

Rosh Hashanah 5770 First Day

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Keeping Score, Letting Go

Revelations, profound flashes of insight into our lives -- they are said to happen in special places. At a blazing mountaintop in a desert like Mt. Sinai. On the ocean dunes, gazing at the infinite sea and the rhythmic waves. Or on the side of a dusty road for travelers.

Mine was like that -- I had my revelation in a kosher deli within sight of the Long Island Expressway. Not quite the road to Damascus, but the message got across.

The deli was so-so, the pastrami wasn't lean, it was expensive even for kosher. But I digress. It was several months after I had finished my first job out of rabbinical school. I was there having lunch with a committee chair from the Jewish day school where I had been working. He was a professor of Jewish Studies I had gotten to know and appreciate, a scholar of Talmud who had new things to say about the old books. I had come to respect his wisdom not only about Torah but about organizations, and people.

I had taken the position originally out of great idealism. It was exciting to join a team starting a brand new Jewish institution, a group that wanted to create a high school where our students would learn the true meaning of community, and see Jewish values alive in every subject and their daily experience.

Alex was born during my fourth year at the school. Laurie and I had agreed when we got married that we would share the care of our young children and value both our careers, so in year five I cut back to part-time. I looked forward to being with the baby, but it was difficult for me to be only partly present at the school, especially in an institution I felt I had helped create, and at the end of the half-time year I decided to leave and concentrate on the baby and my next rabbinic dream.

But that wasn't really why I left. The truth is, for a year or more I had been stewing. At some point, the direction of the place I had poured my dreams into had turned. As we became like every other school in our area, I said that we were losing that special quality of community, and without our unique spirit then even the quality of our education would suffer -- and you know what, I was right! But nobody else saw it, or did anything about it. I watched my fellow Young Turks decide to leave, one by one, and felt like a lonely, embattled voice.

אֶת חַטָּאֵי אֲנִי מַזְכִּיר הַיּוֹם *Et chata-ai ani mazkir hayom* -- as we say in Hebrew, quoting Pharaoh's cup-bearer in Genesis, "I mention my own sins today." At that point in the school I shifted, and began to think about who wasn't listening, and who was to blame. It wasn't a short list that I compiled. I was disappointed and then angry with individuals who I felt had let me down, and who I felt had let us all down. I would replay conversations or decisions in my head, and it only made me stew more. Sometimes I would tell baby Alex these things while we drove in the car -- he was kind of a captive audience -- and when he wasn't spitting up, I tell you, he

was a very good listener!

I confess that it didn't end when I moved on. The following year, people would innocently ask me "How are you?" and I would say I was no longer at the school and launch into a dissertation about why things had gone astray there. There is a line in the psalms, where the speaker says: *A thousand fall at your side, ten thousand to your right, but you they cannot touch. Just look with your own eyes, and you will see how the wicked are repaid.* That's how I wanted things to be. I was sad to see a dream of mine gone, and I wished the people responsible had to stand up and be counted.

If you had convened a Congressional committee, I'd have been ready to name names.

That's how I ended up at the deli. It was my umpteenth attempt to get someone to tell me I had been right, and the other people were wrong, and if only they had listened to me things would have been amazing and all our dreams would have come true. That would feel great. I had picked the professor to lunch with, not only because of his wisdom but because I already knew he agreed with me. I wanted him to go over the scorecard with me one more time, verify that my tallies were accurate.

Halfway through a too-expensive pastrami sandwich, I had my revelation: that this whole exercise was absurd. I had dragged this poor man out to lunch for what kind of interesting conversation? Did I really believe that it would make me feel better? He *was* of course telling me exactly what I wanted to hear -- but I *didn't* feel great at all. Holding on to my own self-righteousness was getting in the way of learning from my experience, and from enjoying my new projects. The past was past, and it was time to move on.

If you have worked in an office or an institution of any kind, or if you have volunteered your service in an organization whose purposes you believe in, you may well have your own version of this story. And the same kind of thing happens in families. That's where we often get frozen, storing up slights done to us, thinking of other family members who are never called on it when they do something insensitive. Relating the latest discussion to something that bothered us years ago and are still not forgotten. Thinking of things we want to say to someone but feel we can't possibly say.

