

Rosh Hashanah 5771 -- First Day

Helping Someone Else to Change

Suppose you were granted a wish that you could use for either of two things. You could use this wish to change something about yourself. Or, you could use it to change something about somebody else. Perhaps, dare I say it, even someone in this room!....

I'm talking about something like your height or the color of your eyes, but something on the inside. A habit, or a personality trait, something you consider a flaw. Which would you pick? Change yourself, or change someone else?

I'm betting that most of you are at least *considering* that you would use the wish on someone else. Maybe you're thinking: If I was a *tzaddik*, a saint, I would of course focus on myself, but there's something about this other person in my life that could stand a little adjustment. So, how about three wishes. Certainly, you'd feel all right using at least *one* of three to change someone other than yourself.

Now, sometimes we'd like to change someone else because that would make *my* life better! If somebody around me acted differently, it would help *me* address something that I'm unhappy about. If I had a better boss, I would find work so much more rewarding. If my friend would just be serious every once in a while, I could really use someone to talk to. If my spouse would stop bugging me about this or that, it would help *me* be more understanding, more loving.

But it's not just for self-centered reasons that we wish someone else would change. As we sit here, with people we care about on every side, we think about those in our lives who we wish could be happier, more at peace; could have more *shalom* in their lives, could feel more of a sense of purpose. We want that for each other. Sometimes you care about that even more than fixing something unbalanced in your own life.

So there are two kinds of these wishes we have for others. Some change that would help me, or some change that is good for them. Either way, it's well-intentioned. Either way, sometimes that wish for someone else is so strong -- we want to get it out there, to say it so much, that it drives us to be....

Annoying. Nagging, noodging. And completely ineffective in the process.

Can a person really ever help someone else change? Should we even try?

To these questions, the Torah says: Yes! Not always, and there are caveats, of course. But yes. I want to teach you a Hebrew phrase, a specific mitzvah, that captures this idea. It's such a unique phrase that you can only say it in Hebrew, and I want you say it together now, after me: הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach*.¹

Ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach is one of those great Jewish terms that have no precise English equivalent. It's a term that occurs in this morning's story about Avraham and the Philistines, which we'll come back to shortly. It is defined by the Torah in chapter 19, verse 17 in *Vaykira*, the book of Leviticus. The text there says:

לֹא־תִשְׁנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְךָ הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֶטְא׃
Lo tisna et achicha bil'vavecha, ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach et amitecha, v'lo tisa alav chet.

The verse has three parts. First part: *Do not hate your brother in your heart*. Second part: *Ho-chay-ach, to-chi-ach your fellow*. Third part: *And do not carry guilt because of him*.

As I said, the words *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* are very hard to render in English. Some translations say "rebuke" or "admonish", but to me that's too harsh. "Criticize" might be closer, but when you think of criticizing, it's often an uneasy dynamic. "Feedback" is nicer and maybe better, as long as it's not too *pareve*, just describing and reflecting with no suggestion at all.

So let's hold the Hebrew phrase as it is: *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach*, and try to pin it down better.

If we take just the first two parts of the verse in Leviticus, it's sounds clear what the Torah is saying. If you're getting upset with someone, don't get to the point where you would just walk away in frustration, and say, I can't stand him anymore. Nothing will ever change. Don't keep it inside, in your heart, in your thoughts and feelings. Instead, figure out what happened that bothers you, and get it out there!

Now here's an interesting ethical teaching! In a philosophy class on ethics, you might hear bland things like "don't hurt another person". But wow, the Torah *isn't* saying: Never be angry, just be calm, accept everyone as they are. No, the Torah actually says: You're angry! Get it out there, you can do something about it!

1. [For those reading this later, the "ch" is the Hebrew letter ח *chet*, which makes a sound like the German "ch", like the first letter of Chanuka.]

It's a liberating teaching, but not the whole story. So keep a finger in Leviticus while we remember Avraham's story.

This morning's reading told us that *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* is something Avraham did, and something he didn't do. Toward the end of the reading, Avraham is approached by Avimelech, king of the Philistines. Avimelech knows that Avraham is a powerful person, blessed by God, and seeks a treaty of friendship between their peoples. Avraham agrees, and then the Torah says: "And Avraham *ho-chi-ach-ed* Avimelech because of the well of water that Avimelech's servants had stolen." How did this conversation go -- this feedback, this criticism, this admonishing? The Torah continues, "Avimelech said: I didn't know! Who did this thing? Also, you didn't tell me. Oh, and also I didn't hear about, not until today."

