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Averot bein adam lamakom, Yom Hakipurim m'chaper. Averot bein adam l'chavero, ein Yom Hakipurim m'chaper ad sheh y'ratseh et chavero. For sins between man and God, Yom Kippur atones. For sins between man and his fellow, Yom Kippur does not atone until he has made peace with his fellow.

Women, the fact that this old text speaks about man and God and man and his fellow means nothing. This is about all of us, and it has been the single most fundamental teaching for this holy day since it was written eighteen hundred years ago. After all the fasting, all the prayers, the donations to tsedakah, after getting ourselves over here and attempting to find decent seats, after we have contended with the crowds and soaked up the music and the poetry, what does this day ask of us? A conversation. And whether or not we have that conversation, and how we have it, is the great question of this night.

In South Africa, at the end of the apartheid era, as that society was seeking to make a new beginning, they established a commission with a marvelous name, the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. That would be a good name for the conversation--the difficult, daunting, awkward, holy conversation which is at the heart of this day which is at the heart of Judaism. Yom Kippur invites us, and challenges us, to a conversation of truth and reconciliation.

With whom shall we have this conversation?

Let me pause for a moment, and allow you to answer the question for yourself. In all probability, it is someone who is close to you, or was. Typically, we hurt the people closest to us. Our friend. Our sibling. Our coworker. Our spouse. Our parent. Our child.

At this point, I imagine the air above our heads filling with the reasons that the conversation is NOT a good idea. We could probably list them together.

- #1. It's hopeless! We have tried talking about this before and we always end up fighting.
- #2. It's over. What happened, happened; and now time has to pass and let things heal. To discuss it again would just reopen old wounds.
- #3. We were both wrong, and while I am willing to admit it, he or she is not. And I am not going to be the only one apologizing.
- #4. It's too painful. I don't want to bring it up because what happened was embarrassing and humiliating for both of us...I don't want to put either of us through the pain of remembering.
- #5. I don't want to be a hypocrite and apologize if I'm not really sorry. And I'm not!
- #6. She won't forgive me.

This is a good list...not complete, of course, but hard to refute.

For the best Jewish answer to our objections, we have to turn to Rabbi Moses Maimonides, also known as the RaMBaM.. Maimonides in the 12th century organized all of Jewish life in his magisterial code which he modestly titled "Mishneh Torah," meaning "The Second Torah." RaMBaM's problem was not lack of self-esteem, but he was right about his book. It has been for our people, probably the most influential Jewish book since the Talmud.

In the Mishneh Torah, the RaMBaM reiterates the Mishna's great teaching about the need to make peace with our fellow man, but then goes on: "he must make peace and ask him to forgive him. Even if he only hurt him with words, he has to plead with him until he forgives him. If the person does not want to forgive him, he should bring a group of three friends, and they plead and ask for him. If he still refuses to forgive, he brings a second and then a third group. If he still refuses, then he leaves him and is done. And the one who refused to forgive is now the sinner."

What an extraordinary scene the RaMBaM paints! I honestly don't know how often anything like this has been done over the centuries....the bringing of groups of friends to plead for forgiveness from stubborn, grudge-bearing people in the right. Perhaps in 12th century Spain, it was not unusual. Or perhaps it's a fantasy woven out of the RaMBaM's imagination. In any case, his point is clear. To obtain forgiveness is not optional. We need it to get on with our life. It's as though a huge pane of glass was broken in our house....we don't dither about whether or not it needs to be fixed; we deal with it. This is the RaMBaM's view of forgiveness. Is it somehow less necessary for us, in our later century? Or are we all sitting in homes with the windows blown out, trying to convince ourselves that we're nice and snug and that everything is fine?

In light of the seriousness of the RaMBaM's doctrine of forgiveness, it is even more wonderful that after the third group of friends has tried and been rejected, then he says that the need is simply....over. Reason #6 not to have the conversation, that they won't forgive us, is no reason at all. We will find out...and if after trying we have been rejected, then we are done....not before we have even tried.

Before leaving Maimonides, let me call your attention to the words "he must ask for forgiveness." There is a subtle but enormous difference between saying "I am sorry," and saying "would you forgive me?"

"I'm sorry" does not ask for a response. "I'm sorry" leaves both people wondering...what just happened? Was there forgiveness? The RaMBaM says "he must ask for forgiveness," because the response reveals whether or not forgiveness has occurred.

Did you see the Israeli film Ushpizin last year? You can rent it next week and watch it for Sukkot! My favorite scene in that movie takes place when the lead character Moshe, a religious Jew, learns that his sukkah—which a friend had found for him—was actually stolen from another man's courtyard. He runs madly to that man's house and yells up to him "David ben Gabbai!" The man's name. "Come out!" The man comes out on his balcony and says: "What? Why are you yelling?." Moshe says "Are you David ben Gabbai?" The man replies "I am!" Moshe says "It's me, the one with your sukkah." The man grumbles, "Oh, so it's you." Moshe says "I ask your forgiveness." The man replies, "I forgive you." Moshe says, "I'm afraid you didn't understand me. Would you please say "forgiven, forgiven, forgiven." At which Ben Gabbai finally smiles and says "Forgiven, forgiven, forgiven. There. Now, have a good holiday." And Moshe, vastly relieved, says "You have made me so happy! Chag sameach!" That scene, and that exchange, reveal the difference between "I'm sorry" and "Forgive me."