Keeping score in these situations comes easily. Holding on to disappointments is natural. Righteous indignation feels good. It can be quite satisfying to replay in our minds how others have wronged us, since that makes you the good guy. The only one of the bunch who truly understands what's going on or what is at stake. Who here hasn't fantasized the unlikely conversation with a family member, the one where they say, "You're right -- this tension, these things we never talk about, is all my fault. It's a good thing we've got you here to point things out." Who here hasn't imagined the conversation with a coworker or a supervisor when we hear, "I was wrong. You were right the whole time. Thank you for setting me straight -- we'll start doing it your way, right away."

Yeh, right. What do we do when that doesn't happen?

Self-righteousness can be a way of avoiding action. Of not spoiling a feeling of purity by entering a process of compromise. When we can't confront someone, or aren't willing to, the alternative is civil conversation. That would feel like selling out, letting the other person off the hook. Or it would feel like complicity -- if they're so wrong but I deal with them anyway, I'm a part of what really bothers me.

But those feelings can be a dangerous trap. Even when you're right, you can only sit and stew for so long in righteous indignation. We can't live life always waiting for a chance to even the score.

A story is told of two Buddhist monks traveling on a pilgrimage to a shrine in India. Along the way they come to a large mud puddle, and they see a young girl in a beautiful new dress standing by the puddle, afraid to cross for fear of ruining her dress. The monks, of course, live a strict life in an all-male community -- but one of them impulsively picks up the girl and carries her across the puddle. The second monk is troubled and upset by what his friend has done, for he feels that his friend has violated their vows, and this bothers him for the rest of the day. He doesn't say much as they walk; he can't concentrate on his meditations; he answers his friend only in monosyllables or short sentences. Finally, at day's end, when the two monks stop to cook their dinner, he says to his companion: "You know, it's not right for people like us to get too close to women. You took a vow, remember?" And the other monk says, "Are you still carrying that girl? I put her down six hours ago."

Every time we store an incident and silently rehearse our own rightness, we only load ourselves with a burden that becomes heavier the longer we carry it. Like the monk, who lost a day of sacred contemplation by ruminating on what someone else did, the longer we are frozen by a memory, the longer we carry, the longer we keep track of the score, the more we become distracted from what our lives or work are really all about.

The rabbis of the Talmud crystallized this insight in their commentary on the commandment **לֹא-תִקֹּם וְלֹא-תִטּוֹר** *lo tikom v'lo titor*. Literally, "Do not seek revenge and do not preserve." These mitzvot appear in the same verse in Leviticus as the command to love your neighbor. The rabbis explain: What is revenge? Here's the situation. Reuven refuses to lend Shimon his axe. The next day, Reuven asks Shimon if he can borrow his cloak, and Shimon responds, "Just as yesterday you didn't lend to me, so today I am not lending to you." That's pretty straightforward.

The Talmud continues: What is the second half of the commandment, **וְלֹא-תִטּוֹר** *v'lo titor*, do not "preserve" or "guard"? It's the same situation, but this time when Reuven asks to borrow the cloak, Shimon says, "I **am** going to lend you my cloak, even though yesterday **you** would not lend me your axe." That's a great insight -- "I'm doing the right thing, and oh did I mention that time you wouldn't do that for me?"

Both prohibitions remind us that it takes effort to remember a grievance, to internalize it and to go to the trouble of making it the basis for how we act in response. If you are paying attention to a mental scorecard, you are losing perspective, letting someone else's wrong govern your decisions. Some commentators teach that the second prohibition, **וְלֹא־תִטּוֹר** *v'lo titor*, or not preserving a grudge, applies even if you just think to yourself: I am going to do this because I am better than the person who wronged me.

This is really the crux of the matter. Acting friendly while thinking about a past wrong is a way of keeping score. It's equal in the Torah to the direct act of revenge, of payback. It keeps alive a bad memory; it stands in the way of reconciliation. We are not entitled to define ourselves by what we don't like in others--when we do so, we only make ourselves partners who preserve what bothered us in the first place.