There's a lot to nod our heads at in this conversation. At first blush, Avimelech's reaction to Avraham's *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* sounds like the completely natural, defensive reaction most of us have when we're called out. Basically, he gives a long list of excuses: I didn't know about it, it's really your fault for not telling me, I had nothing to do with it, and did I mention I didn't know about it?

This is the pattern and the tone of most of the unsatisfying conversations we have when we confront another person with someone she or he did wrong, or is doing wrong. It doesn't work. It doesn't help. But it's hard for us to stop doing it. Just a few nights ago, Laurie corrected me about something and I answered her in just this same defensive way. Needless to say, it was one of the same nights I was writing this very sermon!

In the Talmud, Rabbi Tarfon says: "I wonder if there is anyone alive today who knows how to hear a *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* message! If you say to him, "'You've got a sliver on your forehead, why don't you remove it,' he'll say, 'You've got a whole piece of wood on *your* face!'" Rabbi Tarfon says sometimes we can't even tolerate simple, practical advice -- your socks don't match -- never mind something profound. We're so touchy. Some days, we feel like it's all we can do just to keep it together -- now someone wants me to change, to do something hard?

There is, however, another way to look at Avraham and Avimelech, and the hurt between them. Avraham brings up the stolen wells, and Avimelech says, perhaps more quietly: "I didn't know about it, and I didn't know who did this thing. Why didn't you tell me about it, so I might have known about it before today?" This way, it's Avimelech doing *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* toward Avraham. He's saying: "You could have

trusted me. Rather than waiting until we're out here in front of all these people, you could have let me know in private. I really have tried to make you feel welcome here, and there was a better way to talk about it."

In the Talmud, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah says: "I wonder if there is anyone alive today who knows to do this *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach*." Even when our motivations are good, we easily descend into nagging and noodging. And none of us likes to be nagged or noodged!

So let's go back to the verse that teaches this mitzvah and see if it can teach us any positive way to talk when we feel that someone needs to change.

לֹא־תִשְׂנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חַטָּא:

Do not hate your brother in your heart. Ho-chay-ach, to-chi-ach your fellow. And do not carry guilt because of him.

That last phrase is tricky in the text. It might mean that if you don't speak up about something that is wrong, then you carry a part of the guilt, the responsibility, for what follows. If someone is on a path you're concerned about, and you don't say something, you'll certainly *feel* guilty. Once we're in a relationship with someone, as a brother or a fellow or colleague in some sense, we have a stake in who they are and what they do.

But how do we know if we're really responsible, or if we can really speak? The other way we read the verse is: *Ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* your fellow, but not to the point where doing so would bring you to guilt, to something wrong.

The Talmud says: What if you share words of *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* and they are not accepted? Well, it says it twice, *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* -- that means do it again! But not to the point where the other person becomes embarrassed, for the verse ends: *Do not become guilty because of him*. Don't take it to the point where you make no progress, but just cause humiliation.

Ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach isn't just venting, but something you do very carefully. *Ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* is more than just one thing you feel you need to say, at one point in time. It's really something much larger: the role that one person plays in another person's *teshuvah*, in someone else's process of repentance or personal change.

How do we make sure we do *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* in a way that does not make us

guilty in the process?

The Torah uses this double language -- *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach*, "criticize, yes, criticize your brother" -- the same word twice in just a slightly different form. Perhaps the words are pointing in two directions, at you and at the other. "Do not hate your brother in your heart" could mean: Don't hate the other for something you actually dislike in yourself. Often the buttons that get pushed for us aren't just outside, but inside too. If the place is a mess, is it the other person who is responsible, or is it you too? So when there's something you really want to change in someone else, first turn the question back inside. *Ho-chay-ach* to yourself, only then *to-chi-ach* to the other.

There is a well-known story about Mahatma Gandhi, perhaps apocryphal but profound still. A woman once came to Gandhi and asked him to please tell her son to give up eating sugar. Gandhi asked the woman to bring the boy back in a week. Exactly one week later the woman returned. Gandhi looked the boy in the eye and in a stern voice said, "Please give up eating sugar!" Sure enough, the boy stopped. The woman returned to thank the Mahatma and, as she turned to go, said, "I have just one question. Why did you ask me to come back in a week? Why couldn't you have said the words when I asked?" Gandhi replied, "Because the week before, I myself had not yet given up eating sugar!"

