

Yom Kippur Sermon – 5772

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One of the great paradoxes of human life lies in the tension between our powerful drive towards social connection and the reality that each one of us is profoundly alone, trapped by the limitations of our own bodies and minds. We are, at our core, social creatures who instinctively seek out relationships with others, and yet, at the same time, we invariably see and experience life from within our own physical, psychological and cultural boundaries. This paradox sets the stage for the probability of experiencing conflict, to one degree or another, on a fairly regular basis in our lives as our own subjective experience and perspective collides with those of others. One could argue that the entire project of human civilization can be summed as an attempt to overcome this paradox by way of up improving our ability to relate to, communicate with and learn from one another. This very idea is reflected quite beautifully in one of the more famous Talmudic stories about the two great rabbinic rivals, Hillel and Shammai.

As the Talmud tells it, a non-Jewish person, theoretically interested in conversion, decides to approach the two greatest rabbis of the day and asks each of them the question, in what we must imagine is a very chutzpadik tone of voice, “can you teach me everything there is to know about Judaism while standing on one foot.” In response to this question, Shammai grabs, of all things, a builder's T-Square, and begins to strike this man so that he runs away in terror. In the next scene, this same man approaches Hillel and poses the same question. Hillel's very different response consists of presenting his version of what has come to be known as the Golden Rule, “whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.” But then adds the coda: all the rest is commentary, now go and study it.

Most often, this story is framed from a very positive point of view, with an eye toward emphasizing either the importance of study within Judaism, or the great wisdom that Hillel displayed in finding a way to engage the man asking the provocative question, without compromising his own values around the importance of making a commitment to Jewish learning.

While both of these understandings of the story are certainly accurate and legitimate, there is another angle on this story that rarely gets any attention and frankly has a bit more of a spiritual edge to it. What I'm thinking about specifically is that it may seem, at first blush, impressive that Hillel is able to condense the entirety of Jewish tradition down to the single goal of pursuing the achievement of interpersonal harmony, or at least respectful coexistence.

But if we look closely at the implication contained in the story's final line, where Hillel says to the potential convert, “all the rest is commentary, now go and study it,” I think we can discern the subtle suggestion that living our lives according to the Golden Rule is, in fact, not a particularly easy thing to do. If it were, what need would there be for all of that commentary?

And who among us would really argue with this conclusion? Do not most, if not all of us, encounter on a daily basis, situations and people that leave us feeling frustrated, upset, angry or hurt. Sometimes these encounters involve those with whom we have no direct and on-going connection: The person in front of us at the grocery store in the express check out line who decided to that it was ok to go through with 20 items even though the sign says no more than 12. Or the driver in the car behind us who gives us exactly one millisecond to begin accelerating through the intersection before he gives us a loud rebuke on his horn. And at other times, we grapple with these difficult emotions in the context of relationships that mean quite a lot to us, with our colleagues, our friends, our family members. The people who we feel know us best, but by whom we sometimes also feel let down, irritated or misunderstood.

Over the course of human history, there have been many great philosophical and religious thinkers who have devoted a tremendous amount of time and energy to the question of how people can most productively and most happily live together in families, in communities, in the world. If anything this attention to the art and science of human relationships has only intensified over the past couple of centuries.

The great medieval rabbi and philosopher Maimonides included within his definition of Torah even knowledge that originated in the so-called secular world, provided that such knowledge added to one's appreciation for the depth and complexity of the universe. It is in the spirit of that teaching that I would like to share a piece of what strikes me as compelling contemporary Torah focused on the process of improving human relationships.

This piece of torah comes from a group of scholars at the Harvard Negotiation Project. Specifically, from a volume entitled, "Difficult Conversations" that I happened upon, almost by accident, earlier this year. This book has given me much food for thought when it comes to approaching the challenge of managing the normal messiness of human interaction that each one of us encounters in our lives. Even though I initially decided to read it because I was interested in learning more about conflict resolution, I discovered that the perspectives presented in this volume are valuable for use as everyday tools for any kind of relationship, and not only in situations where we feel like the conversation we need to have will be a challenging one. In one sense there is nothing dramatically new in this approach. I am certain that everyone in this room has encountered each one of these ideas at some point in their life. But, it is the way in which these ideas are put together, and shown to interact with one another, that I feel has the potential to be helpful to us.

As the authors see it, there are three common mistakes that most of us make when we encounter some kind of social friction with another person. The first mistake is that we often try to prove that we are in the right and the other person is in the wrong. This is a bad idea for two reasons. Pragmatically, trying to convince someone they are wrong makes it much less likely that a resolution will be reached due to the instinctive defensiveness that gets triggered in most people by that approach.