It's not accidental that we talk of "carrying a grudge." Grudges -- memories of experiences past that we find disappointing, frustrating, or just wrong -- they are burdens. Quite apart from the question of whether they are justified. The point is that even when we have been wronged, even if we haven't been asked for forgiveness -- even so, nursing a grudge takes effort, requires energy and focus, diverts us from our responsibilities to others and from our sacred journeys.

Whether in the workplace or in our family, not preserving grudges in this way is difficult. In the workplace, the less control you have over your own situation or department, the harder it is to say openly what needs to be said. Sometimes it really is impossible, and the choice is therefore to silently keep score, or to let go. In families, too, there are always the same choices--speak openly, nurse a grudge silently, or let things go.

When open conversation or criticism seems impossible, the mitzvah of not preserving a grudge teaches us that we simply have to let go. This is the hardest kind of forgiveness. It is forgiveness for something no one has asked your forgiveness for. Forgiveness when what you perceive as a wrong has not been acknowledged--or worse, the other person thinks it was right! Sometimes, we are bystanders, interested third parties witnessing terrible situations. Bystanders are rarely asked for their forgiveness, but have good memories as much as those involved. Yet in all these situations, if we do not or cannot confront, we have to let go.

Rabbi Harold Kushner cites another rabbinic teaching on this subject. The Torah distinguishes between murder and accidental killing, manslaughter. If the killer was known to be an enemy of the victim, according to the Torah he cannot claim that the killing was an accident. The rabbis ask, what defines an enemy? And their answer is, an enemy is someone who you haven't gotten along with for three days.

Three days. Three days, Rabbi Kushner suggests, should be the statute of limitations on grudges. You may go to sleep angry once, and fulminate for a whole extra day. But if you put your head down on the second night, indignant at your boss, angry at a coworker, upset with a loved one--then you are making a choice. Sometime on that second day, before going to bed, we have to decide--to say what we feel, or to let go.

Maybe there should be a sliding scale, depending on how complicated the situation or the wrong. Three days seems right for the petty slight, the meeting that went badly, the one-time fight when you really felt a family member hurt you.

Some things are bigger, and the time it takes to release them is longer. We will soon bring to mind the metaphor of the סֵפֶר הַזְּכוֹנוֹת *Sefer Hazichronot*, the Book of Remembering where deeds are recorded. It contains only the story of the past year. If you arrive here next year thinking about the same unresolved conflict as you are today, it'll be a signal to move on, to let go.

Rosh Hashanah is an opportunity to clean house and throw away all scorecards that are more than a year old. To do *tashlich*, not only with our own wrongs but with the burdens of wrongs done to us, or witnessed by us, that we have not already confronted or forgiven. We read in today's haftarah that Hannah used to be taunted by Peninah, her husband's other wife, because Peninah had children and Hannah had none. At first, Hannah would accompany the family to Shiloh but not eat, suffering her indignity in silence. In the text, Hannah and Peninah never speak openly. But we do know that Hannah eventually realized that Peninah or no Peninah, she was at the house of God, so she prayed, and her prayers for a future were answered. She made sure that a grudge wouldn't nullify the meaning of her pilgrimage.

A couple years after I left the day school, my old boss called me and asked if I would work with her on another project. We had remained friends, and kept interested in each other's work and each other's lives. She offered me another chance to create something with her, a summer leadership training program for Jewish educators. She asked if I would join her new team designing it, and serve as the rabbi in residence. Several pastrami sandwiches before, I might have stopped to think -- what if it's the same all over again? But it never crossed my mind. I said yes, and we did some great work that summer.

In ancient times, our ancestors originally thought that God kept score--that every sin unleashed a kind of boomerang weapon that had to find its way back to the one who launched it. "You need only look with your own eyes, and you will see how the wicked are repaid."

But quickly, they came to conceive of a God who might not punish every wrong, a God who could let go. When we cast aside our grudges and our disappointments, let go of what can't be fixed, our relationships are no longer controlled by what is behind us. We no longer define ourselves by what could or should have been. The first pages of the book of the New Year are today -- this moment -- still blank. We don't have to copy what was written last year. May we all find the wisdom we need to choose what stays in last year's book. May we free ourselves to go forward, to write anew in our own strong hand.