

The Broken and the Whole: Navigating Our Relationships in Times of Loss

Yom Kippur is one of my favorite holidays. Don't get me wrong, it's no Passover ... but I love Yom Kippur's focus on human relationships. I love the idea, embedded deep in the fabric of this holiday, that we are all capable of growth, and of positive change, and that we can help each other heal.

But to be honest with you, this year, I have been having trouble getting into ... the Yom Kippur spirit, if you can call it that? It has been a very hard year - for many of us, heartbreaking, sometimes angering, sometimes confusing, painful, fearful ... or just tiring. And in the midst of all of these challenges, including world events (in Israel, the Palestinian territories, and beyond) that many of us feel quite powerless to stop, many of our relationships – with people and communities, and sometimes with Judaism itself – have been challenged in new ways. Thinking about *repairing* those relationships, as Yom Kippur invites us to do, can be tough.

As a rabbi, I have spent a good chunk of the past year having conversations with many of you about broken or fraying relationships – and I've experienced some of these challenges in my own life, too.

Your childhood friend who posted something you found unconscionable, maybe many times.

Your long-time neighbor who assumed that because you are Jewish, or because you are married or connected to someone who is Jewish, you must have a set of beliefs that you actually *don't* have – whatever those beliefs might be.

Your school or your child's school where you are now uncertain of your place, in a nebulous way that's hard to name, or in a very concrete way that has a lot to do with swastikas.

Your school or your child's school where everything is fine, thank you very much, and could other people please stop assuming otherwise?

Your family seder

where the hostages

were or were not named

and starving people in Gaza

were or were not named

and no one threw a piece of gefilte fish at anyone else but

boy, it got close.

In domestic politics as well, we're experiencing a high degree of polarization, and we all find ourselves, our families, and our communities somewhere in the story of that polarization.

All of this is to say: many of us had experiences this year in which we were no longer sure of our place in communities that matter to us (including Jewish communities), and personal relationships that matter to us. We may hesitate to enter a conversation or a space when we don't know what we're going to encounter. Many of us think about safety differently than we did a year ago. Many of us are in a state of activation, or distress, more than we'd like to be, and we often find ourselves looking for signs that the person we're talking with, or who we see across the street, is with us or against us. It's a lot to be holding.

What do we do with all we are feeling, holding, and experiencing?

This year, I was in need of a different way into Yom Kippur's themes of reconciliation and re-connection, one that would take seriously the *pain* of this year, the *uneasiness* of this year, and the challenges of engaging in acts of personal and collective healing in light of this pain and uneasiness. Maybe some of you are in need of a new way into Yom Kippur, too.

And so I went looking in the vast store of Jewish tradition's stories about relationships, and especially, about reconciliation. The story I ended up coming back to, again and again, was the story of the golden calf.

When we tell the story of the covenant at Mt. Sinai between God and the Jewish people, we often tell the grand parts - how the people stood at the base of a mountain,¹ received the Ten Commandments,² and promised *נעשה ושמע*, "we will do, and we will listen."³ But we often cut the story off before getting to the trickier part - Moses goes on a trip up the mountain to receive more commandments, and when he's gone for too long, the people assume that maybe Moses and God have left them forever.⁴ Out of desperation, they build a golden calf, to replace God.⁵ When God and Moses see what the people have done, they don't wonder if the people feel abandoned - they assume that the people have abandoned them. They react with incredible anger, and Moses drops the tablets he is carrying.⁶ Those sacred stones we see in the movies somehow shatter in the sand.

This year, when I read this story, I saw all of us. The people in this story have been through a lot - they have seen death and destruction, they have narrowly escaped disaster many times. In some ways, they are primed to expect loss, and betrayal, and they struggle with feelings of powerlessness, as well. Their ability to tolerate unexpected events is understandably diminished. Is it any surprise that they read something catastrophic into Moses' delayed return from the mountain?

