

On Detachment and Forgiveness

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Rabbis have many strange conversations. When I was in Israel last year, I talked with a friend named Matt who I knew from Los Angeles who, for whatever reason, wanted to talk with me about a renewed focus of his on observing Judaism's dietary laws and he started to confess some of his struggles. "A few days ago," he said, "I did not say birkat hamazon – the grace after the meals." That happens to all of us sometimes, I said. Tell me why you think that happened. "Well," he said, "I also didn't do netilat yadaim – I didn't wash my hands before saying hamotzi." I listened understandingly and asked him again, "why do you think you did that?" He was getting very sad and seemed to not want to answer my question just continued, "Daniel, I ate really non-kosher food." I listened over the phone and tried to ask him again. "Matt, there are so many great kosher restaurants in LA, why don't you just eat there?" I asked. "Really," he said, "they're open on Yom Kippur?" J

We are here to repent from sins, big and small, but to do so, we must understand where sin begins. And one way to understand an idea is to look at the very first place that it occurs in the bible. Many of us think that the first time there was sin in the Torah was the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil and it was a sin, but did you know the word "sin" does not appear in that story? The first place it appears is in the story of Cain and Abel, two brothers who bring offerings to God.

"Adonai had regard for Abel and his gift, but for Cain and his gift he did not have regard. Cain became very angry, and his face fell. Adonai said to Cain, Why are you so angry? Why is your face fallen? Is it not as follows: if you intend good, there is forgiveness, but if you do not intend good, sin crouches at the door, it will lust after you but you can overcome it."

From the very beginning, it seems sin and anger go together. Two brothers bring offerings but God likes one better. It makes Cain angry. He feels like his gift was not good enough, like he was not good enough, that God loves him less.

The Torah continues, *"Cain said to Abel his brother...and it was when they were in the field, Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him."* Cain spoke to Abel his brother but we don't know what he said...so the midrash imagines. In one story, they said,

"Let's divide the world. One took land and the other movable property, [like clothes and cars]. One said, 'The land you stand on is mine,' while the latter retorted, 'What you are wearing is mine.' One said: 'take off your clothes; the other retorted: 'Fly [off the ground].' Out of this quarrel, Cain killed Abel.

We fight over things, over stuff.

R. Joshua of Siknin said in R. Levi's name said the fight went this way. One said, 'The Temple must be built in my area,' while the other claimed, 'It must be built in mine.'

They, like us, fought over the Temple Mount in Jerusalem – they fought about religion and God's love.

Judah b. Rabbi said: Their quarrel was about an additional twin who was born with Abel. Each claimed her. Cain claimed: 'I will have her, because I am the firstborn'; Abel said, "she's mine because she was born with me."

So they fought over a girl; they fought about love.

These stories are all different and they all aim to explain the things that we get angry or jealous about: what *stuff* other people have, who is really closer to God, love. But I would like to return this morning back to Cain in the moment just after God rejected his offering but before he went to the field and killed his brother, before he was "Cain the murderer," when he was still just Cain, a boy who felt the sting of rejection and needed his mom and dad. As I read and re-read that story, I wonder, "Where are Adam and Eve?"

Cain has a right to feel angry at God. Don't get me wrong – Cain had some work to do. The Torah tells us Abel brought the first, the choicest of his flock whereas Cain “after a few days” brought “mi'pri ha'adamah” “some fruit from the ground” – he waited a while didn't bring anything special. It's clear that, comparatively, Cain's gift was not as good as his brother's. God didn't offer loving encouragement or say, “hey buddy, you can do better,” God simply proclaimed it “unacceptable” and, by rejecting his gift, rejected him. We, and Cain, can rightfully expect better parenting from God. Cain may also be upset with himself. His gift wasn't as good as his brother's. I doubt we help people by acting, in the name of self-esteem, as if there is no difference between excellence and mediocrity, and I wonder if maybe Cain wasn't a child; if maybe he was old enough to know he hadn't done his best and if, when he lashes out at his brother, he isn't really just angry with himself because it is hard to take responsibility, to admit it's not someone else's fault and instead look within.

With all that said, I still wonder “where were Adam and Eve?” and what might have happened if Cain's father, Adam, and mother, Eve, had heard about what happened between him and God and had come home to talk with their son that day. I wonder if that's all Yom Kippur really is: a lost and angry son or daughter sitting down to talk with our parents. I wonder how much anger and pain returns to family, to conversations we should have had. I wonder how much of all the anger and grief come from the love we all ache to feel, from how much we miss those we love the most, and from the excruciating pain of moving on.

In her book, A Year of Magical Thinking, Joan Didion writes about mourning the death of her husband, John, and cleaning out the house.

One day...I gathered up more bags and took them to John's office, where he had kept his clothes. I was not yet prepared to address the suits and shirts and jackets but I thought I could handle what remained of the shoes, a start. I stopped at the door to the room. I could not give away the rest of his shoes. I stood there for a moment, then realized why: he would need shoes if he was to return. The recognition of this thought by no means eradicated the thought. I have still not tried to determine (say, by giving away the shoes), if the thought has lost its power.

