

ROSH HASHANAH 5766
TEMPLE EMANUEL
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A husband and wife are not talking. Finally, the wife implores her husband to speak. He begins a tirade about “this” that’s not right, about “that” being wrong, about the way the kids, the cars, the house, the war, the disasters, and the Yankees are just wrong, bad, wrong, WRONG! When he is finished, there is a moment of silence, and then she says, “That’s all right, we don’t have to talk if you don’t want to.”

That conversation may be one that can take place in your home. Or in the house of someone you know. It may have been between two brothers or sisters, or between long-time friends, or estranged relatives, because all of us have relationships where the conversation that needs to happen, doesn’t happen. We all have had someone in our lives that is no longer in our lives because “the” conversation never took place, leaving pent-up negative feelings where our hearts once lived.

How else can any of us explain how siblings, who have known each other their entire lives, don’t speak? Or that a couple married for twenty years or more, decide to split? Or when the first time a son sees his father in ten years is at his father’s funeral? Conversations were missed, avoided, misunderstood, and/or finally, stopped altogether.

For me this is a frightening subject, and when I decided to write about it, and began thinking about it, I started to recall conversations that I never had from way back, but even more fearful, the ones that I need to have now. You can ask my parents, my wife, and even my seven-month-old, that when it comes to the phrase “fight or flight,” I am the latter. And the prospect of having the difficult conversations that I need to have is incredibly daunting.

So I thought about why these conversations never take place, or why, when they do, they sometimes go horribly wrong. And, you know, when I am performing a couple’s marriage, I always ask one question to get one of the meetings going: “How are you going to stay together when each of you go through life changes, and you are no longer the same people at fifty that you are now, when you’re thirty?” Every couple says, “communication,” “talking things out.” Some couples hold onto those ideas and survive, but half, since half of all marriages break up (my percentage is much better than that, by the way. . . so far), don’t survive. Why would they lose the foundations of communication and conversation? I found four answers, and I’m sure you can find more, but if you want this sermon shorter than twenty minutes, let’s keep it to just these four:

Silence
Not listening (not hearing)

Not speaking the same language (misunderstanding)
Not forgiving

Early on in our lives, we are told things that we have always believed to be true: “Silence is golden,” “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything.” I have even said that one to my own daughter (although, I must admit, I feel in that instance it was warranted). It’s a compliment to call someone “the strong silent type.” And if the truth be known, there are times when silence is the more positive behavioral choice. But living in silence, or with silence, builds a wall between people very quickly. How do you know what’s going on with someone if you never talk about it? How can two people connect in any way when there is no conversation going on? And if the silence comes out of something that’s bothering you, that’s when it builds up, and conversation, a give and take, becomes more and more difficult. Imagine, something occurs that brings you concern. You are silent. Then something else happens that brings on stress. You are silent. Still another incident comes along that really makes you angry. You are silent. You have said nothing, and yet within you are concerns, stress, and anger, an unhealthy way to exist in the first place. What do you think will happen when another week, or month, or year goes by with more silence? And the fact is, in the time you have remained silent, nothing has changed in your life or in the life of the one who is bringing this on, because s/he doesn’t know about it – you – have – been – silent. And those same actions that caused you to become knotted up inside may keep on happening, and all at once you explode, full of everything that was pent up inside of you, and there won’t be much of a conversation at all. It’s like “the toothpaste / toilet seat / can’t believe you told my boss / how could you / I didn’t ask you to / what were you thinking / I can’t take this anymore. Well, what do you have to say?”

And the worst response? “I’m sorry, what did you say?” Not hearing, or perhaps, not listening, is the second of the conversation downfalls. You are speaking to someone about something that is meaningful to you, and after you are halfway in, you realize that the person you’re talking to is daydreaming, and you ask, “Are you listening?” [And then the answer is] “Oh, I’m sorry, I was thinking about something else.” That doesn’t really provide a safe environment for sharing, never mind conducive to conversation. And imagine how difficult it is to hear when you’ve got an inner monologue going on inside your head. I’m sure we’ve all been on both sides of the hearing equation. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber would describe the conversation when one is speaking and the other isn’t really listening as an “I-it” relationship, a place where there is no mutuality to the conversation. He would say we need to strive towards “I-thou” relationships, where each person is completely accepting of the other, demanding nothing from that person, and just existing fully for each other -- nearly impossible to reach that point he’s talking about, but absolutely possible to try.

So let’s imagine that you are not silent, and you are listening to each other. Language can make it so difficult to have a conversation with someone. You

speak English, and no other language, and she speaks Italian, and no other language. Unless you say “pizza” over and over, there’s not going to be much to say. But how often it occurs that two people who speak English aren’t speaking the same language. What one person *means* to say isn’t always what is being understood. Think of the word “manager.” Were you thinking of a store manager, or a business manager, or a talent manager, or baseball manager, or a money manager, or “Can I talk to your manager?” manager, or the night-manager at a hotel, or do you think “boss”? So much can be conjured up with many words in our lexicon, and if you and another person do not have the same meanings behind the words, it can be very difficult to converse.