¹ Exodus 19:17

² Exodus 20

³ Exodus 24:7

⁴ Exodus 32:1

⁵ Exodus 32:4

⁶ Exodus 32:7-19 (and beyond)

Back here, in 21st century America, whether we personally have been proximate to violence this year or watched it from afar, many of us are also primed to expect loss. And, not unrelatedly, many of us have a much shorter bandwidth for people who see things differently from us than we might have in a time and place where we felt less grief, less anger, and less fear.

How do we make space for people with different perspectives and experiences, anyway? This is the big question for us, for the people in the golden calf story, and for God and Moses in the story, too. The stakes are personal - our relationships matter to each of us - and they are also societal, because on one level, the larger groups we are part of are nothing except webs of relationships.

God and Moses both react very quickly when they see the golden calf. They both make, and then act on, a lot of quick assumptions about the intentions that the golden calf must reveal. They both think that the golden calf means that the people don't want any further relationship with them. They are wrong.

When I read this part of the story, I thought of experiences I had this year with friends' social media posts. Like many of you, I have people in my life who sometimes post things I disagree with - and even that make me uncomfortable. When I read their posts, I sometimes feel confused, or concerned. I have even wondered about the future of relationships ... which is a milder version of what I imagine everyone in the golden calf story must have felt about each other.

What I feel grateful for, however, is that after initially having a very strong internal reaction, I've had opportunities to speak with some of these friends, and learn more about their perspectives and motivations. One friend shared that she re-posts things she knows are provocative because, in her words, she's trying to make people think. Another friend shared that when she posts, she is trying to help some of her family and friends who are living through the war know that they are not alone.

These are both motivations I wouldn't have been able to imagine before we talked. I still disagree with some of the content they both have shared, just as I imagine if God and Moses had learned *why* the people built the golden calf, or the people had learned *why* Moses was gone for so long, they still would have disagreed with each other's decisions. But I feel more stable knowing these friends don't intend harm - just as I hope they know I also don't intend harm. This shared understanding of mutual goodwill feels like a basis on which we can continue to build our relationship.

Of course, stories of disagreement don't always end this way. I imagine each of us here has a mixture of memories. We can name times we were able to forge or restore connections across differences of perspective, or across misunderstandings, and times we were not able to do this.

Recently, a congregant shared a story with me that falls in this second bucket - misunderstandings, and maybe misattributions of intention, that don't get resolved. The

congregant in question, who gave me permission to share this story with all of you, was walking into a memorial event honoring the memories of the people killed on October 7. As he waited in line to enter, he saw protesters. One of them had a sign that said “we all bleed the same.” He gathered from what he was seeing and hearing that the protesters thought that the people entering the October 7 remembrance event didn’t care about Palestinian lives - and he was pained, because he didn’t see it that way at all. He wished there was a way to tell the protestors that he was grieving the deaths of civilians on all sides of the war - but he didn’t find a way to do that before entering the event.

Have you ever had an experience like this? I know I have. It can be hard to respond in a kind and helpful way when someone assumes you have a perspective that’s really far from what you actually think. And yet, when we’re in community with each other, responding in a kind and helpful way to people who misunderstand us is exactly what we often need to at least try to do.

One of the things Yom Kippur offers us is an invitation to reflect on our relationships and ask ourselves, and perhaps each other, if there are any opportunities for repair ... and then to begin doing the work.

This is what happens in the golden calf story, too. After a series of catastrophic misunderstandings, Moses, God, and the people realize they all need each other – and they try to move forward, together. Moses goes back up the mountain, and the people wait for him, even though it probably scares them to wait. God faithfully dictates the commandments once again, and this time, Moses returns to the people with the tablets he is carrying intact. The people can continue their journey, now with a guidebook. And just before they do, God makes Moses a kind of breathtaking promise, which we recite as part of our Yom Kippur liturgy:

יְהוָה יְהוָה אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן
אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת
נִצֵּר חֶסֶד לְאֲלֵפִים
נִשָּׂא עוֹן וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאת וְנִקָּה

*Adonai, Adonai, is compassionate and merciful, slow to anger, abundant in kindness and truth, preserver of kindness for thousands of generations, forgiver of wrongs committed on purpose or by accident ... God wipes the slate clean.*⁷

What were the people supposed to make of this promise from God? What was *Moses* supposed to think? In context, it doesn’t really seem plausible to say that God was claiming to *always* or consistently be compassionate and merciful, slow to anger, forgiving, and so forth ... after all, this was *the same God* who had only recently reacted with anger on seeing the golden calf. Instead, I wonder if God might have been saying something like: *I, God, am capable of*

⁷ Exodus 34:6-7

compassion and mercy, self-restraint, forgiveness, and more. And as we go forward in our relationship, I am going to try my best to live up to those personal capabilities.

