

Rabbi Bloom's Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon September 30, 2019

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." A familiar -- albeit misogynistic -- verse from a late 17th century play, often mistakenly attributed to Shakespeare. I would imagine that Ishmael's mother Hagar felt that same kind of fury towards her husband Abraham after he drove her and their son Ishmael into the desert. Thanks to this morning's Torah portion (Genesis 21), we can easily imagine what we might feel like if someone treated us the way Abraham treated Hagar: we would feel deep resentment, and probably feel a desire for revenge. Nor are such emotions reserved to women like Hagar. No, bearing a grudge is a natural part of human emotions.

Sarah, we read, had grown envious of her handmaiden who was able to give Abraham a son while she herself was infertile. Despite the fact that Sarah gave Hagar permission to have carnal relations with her husband, she reversed herself completely after the miraculous birth of Isaac. That jealousy and the fear that Ishmael might win the heart of his father over her son Isaac drove Sarah over the line.

Men, of course, are just as susceptible as women to the power of unbridled vengeance. Just remember the grudge that Joseph's brothers bore against their younger brother, the brash and clearly favorite son of Jacob. We all know too well the results of that unchecked anger when they kidnapped Joseph and cast him into a pit for the Arab caravans to pick him up and take him into servitude in Egypt.

What does Judaism say about bearing a grudge and what to do about it, especially when we are infected with that kind of burning fury? The second question is not a mental health issue, even though bearing a grudge can have a direct impact upon our mental health. It is, instead, a moral health question. Where does holding a grudge get us at the end of the day? Sometimes people say to me, "Payback is sweet rabbi!" Others have said to me "Justice," particularly in conflict situations that are family based or in the social circles we all live inside our community.

Finally, how do we decide, given the high holy days, what grudges we currently may bear that deserve our reconsideration? In other words, is there a possibility of healing or reconciliation and if not is walking away a legitimate response to grudge bearing?

The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 18a) certainly has something to say about this problem. One particular passage I have in mind is a discussion of the *ma'avir al midotav*, which literally means a person who does not count the attributes of transgressions committed against him or her. By doing that, the rabbis believed, the Heavenly Tribunal chooses to remove all their sins. Moreover, the rabbis insist God pardons one who overlooks transgressions committed against the individual. Judaism teaches us, as we might expect, that we should be quick to forgive those that have slighted us and not to hold grudges. The phrase *ma'avir al midotav* literally means the insulted party does not measure out how much retaliation is required against someone who sins against them. In a sense, it is similar to the English idiom of

getting even or evening the score. Thus, Jewish sources and values teach us to restrain ourselves from taking action or seeking vengeance.

Whether we cite from the Talmud or the Torah, it is clear the force of the tradition is 'don't go there! Stay away from the temptation to exact revenge and hold onto the bitterness of anger. Walk away! Don't get sucked in!'

Intellectually we know that holding grudges is not a healthy or good thing to do, but the problem is aggravated by the intensity of the emotions involved. We are supposed to strive for the better side of ourselves. I know people who maintain that bearing a grudge is a mental health issue. They have a point because the propensity of holding grudges often stems from experiences in childhood. They typically lead to belligerent behavior in adulthood. All true. But there also comes a point where a rational adult faces a moral decision which says; "I choose to take action on my anger. I choose to extract a pound of flesh. I am willing to hurt others to get my comeuppance."

Of course, you and I both know folks who have been burned by horrible behavior from others, and yet who have the strength to transcend their anger. Some can laugh it off. Others are able to ignore their resentments against the offender and walk away. Or they express sympathy for the pathetic behavior of the individual. They go on with their lives.

Then there are those who are so narcissistic and self-absorbed that they tout their victimization and exploit it as a weapon to anyone in earshot. They lather up their fantasy of emotions to exact revenge. Anyone else, including even institutions, becomes collateral damage to their incessant and relentless grudge bearing rantings. This type of behavior is beyond mental health dysfunction. This is an example of moral blindness and a residue of spiritual bankruptcy, which in my estimation is a poison, not only to the persons involved in a dispute but also sometimes to a larger community such as non-profits like synagogues or businesses too. Judaism may set a high and often times unrealistic standard. But what I value is the emphasis on the strength of a human to resist the temptation to descend into the moral abyss.

The third point. How to cope? Joseph is the man who becomes the archetype of a *ma'avir midotav*, one who transcends the transgressions committed against him. We know that his brothers are deathly afraid of him after Jacob dies. In chapter fifty of Genesis they say they are afraid that their brother who surely held a grudge will take his vengeance against them. "Surely he will pay us back for all the evil which we did to him." They ask him for forgiveness. And instead of imprisoning them, or worse, what does Joseph do? He proclaims, "Fear not; for am I in the place of God?" "But as for you, you thought evil against me; but God meant it for good. To bring to pass, as it is this day, to save people who are alive. Do not fear; I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spoke kindly to them" (Gen 50:17-21).

Is this not a perfect example of how we can transcend our anger? He had every right to exact retribution against them. Yet, his story stands out in the literature of the Torah for all generations to teach us what it means to take the moral high ground.

So often the high holy days focus on how to say we are sorry and how to ask for forgiveness. Yet, in this story we learn about how to forgive. Is rising above the hurt and the pain perpetrated against us and the anger which comes with it not godlike behavior too?

This is why the rabbis chose the passage from Leviticus for our afternoon reading for Yom Kippur. In chapter 19 we read, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."

We all react differently to situations of harboring old wounds in our lives. Letting go and cutting loose of our anger -- as opposed to being enslaved to such anger -- turns out in the long run to be the best moral and probably the best mental health strategy. We know holding a grudge, even after an act of vengeance has taken place, typically never leaves us in peace.

Think of one grudge we have not let go of after all these years or one we once held. To take the moral high ground requires a leap of faith- to be a Joseph. The Torah does not tell us about how Hagar might have felt about Abraham nor how Ismael may have felt either. If Cain held a grudge against his brother Abel, did murdering him solve his problem? No. He wandered the earth with the mark of Cain on his forehead and with his act of murder on his conscience all his life. Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, so the latter's grudge led him to almost commit genocide against the Jewish people, but, where did it get him? The hangman's noose at the end of the Purim story.

The rabbis conclude with a story that a Rabbi Eliezer prayed for rain when a drought fell upon the Jewish people in Judea. He prayed and God did not answer his prayers for rain. Then his colleague Rabbi Akiva came forward and offered his prayers for rain and God answered him by causing rain to soak the ground. The rabbis all gossiped by saying that Rabbi Akiva was a better rabbi than Eliezer because his prayers were answered. Suddenly a divine voice called out and reproached those rabbis, "God chose Rabbi Akiva not because he was more powerful or a better scholar. Rather God chose him because he was a *ma'avir midotav*, a man who forgave people who sinned against him and never held a grudge against his fellow colleagues." (Taanit)

I am not suggesting that we forget the hurt when people do bad things to us. Not at all. Nor am I suggesting that we deny the anger or the desire to get vengeance. It is how we cope with those emotions that will make the difference between being Joseph and being Haman. The choice is up to us.