Finally, the inability to forgive keeps conversations from ever happening, and on the chance that it does happen, doesn’t allow for a positive outcome. This is what the High Holy Days are all about, the exact moment when one tries to have that difficult conversation in order to clear the air. How easy it is to give forgiveness with your mouth than it is to let go of it in your heart. Feuds are fueled by the inability to forgive and move on in life. They are fed by something that made you angry years ago. Think about this: I’m sure that there were things that also made you laugh years ago, and those same things don’t make you laugh now. Couldn’t that also be true about things that made you angry at one time in your life, and kept you apart from someone? Have the conversation to find out. You may find that you aren’t compatible with the other person, and that’s all right, too. Find out. Have the conversation.

Silence, not listening, not speaking the same language, and not forgiving. They can exist on their own, or can combine, making a powerful potion of anti-conversation. The antidote of course is to talk, to have a conversation – about something really inside of you. About how *you* feel – not what the other person is doing – and see where it leads you. It’s very easy to get into a discussion over politics, sports, music, movies, and so on, but to have the conversation about what’s true between you, about what’s really on your mind and the mind of the other person, that’s much more difficult, but potentially more satisfying.

So, “What’s Jewish about this conversation?” When Judaism and the Jewish calendar designate a time of the year when one must ask forgiveness from another, it appears as if having the difficult conversation is built in. Asking forgiveness implies that someone’s upset, and the situation is ripe for the avoidance of conversation. Who yearns for those conversations? Who smiles and says to themselves, “I can’t wait to sit down with the person I humiliated last year”? But if it is incumbent upon us to make amends – then it is necessary for us to get down and have that conversation.

Here’s what else is Jewish about this conversation – the conversation itself. The idea that two people who knew each other well would grow apart so much that they lost the ability to converse goes all the way back to the Rabbinic period. There is a story found in Genesis Rabbah, a collection of Midrashim, or

commentaries on the Torah from nearly two thousand years ago. Through this story we continue the conversation about this subject of conversation – tying it to an ancient text that has been discussed for two millennium. This story is about the preeminent rabbi of the tannaitic period, Rabbi Joshua, and one of his disciples, Shimon Ben-Zoma. The two had studied together for close to two decades, seeing each other every day, celebrating every Shabbat together, every holiday, every fast, studying every Torah verse together. Ben-Zoma, as it is told, began to study the mysticism, and this began a rift between him and Rabbi Joshua, who was against such study.

Our story begins with Shimon Ben-Zoma standing entranced. R. Joshua, *walking with a group of disciples, saw him in this state, and inquired concerning his well-being. There was no answer and so he inquired once again, but Ben-Zoma still didn't answer. Upon inquiring a third time, Ben-Zoma answered in a startled fashion. Rabbi Joshua said to him: "What is wrong with you?" Ben-Zoma replied: "It does not come from nothingness, Rabbi." R. Joshua, shocked by such a response and now even more concerned for his well-being, said, "I swear by the heavens and earth, I'm not going to move from here until you inform me as to what is wrong with you." Ben-Zoma, thinking he now understands what R. Joshua wanted, tells him why he had been in a trance, saying to him: "I was just considering the act of creation and noting that there are not but two or three finger-widths between the upper waters and the lower waters. And concerning the Spirit of God, 'blow' is not written in the Torah here but rather 'hover,' like a bird which glides and flaps its wings, but its wings touch the edges of the water one moment and then they do not touch." Upon hearing this description, R. Joshua turned and said to his disciples: "He is gone."*

This story has all of the elements that have been mentioned already. There is silence in the story; it is quite obvious that Ben-Zoma is not listening at all to R. Joshua; neither Ben-Zoma nor R. Joshua are speaking the same language, each misinterprets what the other has said; and finally, R. Joshua comes to his conclusion that Ben-Zoma's mental well-being is gone, and actually in another version found in the Talmud, it says that R. Joshua tells his disciples that Ben-Zoma was "bachutz" or "outside." Whatever the case, R. Joshua gives up on Ben-Zoma, and in a sense, doesn't forgive him for his mystical endeavors, saying in public to his fellow students that he's no longer in the group, and in so doing, takes him out of the group publicly.

So now we have heard about the various factors that go into avoiding difficult conversations. We have heard a story from our tradition that illustrates how this subject has been a reality for almost two thousand years. The only thing there is left to do. . . is to have the conversations. Now if you *are* actually thinking about the conversation you need to have, the final reason for staying away from doing it has inevitably popped up: fear. Hey, I'm afraid, afraid of what might happen, afraid of what my friend or co-worker or acquaintance or wife might say if I bring up a subject that is hard to talk about. I'm afraid of saying the wrong thing, or, for

that matter, the right thing that will sever my relationships forever. And it will be difficult; it will be uncomfortable – but does it have to be? If it comes from my heart with positive intentions; if it comes out of love, if it comes with the knowledge inside of me that I really do want the relationship to move forward, then let it come.

One of two things can happen. I can lose a person from my life forever, or I can strengthen the bond between someone I care about and myself. Because out of these conversations, clarity can be achieved between two people, and perhaps even inside of me. All that is needed is the strength to be honest and open to having the conversation. All that is required is that we listen to each other. All that is important is that we break the silence and be ready to forgive. All we can hope for is love.

May you have the strength to engage in the spectrum of conversations this year: from the ones that are easy and comfortable, to the ones that need to happen, but haven't. May you break the silence, listen, understand, and forgive, and may you be written and sealed in the book of life. Shana Tova.