Slow to anger! Wouldn't that be great?? In the story, God has not yet demonstrated these qualities in any real way – compassion and kindness and forgiveness, maybe sometimes, but slow to anger? Not so much! I think part of what this story teaches is that we can choose to acquire skills for building and maintaining relationships that we don't yet have, choose to grow in ways that maybe haven't even been modeled for us. Even when we have just had a really hard set of experiences. Even when we might be feeling very alone.

This year, one of the ways I want to try to grow is that I want to try to pause a little bit more. I want to try to notice when the words “I assume” are on the tip of my tongue, and ask myself, “why do I assume? What else might be possible? How might I learn more about what this other person thinks and feels?”

This kind of pausing feels especially important – and especially hard – in our world today. It can be easy to fall into a pattern of listening to another person not to understand what they think, but instead, to screen them. We check to see if they use certain words and phrases that will tell us either that they are aligned with us, and therefore safe, or aligned against us, and therefore dangerous.

It can also be easy to decide to be *silent* - because we're not sure what to say, but we worry that anything we might say could elicit anger. You have to imagine that while the golden calf was being built, there were probably a few people scratching their heads and thinking, “I get that we're in a tough spot, but your solution is that we're going to build ... a small cow ... out of our jewelry?” But they might not have known how to say that without further inflaming others' grief, anger, and fear.

All of these actions ... staying silent, aligning ourselves with slogans, screening other people based on limited data ... all of these are very human things to do. In some situations, they may in fact help keep us safe.

But what the story of the golden calf offers, I think, is a reminder that sometimes our assumptions can be off-base. When we are living through a really hard time – as the Ancient Israelites in this story were, and as we are, today - we might fear that people with whom we were once close have turned away from us, or that relationships that have taken turns for the worse might stay that way permanently. We might fear that in light of everything we've been through, we won't be able to transform our relationships, and our world, for the better. We might, or might not, be right.

One of the most beautiful details of the story of the golden calf and the re-written commandments is that when the people and God finally left the mountain, the people put the tablets in an ark for safe-keeping – not just the second set of tablets, whole and perfect and easy

to read, but the first set too – the set of tablets that were irrevocably broken.⁸ Like the ancient Israelites in this story, we carry within *us* brokenness and wholeness and everything in between, and we move forward, not in spite of our brokenness, but with it. Some types of destruction cannot be undone. But the people who have survived destruction – and even *committed* it – can still live, and love, and build community. *We* can still live, and love, and build community.

Centuries after the golden calf story was first set to parchment, the rabbis of late antiquity came up with a midrash, an interpretive story, that they layered on top of the Torah's story of the golden calf. Their biggest innovation was to set the story in specific seasons, and with those seasons, specific holidays in the Jewish calendar. They said: maybe the Israelites received the Ten Commandments over the summer. And maybe Moses destroyed the tablets on Tisha B'Av, a summer holiday associated with destruction and loss. And maybe when Moses finally went back up the mountain, and the people bid him farewell, it was the first day of Elul, the month of reflection and return preceding the High Holy Days. And the day Moses came back down the mountain, carrying a new set of tablets that would allow everyone to begin again? Maybe that day was Yom Kippur.⁹

Maybe today is *our* day to begin again. Wherever we are, whatever we have been through – in mercy, in compassion, and in love, we can begin again. *G'mar Hatimah Tova*. May we be sealed for a year of goodness and of blessing.

⁸ The idea that the whole and broken tablets were both placed in the ark is a rabbinic teaching that comes from an interpretation of Deuteronomy 10:1-2. One example of this teaching is found in the Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 14b, in the name of Rav Yosef.

⁹ Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezar 46.