. If you think we're over the Holocaust, we're not, unfortunately, and we are projecting our trauma onto people who disagree with us. There is definitely work we need to do around how we think about and commemorate the Holocaust - I fear we do so in ways that are perhaps not healthy, but that is a sermon for another time.

Second, I want to apply here Rav Yehuda's concept of, "kol ha-posel, pasul." When we point out the other group's flaws, we are also indicating our own. Now, I don't mean that in terms of content here, but rather form. What it implies is: if you go down the insult road, everyone is going to come out insulted. When you start the Holocaust comparisons, everyone starts getting called a Nazi.

Third, and most important, I want to hold up Reish Lakish's paradoxical advice as being particularly helpful at this time.

Many people are bothered by things that the other side does and says. We are bothered because we care. We want to k'shot acherim, to fix others, because we care.

But trying to fix others does not do what we want it to do. We have to focus, instead, on k'shot atzmecha. We have to fix ourselves, first.

Now, I know the response – which I can get from the left or the right – the response here is, “but this is an emergency, we have to k'shot acherim.” Yeah -- this is an emergency. And so we have to k'shot atzmecha. K'shot acherim ain't going so well.

We need to try k'shot atzmecha.

No one wants to do k'shot atzmecha. What I love about BEKI, though, is that I think this is a message we can hear. People have very divergent views here – don't I know it – but people really do respect each other and they don't insult each other.

They don't go down the kapo/Nazi insult rabbit-hole.

But you know what? At a lot of other synagogues, they do. In a lot of other Jewish communities, they do. On college campuses, this certainly happens.

I would like us to “k'shot acherim” to these other places. I would like us to fix them and help them. I have so much advice for so many people!

But – k'shot acherim. Doesn't work so well.

So here's what I want us to do. I want us to be "the best" at k'shot atzmecha. I want us to be really, really, good and loving. Really able to listen, to dan lechaf zechut, which means assume that people are coming from a place of love and commitment even when they differ with you. I want us to be patient during all the times we have to hear someone talk about their views that we disagree with, I want us to feel a sense of connection to them. Maybe there's a germ in what they are saying that can bring us some wisdom, or maybe there's an aspect in them that just needs a hug. That's something that's very real.

Being good at "k'shot atzmecha" means spending these holidays really working on yourself. And it means helping your fellows, the ones you see as compatriots, to focus on "k'shot atzmecha." On fixing the issues of their own political camp first - they both have 'em - and on fixing the issues in your family, in your domain. And by the way, apply everything I'm saying to the American political system, too, and our country's polity.

This is all paradoxical, in its way. You want to get those people to be better Jews? Become a better Jew yourself. But it's not surprising. Just like Ben Zoma's paradoxes.

I'll give the final word to a rabbi quoting Avot DeRabbi Natan, a later rabbinic interpretation of Pirke Avot. In an absolutely beautiful essay title Love and Hate in his Hegyonei Uzziel, Rabbi Ben Tziyon Meir Hai Uzziel, chief Sephardic rabbi of

Israel 1939-1953, wrote the following:

אם נראה כך דבר מגונה, ובגללו באת לידי שנאת חברך, התגבר לראות את חסרונותיך ולהפוך שנאת
חברך לאהבה אותך: איזהו גבור? העושה שונאו אוהבו (אבות דרבי נתן כג)

If you see some indecent quality in your fellow, and because of this you come to
hate them, strengthen yourself to see your own lack here, and to overturn the hatred
of your fellow into loving them. As it says in Avot d'Rabbi Natan, Who is strong?

And the answer here is twisted a little by the author.

The original version: Who is strong? One who makes his hater his friend.

Rav Uzziel's version: Who is strong? One who turns their object of hate into an
object of love.

May we all merit to be love, to be recipients of love, and to turn enemies into
friends.

Shanah Tovah