

**YOM KIPPUR SERVICE 5780/2019**  
**Havaya (Being) and Rachamim (Compassion)**  
**Living with What Is**  
**Rabbi Brian Walt**

Several years ago, I read a story that Dan Gottlieb, a family therapist tells about his grandson who is autistic.<sup>1</sup> Sam loved to draw. His family had learned that it was important to keep Sam engaged as autistic children can get lost in their mind. His mom, Debbie, tried to be with him as much as possible and he thrived.

One day when he was five years old, he was drawing a picture and asked Debbie to pass him the colors. Debbie was balancing some work she was doing in the kitchen as she passed him colors. She wasn't paying close attention when Sam asked her for turquoise. Debbie glanced quickly in the box, picked up a crayon and gave it to Sam. Unfortunately, the crayon she chose was not turquoise, it was light blue.

On the verge of applying the crayon to paper, Sam's hand froze in midair. He seemed shocked.

"Mommy, I asked for turquoise!"

Debbie retrieved the light blue crayon and passed him the turquoise.

Sam's searching gaze never left her face. He studied his mother trying to find out what had gone so terribly wrong.

"Mom, you weren't paying attention!"

"I know" Debbie confessed. "Will you forgive me?"

Sam thought for a moment.

"Just a little," he said.

Dan tells us that in earlier years, Sam would get so frustrated when things didn't go the way he wanted, he would bang his head on the floor and walls in frustration. Now he had learned to tell his family and he was pleased that he was able to express himself. Dan, Sam's grandfather, was so proud.

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<sup>1</sup> Gottlieb, Daniel. *The Wisdom of Sam* (New York, Hay House Inc. 2010)

And, said Dan, I also admired his honesty about forgiveness. Sam to his credit understood how much he could forgive. His mother asked for complete and categorical forgiveness. Sam couldn't go that far. What he could manage was to forgive her just a little. Sam, like all our children has wisdom to teach us. This time the lesson was about honesty and forgiveness. (You can read more about the wisdom of Sam in the Dan Gottlieb's beautiful book, *The Wisdom of Sam: Observations on life from an uncommon child.*)

I like the story because the offense is so small and most of us regard Sam's response as an overreaction to a very minor offense. Yet for Sam, given his personality and his own life, it was very real. Just like us, sometimes the offense is small but the hurt for the other is large. Our hearts can be so sensitive, so fragile.

### **Forgiveness is hard**

And I like the story for its modest message about forgiveness. **Forgiveness is so hard for all of us.** Asking someone for forgiveness and forgiving someone both are very challenging. "I am sorry" are among the three most healing words one could ever say, and they are some of the most difficult words to say. Maybe "just a little forgiveness" is as much one can hope for. Or maybe forgiveness happens just a little at a time and is cumulative. Maybe only God can forgive us completely or maybe we can only forgive completely with great effort and compassion.

### **YK The Day of Forgiveness**

Here we are on this day of forgiveness. We turn to God and ask for forgiveness. Jewish tradition teaches that we must ask forgiveness from anyone we have hurt before this day. And it includes a significant amount of detail about what this entails. We can't ask only once, we must ask sincerely three times. And, according to tradition, this should all be done before Yom Kippur because Yom Kippur only atones for sins against God, sins against another human being, can only be atoned for in person.

Forgiveness has been on my heart and mind this past year.

As many of you know, my older sister, Annette, died a year ago. The family into which we were both born had a lot of conflict over several generations. Without going into the details. My father and several of his siblings didn't talk to one another for many years. How painful and yet how common! How many of us here tonight have had or currently have cut offs in

your own family, where people don't don't talk to one another? I imagine quite a few. The entire book of Genesis is about conflicts and cut offs in our mythical ancestral family: Cain and Abel, Sarah and Hagar, Jacob and Isaac, Joseph and his brothers, just to name a few.

In my family, while my father's family was very conflictual, my mother's family was totally different. She had such a strong lifelong bond with both of her sisters. My aunt Elsa, the mother of Ian Shapiro, lived in Ithaca at the end of her life and attended at these services for many years.

For my mom, peace in the family was paramount and her life's work was to make sure that my two sisters, my brother and I love one another and that the painful cut off between my father and his siblings was not replicated in our generation.

And, she was partially successful. But not totally.

Annette, the first born in our family, absorbed a lot of the hurt of the previous generations and hurt of her own. She built a beautiful life for herself in Berkeley as a family therapist working with children and families and had a very strong community of friends. The four of us cared a lot about one another but all three of her siblings had conflict with her at different times. Our relationships were often quite fraught.

So, when she was close to death a year ago, we were gathered at her home and we were about to leave. We realized that it would almost certainly be the last time that the four of us were together and we felt the urgency of forgiveness. This was our last conversation. It was now or never! And so we gathered around her bed, we prayed and the three of us apologized for anything we had done to hurt her and asked her to forgive us. There were many tears and it was not easy. It is never easy to ask for forgiveness.

For whatever reason, at that critical moment Annette could not reciprocate. All she could say was to acknowledge that we were born into a difficult family.

We will never know why she herself couldn't say sorry. Maybe she "forgave a little" or even a lot but we will never know. Maybe she was in too much emotional or even physical pain as she faced her own death. Although my two siblings and I each had our own reaction, we all left feeling that something that should have happened, or more correctly, that something we wished would have happened, didn't. We wanted her to say I am sorry.

My own relationship to my sister was complicated, lots of deep love and connection, and, some very intense conflict. She and I would talk a lot about our family and help one another process the pain we experienced in childhood. Over this year, I have grappled to come to

terms with her death and my own unresolved feelings about what happened at the end of her life.