It's a difference that we need to relearn.

Over the years, a few people have confided in me that they have had an affair, and their spouse found out, and now the affair is over and they want to reaffirm their

commitment to the marriage...but weren't sure how to do that. The only advice I can think of is "have you asked her (or him) to forgive you?"

To ask for forgiveness is an act of humility.

Of surrender. Of vulnerability.

If we hurt someone—our spouse, our friend, anyone—when we ask for their forgiveness...not simply saying "I'm sorry," but "would you forgive me?"...we put ourselves at their mercy.

It's a good, healing thing to do.

Maimonides understood the vulnerability, because he continues as follows: "It is forbidden to be cruel, and to refuse to forgive. Rather, he should be quick to forgive, and slow to anger, and when the person who sinned asks his forgiveness, he should forgive him with a full heart and willing spirit.

And so we have come to the heart of the matter, the reason behind all of the reasons that we avoid the Yom Kippur conversation of Truth and Reconciliation. We avoid it because it seems dangerous. In fact, it is risky for both people: if I ask you for forgiveness, I take the chance that you will not forgive me...and will leave me hanging, convicted by my own words, and unforgiven. It seems safer not to acknowledge my own wrongdoing. By the same token, if I am the one being asked to forgive...how do I know that you are sincere, and that you won't hurt me again tomorrow? It seems safer to shut you out, to defend against you and not allow you to come close again...which is the essence of forgiveness.

A contemporary Jewish scholar and thinker by the name of Yochanah Muffs, has written a strange and marvelous book entitled The Personhood of God. In it, he writes: *Any meeting of personalities requires great bravery. One who attempts to communicate with another endangers his own life, for to do this he must reveal what is in his heart. Any real communication, then, is a dangerous leap. But if one never screws up the courage to jump, he will wither away in silent isolation. There are two choices, to love or to die.*

Muffs is speaking about any and all real communication, and I think that his insight applies even more so...perhaps most of all... to the conversation of Truth and Reconciliation called for by Yom Kippur. More often than not, we play it safe and just avoid the conversation. Sometimes we make a feeble effort that falls far short of what is necessary...and often just make it worse. Listen closely. "I am sorry that what I said made you feel that way." There are the words "I'm sorry," but it is not an apology...and we all know it! "I'm sorry it made you feel that way" is one of the cruelest things we can say to someone, because it really means "I'm sad that you have a problem with your feelings!" Asking forgiveness means saying something about ourselves and our own humanity. Asking forgiveness can only mean one thing: "I did a bad thing; can you please forgive me?" Asking forgiveness means saying "I am not perfect, but I want to take responsibility for my mistake."

Granting forgiveness also, by the way, can fall short, as we all know, because we have been on both sides of that failure. We know how profoundly unsatisfying and unresolving it is when we ask for forgiveness and they say "ts OK." And we know that when we say to someone "ts OK," we are not giving them the forgiveness they need. "ts OK" too often means "go stew a little more!" Can we in that moment hear Maimonides

whispering to us from the 12th century: “forgive him with a full heart and a willing spirit.”

Now it is true that in many cases, perhaps most, both sides did something wrong. Just a day or two ago, someone asked me if the Yom Kippur conversation includes confronting someone if we think they have done something wrong...in other words, where we feel the need for the conversation, but think that we need to do the forgiving...after they have first apologized.

The Torah does speak directly to this situation, in a mitzvah embedded at the heart of the Torah, right in the middle of Leviticus...immediately before the verse “*v’ahavata l’reicha kamocha*, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The mitzvah is known in Hebrew as ***hocheach tochiach***, and it reads:

“You shall not hate your brother in your heart; rebuke, yes rebuke your fellow, but do not assume that he has sinned. Do not bear a grudge and do not take revenge, but love your neighbor as yourself.” In other words, confront the other person when you think he or she is wrong, but be open to the possibility that you do not know all the facts. The rationale for the mitzvah of rebuking is given up front---this is the only way we can avoid hating another person....to confront them, and in that way to learn their side of the truth.

Just like asking for forgiveness, this too is a conversation of truth and reconciliation, requiring the same enormous risk-taking. One of the rabbis of the Midrash stated that only one in a hundred people know how to rebuke a person properly. And another rabbi replied that only one in a hundred people knows how to receive rebuke. It is the most difficult commandment in the Torah...nothing is more difficult than real communication.

And yet, Mishna Yoma says that this day, the holiest day of the year, doesn’t work without it. The choice, as Yochanan Muffs says, is between taking the leap of communication, or withering away in silent isolation. The choice is to love or to die.

Hatred, resentment, a bitter grudge...these emotions linger in our bodies. They do not dissolve with time. They burrow down into our soul. And there they sit...for a lifetime, unless we undertake to heal them.

In one of Judaism’s most brilliant flashes of insight, Yom Kippur teaches us the awesome liberating, therapeutic power of a conversation. It won’t be easy. It may feel dangerous. But a conversation of truth and reconciliation can heal the wounds of our heart, and can relieve the deepest pain buried in our soul.

May this holiest day of the year, the Day of Atonement, give us the courage and strength to take the strong medicine...to take the dangerous leap of communication. On this day, God sets a choice, to love or to die. Choose love.