In Hebrew, the word *ho-chay-ach* is related to another word that means, "in the presence of." If you're going to help someone else change, you really have to be there. First, in a literal sense. I don't think you can do it by e-mail or memo. I have my doubts about a personal letter; the written word, no matter how carefully chosen, is not the same as speaking. Telephone, perhaps; it all depends on you and the other person. But face to face -- it's the hardest, yet it's the best way.

And then there are times when it's hard to be present. Late at night, when you or the other person is exhausted -- it's hard to be present, if you're talking or if you're the one trying to listen. Then again, some of us are at our best at those times, when things are still and the distractions of the day are gone. It all depends on the relationship.

The root of *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* also means to prove. Not in the sense of "let me prove I'm right and you're wrong." Proving is really probing; they are related words in English too. Probing is a step-by-step process, exploring how one thing links to another. Probing should really be patient, and careful. And if something is probed and proven, then it should be understood by both of you, true in the same way to both.

Dr. Andy Christianson is a researcher at UCLA, doing pioneering work in couples

therapy. He says that the most powerful factor in determining whether a couple makes headway is whether they can ask each other: "Why are you doing that?" Asking why is probing, and it makes all the difference regardless of what the issue is -- spending habits, communication, health-related. Simple, you may say. But the truth is, the closer our relationship, the easier it is to skip the probing, the *ho-chay-ach*. If I've worked with you for a decade, if we've been siblings all my life, I may think that I finished asking "Why" a long time ago. That I've uncovered already all the explanations I'll ever need. But when we're bothered, or when we're concerned about someone who is unhappy, worried that their choices aren't working for them -- going back to "why" is the essence of *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach*.

There is some fascinating research about personal change stemming from work by a psychologist from the University of Rhode Island named James Prochaska. He calls his model Stages of Readiness, and it has been investigated in connection to a wide variety of health-related issues, especially relating to addictions and eating. Dr. Prochaska posits four stages a person goes through toward making an important change. The stages are pretty intuitive, even obvious. But they're helpful at the next step -- the interaction between one person trying to change, and another in a relationship to that person.

In the model, the first stage is Precontemplation. Before you think seriously about making a change, it crosses the mind. "Maybe I'll lose some weight this year." The second stage is Contemplation: "Yes, I'd like to be thinner." The third stage is Planning -- "Here's what I'm going to do, I'll join a gym and eat more fruit", and the fourth is Action.

So far, pretty obvious, even banal. From the standpoint of a person looking to support the change, the Stages of Readiness model gives us a social science theory of noodging and nagging. Research suggests that problems come when a person responds to the one who wants to make the change, but not in a way matched to the stage they're at. "I'm thinking about going on a diet," says one person. That's Precontemplation, stage 1. The other person says, "Great. The next time we go the grocery store, let's not buy ice cream, let's buy lots of broccoli and cauliflower." That's stage 3, Planning. Three does not equal one. And it's definitely experienced as nagging.

We can do more to help someone who wants to change, by supporting them at the stage they currently are. Often that's a process of asking questions, exploring motivations, rather than making suggestions and proposals. "What's got you thinking about what you eat?" Or, "Why do think keeping organized has been such a difficulty for you?" Again, it's probing, the step-by-step process, seeking out insight. *Ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* is the opposite of nagging.

I see something else in the Torah's language -- the doubling of the words *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach*, and the two other words in the verse about your brother, and your fellow. The poetry of the command is that the process of *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* should bring two people together. My friend Benjamin Karney is a social psychologist, and he studies intimate relationships, usually up close behind a one-way mirror, watching the very minute details of conversations between partners in a relationship. He has seen a good deal of nagging, and though he wouldn't put it quite this way, he's hoping through the research to see what *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* might look like.

Ben has seen a lot of bickering through his mirror. One major pattern he sees is when one person puts all the focus on something small and concrete. You don't get back to me when I have a question I e-mail to you, says one colleague to another. You're eating too much, says one spouse to another. These kinds of conflicts get us into the pattern of "hating our brother in our heart", to use the Torah's language. They are bound to keep us apart. One member of a relationship or a friendship is pushing the other to do something, or coaching the other on how to do something. But we don't like that kind of power difference even when it's for a good thing, even for something we want.

Instead, Ben suggests that partners in an important relationship reframe things, in a way that gets both people working toward a larger goal. One person says, "I'd like to lose weight." Typically, the other suggests where the nearest health club is. But instead, Ben says, one person's desire to change is an opportunity to focus on the long term, what it means to be together for the long haul. Both of us want to be healthy, so we're together for many years ahead. This project we're working on is important, our work could have long-lasting benefits for our enterprise together. Our relationship is a source of strength, and wouldn't it be great if we could be there for our kids when we're older and they need us in new ways.