It is hard to give away the shoes, to let go, to move on. Yom Kippur is a Day of Atonement, but לכפר from which we get the word “kippur” means “to cover over.” Yom Kippur is a day of covering over. But what if we do not want to cover over, to leave the past behind, because, in some way, it means losing our loved one's again? In a few minutes, we will recite Yizkor which means memory, but memory is a double edged sword – it is sweet to remember those we loved, but all memory is also erasure because we are replacing our loved ones with an image in our minds. We treasure memories, but we don't miss them; we miss our loved ones, all of them.

In his book, Kaddish, Leon Wieseltier describes a medieval burial custom where relatives and friends would tear grass at the grave and throw it backwards over their shoulders based on the belief that the soul accompanies the body of the dead as far as the grave, but it does not have permission to return to its place until those who have gathered [at the grave] give it permission, and throwing grass backward was a sign of mourners' permission [for the soul to return], as if to say, ‘go to your rest.’

Wieseltier asks, “But what if you do not want this soul to depart? What if you cannot acquiesce in a world without this soul?...Stand,” he says, “at the fresh grave, I say, and tear up the grass, but throw it forward, not backward, and the fury with which it travels toward the horizon will be your fury....” Some in this room have known that fury, have lost parents or other loved ones this year or before. But who has not known the sting when those we love are absent when we need them? That too is a kind of loss that fills us with grief and sadness. How much of Cain's rage was just about a boy who needed his parents, but they were not there?

We each deal with anger in different ways. A husband and his wife always disagreed about politics and he once asked her, “When I yell at you about who you should vote for, you are always so patient with me. How do you control yourself?” “I clean just clean the toilet bowl,” she said sweetly. “How does that help?” he asked. “I use your toothbrush,” she replied. J

That is one way I suppose, but...our feelings run so deep.

We don't mean to disappoint those we love but it is virtually unavoidable. Before our middle son, Benjamin, was born, I couldn't imagine my heart could love anyone more than I loved our first son, Alon. My friend, Rabbi Brad Artson and I were talking about this on the way to shul and he explained, “your heart expands; it grows and fills with infinite love.” And he is right. Our hearts expand. For our spouses and partners, for our children and grandchildren, for friends and

parents and loved ones, we feel so much love within us we could cry. But the problem is that the hours in the day do not expand. We do not expand. We have only so much attention to give, and it is so hard to communicate how infinite is our love when we are not, when there are only so many hours in the day. We don't mean to hurt those we love so much, but we do. We know what it means to feel unloved, unknown for the special gifts we bring to the world? We know what it means to feel alone, to miss those we love, and for that longing to switch into anger and pain. The bible tells us "Adam knew his wife again" (Genesis 4:25) but somewhere far back, we are all the children of Cain, descendants of when our parents were not there for us, of a particular pain that happens when we realize: our parents are human.

Towards the end of his book, as his time for mourning comes to a close, Wieseltier writes how "human love must rise above animal love." He says, "[t]he difference [between the two] is in detachment." What I think he means by "animal love" is that instinctual, biological love between parents and children, between mother bears and their cubs. But, Wieseltier says, "I am not only an animal[...I am not only a son." Even, perhaps especially, in grief, we must remember fight off the urge to love our loved one too much and, by doing so, to refuse heal and forgive and move on. "My soul," he writes, "surpasses my ancestry. My father imbued me with my purposes, but my purposes carry me beyond my father. In the heart of the family," he writes, "there must be a wise alienation, a standpoint stricter than the standpoint of love...A father, a mother, a son, a daughter: they, too, can be idols. Idolatry may be nothing more than too much love."

It is strange to think of detachment as helpful, but it can be. I am reading a book with our parents of our bar and bat mitzvah class on raising Jewish teenagers called The Blessings of a B Minus in which the author, Wendy Mogel, writes about the importance of practicing "detachment" with our kids, of "watching the dramas of the day as committed but slightly amused observers...the moving violation your son incurs when he's caught doing 'doughnuts' in an icy parking lot; your daughter's grief and outrage when she is dumped by her best friend – respond with concern *and* detachment...By taking a deep breath and withdrawing, she says, "you make space for your child to grow."

Today, as we remember those whom we've lost, and as we focus on the mess of hurt feelings and disappointments, as we dwell upon the sins of anger and rage and we mourn the love we deserved but did not receive, I wonder if detachment might help us to forgive them for all the hurt we feel inside.

Every morning we say in the psalms "*Al Tivtihu B'nedivim, b'vein adam sh'ein lo tshua*" – "don't trust in people who have power, in mortals, because they can't offer you salvation." There is something sad in that message – its pessimism about the human condition, but it's also true. It is not fair to expect another human being – whether your parent or child, your community, your lover or your friend – to fill the emptiness we feel inside. It is a hole too big for any single person to fill – my teacher Reb Mimi Feigelson once said about love, "a ½ times a ½ equals a ¼ but 1 times 1 equals 1." We must be whole people without one another to truly be whole together. Detachment can lead to love, and forgiveness.

I pray that in the year to come we can practice that sort of "human, detached love" Wieseltier describes so beautifully. No synagogue, even Beth El, can fill all the emptiness inside. On Rosh Hashanah just 10 days ago, I broke a glass here to say – I, this place, all of us – we are not perfect; that is not what we require, not even what we seek here. I pray we can be a community who forgives one another every day. I pray Beth El will continue to be a place where we have perspective, where we constantly remember we are all human, and with that perspective we are able to practice more love, more compassion, more forgiveness in a world sorely in need.