

A Chanuka Lesson

ENDING A LONG NIGHT OF DARKNESS

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Few sources of pain in this life are more intense than long-term estrangement from those we love. It's a darkness that's particularly painful at the time of year when we celebrate the Festival of Light. And it's especially agonizing when we're alienated from a parent or child. But it's also difficult when we're isolated from siblings or former friends.

We experience the pain in many ways.

- We may find ourselves cut off not only from the particular loved one but others as well, such as other family members, friends, and even congregants, who have taken sides;
- We may perpetually carry bitterness that poisons other aspects of our lives, such as our social relationships, participation in congregation and community, and work;
- We may have bad dreams and nightmares, psychosomatic symptoms, and unconsciously make lifestyle choices that undermine our health; and
- We may lie or dissemble to put a good face on the situation when we're asked about it.

Maybe the worst is that, when thinking of a failed relationship, we tend to preoccupy ourselves with self-pitying or self-righteous thoughts. And if we don't see ourselves as victims, we often imagine ourselves as righteous avengers—scheming on how eventually to get even.

In short, we lose perspective, which serves to sustain our suffering and prevent us from reaching out for reconciliation. In the worst-case scenario, we spiritually sicken and die alone in our old age, estranged from loved ones for reasons we can no longer recall.

It's pathetically reminiscent of a Nipsy Russell comment—as if we're all saying to one another: “I will love you when you're old and gray, but I will not be with you!”

Is there a way out of this self-sustained suffering?

“Yes,” some would say—we can end the suffering by one simple act: *forgiveness*. But forgiveness must in some way be sought, or it isn't likely to be accepted.

Consider the lessons of parasha (weekly Torah reading) Miketz: Could any greater basis for family estrangement than what Joseph experienced? His brothers sold him into slavery!

Much later, in the midst of a famine in Canaan, Joseph's father, Jacob, sends his remaining sons to Egypt, because it was known they could obtain

food there. But, of course, unknown to them was the fact that Joseph had become viceroy to Pharaoh over all Egypt. (Genesis 42:1-2) Rabbi Nahum M. Sarna, one of our modern commentators, teaches that previously, when selling him into slavery, “. . . Joseph had been at the mercy of his brothers; now he is master of the situation, and they come as suppliants.” (Sarna comment on Genesis 42:1-43:34)

According to Rabbi Sarna, when his brothers first came before him, Joseph acted like a stranger, hiding his identity from them, and of course his brothers didn't recognize him. (Genesis 42:8)

Rabbi Sarna then comments on Genesis 42:9, saying that, “Joseph now finds himself caught in a maelstrom of conflicting emotions. . . . The instinctive desire for revenge is tempered by the knowledge that his father and brother back in Canaan may be starving and are dependent on the acquisition of provisions from Egypt. He is desperate for news of their welfare but dares not give himself away by overly anxious inquiry. Above all, he feels he must find out conclusively whether or not his brothers regret their actions and have truly reformed. He decides upon a series of tests.”

In the first test he tells them to send one of their number back to Canaan to bring their brother Benjamin down to Egypt, while the rest of them remain in confinement. (Genesis 42:16)

At one point, in Joseph's presence, not aware that he understands Hebrew, the brothers say to each other: “. . . We are certainly guilty concerning our brother [Joseph], in that we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we would not hear. . . .” (Genesis 42:21)

Or Hachayim (Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, 1696-1744) teaches us that, “[Joseph] . . . then became aware that they were sorry for what they had done to him and considered themselves as having committed a sin against him.”

Joseph turns and weeps, presumably because of their genuine contrition and regret, which certainly would confirm for him the likelihood of reconciliation.

But he isn't done testing them.

He arranges for his brothers to be specially seated for a meal he is hosting, placing them “from the oldest in the order of his seniority,” and the brothers were “astonished.” (Genesis 42:33) The youngest brother [Benjamin] receives a portion that is several times larger than everyone else's. (Genesis 42:34)

This too, comments Rabbi Sarna (on Genesis 42:34), is a test “. . . to see whether this obvious favoritism would arouse their envy or expose any hostile feelings that they might harbor against the one who is now their father’s favorite.”

And there are more tests.

Why does Joseph test his brothers so thoroughly?

Despite the pain and suffering they have caused him, including a lengthy separation from his family and years in prison, Joseph is open to forgiving his brothers—but not perfunctorily.

To restate the point, forgiveness that is not sought is often not accepted when given—people often feel they have nothing for which to be forgiven, notwithstanding their misbehavior. If forgiveness is given without its being sought, it’s not likely to relieve the emotional burden of the one who offers it.

While our common sense tells us we can’t persuade someone to seek our forgiveness, that’s only partly true. By modeling the behavior we hope to encourage, we increase its probability in the other person. So we may encourage another to seek our forgiveness by saying to that person, “I imagine that I offended you, hurt your feelings, or somehow caused you pain or loss—is that true?”

But, of course, when we believe that *we* have been injured or treated unjustly, we usually respond with resentment and hurt, not with forgiveness. Nonetheless, the question of which of these emotions will be expressed *first*, and with what intensity, is answered by the choices *we* make.

Our internal resentment typically is accompanied by outward expressions of anger or even rage, and our private hurts are accompanied by visible expressions of emotional anguish and pain or even tears. Internally these reactions run together—we experience them as cascading thoughts and feelings—but their external expression is a matter for us to choose.

Specifically, we can choose to express our anger or our hurt *first*. If, on the one hand, we want to *increase* the distance between those from whom we are estranged and ourselves, we may accomplish that end by expressing our *anger first*. If, on the other hand, we want to *decrease* the distance between those from whom we are estranged and ourselves, we accomplish that end by expressing our *hurt first*.

The answer to this conundrum, seems simple, then. Certainly we want to lessen the distance. But of course, we’re often resistant to self-revelation that confirms our weakness or error. Self-revelation of weakness or error is a form of confession, which demands courage and integrity that we rarely show to anyone else or ourselves.

Obviously, however, such self-revelation is essential to achieve forgiveness and reconciliation. And we may be encouraged by the thought that those from whom we are estranged won’t be surprised by what we confess to them. With rare exceptions they will be grateful and moved by our risk-taking for the sake of renewing our relationships with them.

As Jacob sent his sons back to Egypt, this time with his beloved Benjamin, he said to them: “and God almighty give you mercy before the man. . . .” (Genesis 43:14)

As we say on Yom Kippur, the gates remain open. We can still choose to turn our lives. The Midrash understands the words *vayehi mikeitz* (וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ), the opening words of this parasha, to indicate an end to darkness. (Genesis Rabbah 89:1) We can still draw together with those we have loved and who have loved us, ending a long night of darkness between us.

A humorous story about the rabbi of Chelm teaches about the consequences of our resistance to reconciling with those we love:

The rabbi hadn’t had a case to judge for quite some time, so he was desperately in need of the fees usually paid for his services.

One day, standing at his front window, he sees two members of his congregation, a middle-aged married couple, coming down the street, obviously engaged in a fierce argument.

He opens the window and calls out to them, “Come in, I’ll help you settle your argument.”

“Argument, who’s arguing?” answers one of them. And the other one helpfully adds, “It was just a friendly discussion.”

“Fine,” says the quick thinking rabbi, “Step right in the house and for a small charge I’ll make out a certificate that says you have nothing against each other.”

The moral of the story is that when we don’t settle our differences, we remain burdened while others benefit from our estrangement.

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