So, "I'd like to eat better" can turn into all kinds of things that aren't criticism from one to another. It could be a decision together to discover some of the great vegetarian restaurants around, or to buy a new cookbook and try out new things cooking in the kitchen together.

So what is the *mitzvah* of *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach*? It's a way of speaking without nagging. If we're bothered by another person's actions, or worried about their path, it's a way of probing. Of being on the lookout for what the other wants to say, and taking your lead from that. It's a way of seeing opportunities for making a relationship grow, rather than one person changing another.

That wish you have, about someone else in your life: maybe you can approach it in the spirit of *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach*.

And it's possible that when all is said and done, you can't. In the section before Avraham and Avimelech, Sarah asks her husband to banish the servant and her son. Yet Avraham does not speak, does not confront Sarah at all. I've often wondered how he could be silent. What wisdom or reality might have held him back?

The Talmud explores the limits of *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach*. How far should you take *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach*? Rav said: Until he punches you to make you stop. Shmuel says: Until he curses you for your words. Rabbi Yochanan says: Until he turns it back on you! If this is all that you know will happen -- if this is what has happened every time you've tried, if this is all you can imagine happening -- then it's time to say: I cannot help that person change. And I am not responsible. Not responsible. We are only responsible when we can help. There are the times we need that old Serenity Prayer, which is in its spirit very Talmudic: *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can change, And wisdom to know the difference.* Sometimes this is the hardest message to hear: that there is more guilt sometimes in trying and failing to help someone change, than in not trying at all.

Our own *teshuvah* and that of the others in our lives are bound together. Colleagues and siblings, parents and bosses, spouses and significant others. We want so much for the best -- the best around me, so I can be well, and the best for all of them. The teachings of *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* -- of presence and probing, of building a relationship through loving criticism -- can guide our words.

And sometimes, it's not about the words at all.

A study published in 2000 in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology by Niall Bolger, Adam Zuckerman, and Ronald C. Kessler followed a group of couples, in which one of them was preparing for the New York State Bar examination. They asked both members of each couple to keep a diary and answer certain questions each day. Two of the questions were: Did you do something to support your spouse today? Did your

spouse do something supportive for you today? Did you feel happy today?

As you might imagine, studying for the bar exam while working full-time is extremely stressful. It won't surprise you that when the spouse who was studying felt she or he got support, and the other spouse reported doing something supportive, the one preparing for the exam felt a sense of wellbeing.

But it turns out that in this study, that was not the situation that led to the greatest sense of wellbeing. When the partner reported doing something supportive, but the one studying for the exam *did not* report being supported -- on those days, the person preparing for the bar felt the best.

How could this be? Again my friend Ben, the social psychologist, explains it this way. Suppose you come home from a difficult day, and your partner says: I see you're tired, let me make dinner and take care of the kids so you can relax. That would feel good. But suppose that when you get home, you come in and dinner is made, the kids are bathed, everything is quiet, perhaps the newspaper is waiting for you at the table. You don't see the act of support. There is no conversation you have. It's just there, and you experience it as part of the fabric of your home, even if you don't realize it, even if it isn't being brought to your conscious attention.

The three researchers in the New York bar experiment call this "Invisible Support." Wordless, in the background, but yet a very powerful kind of help that we give to one another. The study doesn't address what I have been talking about exactly: one partner in a relationship trying to change, or to encourage the other to change. But the phenomenon of Invisible Support might apply just as well there too. To act invisibly, to supply an environment in which a person you care about can change, is one of the most profound ways of supporting that change.

Isn't this what we say God does for us? It's like the Ark before us. Sometimes, it is open, and we bring out the Torah so that the words will teach us, coach us, even goad us. In the Musaf prayer coming shortly, we will indeed address God as *Mochiach*, which is the same word as *ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach* -- the one who goads us to change. Most of the time, though, the Ark is closed, and God's help in our path of *teshuvah* is invisible, through what we already know, through the people around us who try to support us in all kinds of ways.

Each of us has someone in our life who may want to change, or need to change. *Ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach et amitecha* -- may we know how to go out in the New Year to support them and their changes, to keep far from noodling, to back away when

ho-chay-ach to-chi-ach not in our power. Helping each other do *teshuvah* through the right words, or without words at all.

Shana Tova.