

Opening the Blocked Channels of Love

Kol Nidrei

5783

Rabbi Julie Greenberg

Leyv Ha-Ir~Heart of the City

Our theme all through our holy days this year is V'ahavta ~ You shall love. This evening I want to talk about one of the ways we get blocked from loving, stuck in our loving. The word used for this in translation is Sin, but in Judaism Sin really means missing the path we want to be on, being stuck or stalled out on the journey we want to be on to be good people in a good world.

The prayer Ashmanu that we offer many times during these holy days, where we beat our hearts, or caress our hearts, Ashamnu....., is a gesture that expresses this idea of opening the channels to the natural inherent flow of love. You shall love, you shall open those passageways for this New Year, clear them out, so that you can surge ahead through the open gates into the New Year as a loving, living part of the web of life.

One of the things that blocks our love channels is old hurt, old resentment and self protection to make sure it never happens again. Do you have that experience? You know, when you're human, there's a lot of hurt, a lot of old stuff and a lot of attempts to stave it off. You can't be human without facing the pain of the ups and downs of life. We here are a relatively privileged community and I sometimes hear from people "I've had a great life, I haven't had the hardship that so many people have, I'm very lucky." I honor that sensitivity and awareness of privilege and yet it is impossible to be human without some pain. And it is our experience of that pain that actually expands our capacity to see the pain of others. Thank God each of us has our own experience of going through hard times, because that inner experience lets other suffering in the world resonate with your big heart. Our own experience is so intimately connected with what we can see and feel in others and in the world.

One essential name for Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, At-one-ment. This is because our ability to clear through the emotional and somatic residues of hard times is essential to our inner one-ness and to our collective One-ness. We have to be able to move through the resentments and hurt without getting stuck. Judaism offers the concept of Teshuva which can mean Return, it can mean Response and it also has connotations of forgiveness and making amends.

I never was interested in the topic of Forgiveness and Amends. I just didn't see the point of applying myself to reaching a place of forgiveness to the people who have hurt me or to making relational amends just because it was the right time of year, mostly because I thought that kind of inner growth and relational growth was a more organic process that would emerge in its own time if it was meant to be. And I still think that. As time ripens me, I see more the responsibility that I had in these situations, I see more the ways the other person was shaped by their own history and their own hurting, and also as I've gone through the decades I just have more perspective and a bigger context. I've always trusted that process and not attempted to specifically wrestle with Teshuva as a prescription.

One of the most horrible hurtful relational experiences I had in my life came from a time when I was 21. I was in love with two women and I thought the three of us were going to spend our lives together. We met in Berkeley when I was taking a year off college and Karen and Leslie and I were passionately, madly engaged with each other. But I still had to go back east to finish college. When I returned the following year it was a disaster. We shared a house and all the relationships just blew up. I wanted to walk in front of a truck for the entire year, I was so shocked and so laid low. I truly had thought we were going to spend our lives together.

As the years went by I understood my own part in making huge assumptions that we would be together for life which wasn't necessarily the assumption of either of the other two partners. I came to understand the pressures the other two were under, Leslie coming from a working class background, just starting law school, feeling completely less-than and intimidated, Karen addressing mental health challenges from her family's history of alcoholism. As the decades went by, I also have so much more perspective. We were so young! The stakes seemed so enormously high to each of us back then but as life went on, things ended up okay, even terrific, for all three of us and we are warmly re-connected today.

I never saw the need to do a Forgiveness process, it just seemed to me like forgiveness happens over time organically because of the dynamics of time, of learning, of perspective.

But recently I've been inspired by some teachings about forgiveness and making amends. Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi used to teach about forgiveness as a gift you give yourself. It is you being harmed by resentment, stuck hurt and fear from past experiences. He used to say "Not forgiving someone is like stabbing yourself in the stomach to hurt the person standing behind you." I've also heard this message in the form of "Not forgiving someone is like filling a cup of poison for another person and then drinking it yourself." Another similar image comes from 12 step wisdom: make a gun with your hand so that your pointer finger is ready to shoot at something. Now look which way the three lower fingers are pointing; right back at you.

Reb Zalman also used to say "If you want to know what it's like to be in prison, ask a prison guard." We are imprisoning ourselves when we stay stuck in our pain, even when harm was caused by other people. And when we were the ones who hurt another person, almost always it is because we were hurt ourselves so the same wisdom applies.

In Reb Zalman's work on conscious age-ing, from age-ing to sage-ing, he invites us to redirect the psychic energy we squander by holding on to hurt, and the blocked life energy that comes from staying stuck in hurt. He invites us to do inner work on healing painful memories. One of his ideas is to imagine your elder self going back to visit the younger self who had a traumatic experience. This is used in some psychotherapy practices as well. The elder self says "I come with assurance from the future. You are going to make it. You lived through this difficulty, healed from it, and learned important lessons that matured into wisdom."

An amazing idea offered by Reb Zalman is a Testimonial Dinner for Life's Severe Teachers. I would love to lead such a Testimonial Dinner for our community. It involves preparation ahead of time where you identify the lessons learned through a difficult experience, you examine your own role if any, forgive yourself if you had a part in causing the hurt and you redirect that energy into your conscious growth as an elder. You basically thank the people who gave you these hard life lessons because they are what made you who you are.

Having lived through my own experience of relational devastation when I was in my very early twenties, and there have been a few other times too, I now can guide others, my children and counselees, who come to me in crisis about their lives. Usually they think all is lost, they've ruined their lives, they'll never be happy or love again. I can look at them and say compassionately, "You have a lot of life ahead of you. There is much yet to be revealed. It will be okay."

There is a component of making amends that has to do with the outside world, not with your inner healing and forgiveness. To me what that means, is that you do your own work to unblock your channels for loving and then you will naturally connect with the people in your life with love, whatever that looks like in a given relationship. We are naturally beings of love. When we leave behind the gunk and renew ourselves for the New Year, everything is possible.

I invite you to think for a moment about who you would invite to a Testimonial Dinner for Life's Severe Teachers. Check in with yourself about how you have become more yourself, grown in your humanity or learned important lessons from that person.....

I am so glad to be here together for these Days of Awe when we ponder the most profound issues in our lives. How to be the humans we want to be? How to grow through the hurting and stuck places into wisdom and connection and love? That's why we are here on earth and I am honored to be walking the walk with you.