And philosophically, by framing a conflict as being about right and wrong, we are mistakenly claiming that the conflict is over facts or data, when in reality the vast majority of conflicts are grounded in differences of interpretation, judgment and values which are sometimes dressed up as facts. Moreover, each person's interpretation is in turn grounded in their own knowledge, experience and beliefs. The gulf between these two stances towards the sources of conflict, is immense. If we believe that the truth is at stake, there is really no room for forward movement. But if we come to understand that the need to be right is a misplaced objective, we may be able to free ourselves up to explore the other person's story, which will give us insight into how it is that they see a situation so very differently from the way we do.

The second mistake that we frequently make in our response to what we see as another person's unbecoming conduct, is that we assume that we understand the intention behind the other person's behavior. Or, in situations where we really aren't sure about someone's intentions, we tend to default to believing that their intentions were negative. This is also unhelpful because, no matter how intuitive we believe ourselves to be, our assessment of another's intentions will, more often than not, turn out to be more reflective of our own inner state than it is of the other person's. Not only that, but an intention can be very difficult to tease out. Maybe the person has mixed intentions. Maybe the person's intentions are actually positive towards us, but their translation into action ends up causing pain, unintentionally. It makes much more sense to approach the question of intentions through conversation with the person from a stance of inquiry rather than an assumption of certainty.

The last of the three major errors that human beings make in their instinctive attempts to manage the emergence of tension with another person is the move to assign blame. Going down this path, similar to proving that one is in the right, tends to reify a disagreement rather than help it move towards resolution. This is because, as the authors of *Difficult Conversations* put it, "nobody wants to be blamed, especially unfairly, so our energy goes into defending ourselves at all costs." Yet an even more detrimental outcome of this approach is that it completely shuts down the learning process. We are unlikely to gain a deeper understanding of why and how a situation arose when we seek to lay the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of only one participant.

Again not only because this will minimize cooperation on the part of the other person, but also because in actuality, it is much more likely that there are multiple factors and/or people contributing to the creation of the situation in the first place. So, if we can frame the question of responsibility as one which is shared, and then approach the problem with an authentic desire to figure out how each person has contributed to its existence, we are in a much better position to actually move in the direction of a resolution and prevent similar issues from arising in the future.

What ties together each of these recommendations is the commitment to seeing the emergence of negativity between you and another person as a learning opportunity for both of you rather than as an assault that you must respond to with verbal ammunition and/or internal disparagement toward the other person.

The importance of this approach is clearly displayed in the following light-hearted, but revealing poem, describing a woman who responds to a negative situation she encounters without the benefit of the perspective that we have been discussing this morning, and whose learning opportunity comes too late for her to act on it in any way. Perhaps we will recognize a bit of ourselves in this woman's thinking and behavior and gain a bit more insight into where we each tend to get pulled off track in our own conflictual situations.

### The Cookie Thief.

A woman was waiting at the airport one night,  
With several long hours before her flight.  
She hunted for a book in the airport shop,  
Bought a bag of cookies and found a place to drop.

She was engrossed in her book, but happened to see,  
That the man beside her, as bold as could be,  
Grabbed a cookie or two from the bag between,  
Which she tried to ignore to avoid a scene

She read, munched cookies, and watched the clock,  
As the gutsy "cookie thief" diminished her stock  
She was getting more irritated as the minutes ticked by,  
Thinking, "If I wasn't so nice, I'd blacken his eye!"

With each cookie she took, he took one too.  
When only one was left, she wondered what he'd do.  
with a smile on his face and a nervous laugh,  
He took the last cookie and broke it in half.

He offered her half, and he took the other.  
She snatched it from him and thought, "Oh brother,  
This guy has some nerve, and he's also so rude,  
Why, he didn't even show any gratitude!"

She had never known when she had been so galled,  
And sighed with relief when her flight was called.  
She gathered her belongings and headed for the gate,  
Refusing to look at the "thieving ingrate".

She boarded the plane and sank in her seat,  
Then sought her book, which was almost complete.  
As she reached in her baggage, she gasped with surprise.  
There was her bag of cookies in front of her eyes!

If mine are here, she moaned with despair.  
Then the others were his and he tried to share!  
Too late to apologize, she realized with grief,  
That she was the rude one, the ingrate, the thief!!!!

Like the protagonist in this poem, all of us have had experiences in our lives when we were temporarily blinded by our own assumptions about a situation only to discover a bit later that we were completely off-base. As we reflect on our own lives over the course of the rest of this day, and set our intentions for the coming year, may we open ourselves to the wisdom of this modern commentary on Rabbi Hillel's core teaching, and may we all see ourselves and others with greater clarity and compassion. To the extent that each one of us is willing to work on shifting our approach to dealing with the people and the situations that stir us up in a negative way, we can justifiably claim that we have truly embraced the foundational mitzvah of practicing the Golden Rule, and embraced, in addition, the awareness, that to actually live our lives consistently in this fashion, we must continuously push ourselves to heed the words of Hillel and make the effort to go and study.

Shabbat Shalom, Shanah tovah and Gmar Hatimah tovah!  
May we all be sealed for a good and a sweet year!