Shortly before the unveiling of her tombstone, just a few weeks ago, I re-read a poem by Lynn Ungar that spoke to me deeply not only about my wrestle about my sister but also about life in general. I want to read it to you.

**The Way it is**                      **Lynn Ungar**

One morning you might wake up  
to realize that the knot in your stomach  
had loosened itself and slipped away,  
and that the pit of unfulfilled longing in your heart  
had gradually, and without your really noticing,  
been filled in—patched like a pothole, not quite  
the same as it was, but good enough.  
And in that moment it might occur to you  
that your life, though not the way  
you planned it, and maybe not even entirely  
the way you wanted it, is nonetheless—  
persistently, abundantly, miraculously—  
exactly the way it is.

“Maybe our lives though not the way we planned them and maybe not even entirely the way we wanted them, is nonetheless -persistently, abundantly, miraculously, exactly the way it is.”

At the year anniversary of my sisters death those words touched me deeply and definitely reflected my feelings and the wisdom that I wanted.

Over the year, again and again sentences that began “if only...” kept on gnawing at me.

If only it had been different between all of us.

If only she hadn’t got Alzheimers.....,

“If only I had” .....,

If only my father and his brothers had....

If only, if only, if only! All understandable wishes but not really helpful.

I am convinced she did her very best and so did we. The rabbis teach; *al tadin et chavercha, ad shetagia limkomo*. Don't judge someone until you are in their shoes. But we are never able to be in another's shoes. I could never really see things exactly as my sister did. What was it like to be in her body and in her life? I shared a history with her so I could imagine some of the things that hurt her so badly but I couldn't be in her shoes. I know she did everything she could to find happiness, joy and peace, as did I, and my two siblings. And, in the process we hurt one another.

How utterly human! This is the way it is for most human beings.

I imagine some of you may be sitting here tonight thinking about conflicts in relationships, your mind may be running tapes about what if? If only? Imagining what could have happened, should have happened. If only... if only...

And I hope that some of you have the feeling expressed by the poet, Lynn Ungar, "that pit of unfulfilled longing in your heart had gradually, and without your really noticing, been filled in—patched like a pothole, not quite the same as it was, but good enough."

Maybe Sam's wisdom is really true, that often it is only possible for us to forgive a little. And then maybe a little more. But complete forgiveness may be beyond our reach and may be a set-up for disappointment and more hurt.

So I wonder tonight as each of us does our own *cheshbon hanefesh*, wrestling with sensations, feelings and thoughts passing through us, as we reflect on small and larger hurts, whether we are able to move towards accepting our lives just the way they are. Maybe the challenge of Yom Kippur is to open to life just the way it is. Some conflicts cannot be easily resolved. Maybe some can never be resolved.

As the poet says, "Maybe our lives though not the way we planned them and maybe not even entirely the way we wanted them, is nonetheless - persistently, abundantly, miraculously, exactly the way it is."

It also made me think about forgiveness. Some things are easily forgiven, some not. Expecting total forgiveness may be unrealistic. Maybe what we should aim for is to forgive just a little, and then just a little more but not be focussed that a perfect, transformative event will happen to change everything.

Of course, sometimes a miraculous, transformative forgiveness happens. If it does, treasure it, thank whoever you thank - God, the goddess, life - but don't expect a miraculous,



This Yom Kippur may we see the shape of our lives without obliterating a single instant of it.

I want to end my sermon tonight by inviting all of us to sit quietly for five minutes together with our minds and hearts focused on compassion and love. Compassion and love for ourselves, then compassion for others on our minds and hearts, and then compassion for all beings. Let your heart open to forgiving just a little more.

For this quiet meditation together, I will use the *shiviti niggun* that we introduced on Rosh Hashanah that is on your song sheets. Just four Hebrew words.

*Shiviti Havaya l'negdi tamid.* I place God before me at all times.

In Jewish tradition YHVH, the name of God is also rachamim/compassion. Instead of the word Adonai we will use havaya/Being and then we will substitute *rachamim*/compassion or *ahava*/love.

I place compassion before me at all times!

I place love before me at all times!

There are many names for God in Judaism. YHVH, the most prominent of the names is connected with the quality of compassion (*rachamim*) in Judaism.

In our song we will substitute love/ *ahava* for *havaya*, inviting us to focus on God as love and then to think of other ways we experience God maybe as compassion, peace, patience, kindness.

And the verse calls us to focus on what is most important to us that we place before us at all times.

We will sing the song and then spend a few moments in silence when we focus on compassion. Focus on bringing just a little more compassion into your heart Just a little more compassion, just a little more forgiveness for yourself and for others. Let your broken heart soften. If you are heartbroken, allow yourself in this space to feel that brokenness.

**SING *Shiviti* starting softly**

*Shiviti ahava l'negdi tamid.*

**SILENCE: 5 minutes.**

**Sit in a comfortable position.**

**Close eyes if you wish**

Notice your breath

Notice your body.

Allow yourself to notice what the words evoke in you.

Allow yourself to open to greater compassion, especially for yourself. You are also working.

Silence

At the end of the Silence:

Look around this room. See the room through with the eyes of compassion/*rachamim*.

See the world through the eyes of compassion.

What do you choose as your *shiviti* for this moment or for the coming year?

What is most important to you in coming year?

May we all be blessed with a little more forgiveness in the coming year.

May we all be blessed with the inner wisdom that our lives though not the way you planned it, and maybe not even entirely the way you wanted it, is nonetheless—persistently, abundantly, miraculously—exactly the way it is.

May we all be blessed with compassion for ourselves, for others and for all beings.

*L'shana Tova tikateyvu vteychatemu.*

May we write and seal ourselves in the book of life, compassion and forgiveness for ourselves and for all.