

Be Brave and Connect  
Yom Kippur Morning 5776  
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Temple Beth El, Charlotte, North Carolina  
Rabbi Jonathan Freirich

A Yom Kippur story:

Rabbi Yishmael said:  
Once I entered into the Holy of Holies  
To offer incense in the Inner Innermost sanctum  
And I saw God the Most High  
Sitting on a high and lofty throne of compassion.  
God said to me: Yishmael, my son, bless me.  
I said to God: Sovereign of the Universe  
May it be Your will that Your mercy conquer Your anger,  
That Your mercy overcome Your sterner attributes,  
That You behave toward Your children with the attribute of mercy,  
And that for their sake, You go beyond the boundary of judgment.<sup>1</sup>

And you think we are nervous about giving blessings, meeting new people, and going to new places.

We will get back to Rabbi Yishmael and his amazing encounter on Yom Kippur soon. First, let's talk about personal connections.

We are afraid to connect. I mean really connect. Sit down with one another and talk and listen. Share our hopes and dreams, fears and worries, in a real way, show up unannounced to help in a time of need. We are desperate to get past our normal discussion points - work, the news, kids and grandkids, the Panthers - and we are ill-equipped.

Go back to the last time you spoke about what you really felt. Looking in there is frightening. In order to get through a normal week we place protections around our hearts, minds, and souls. These barriers protect our own awarenesses. Moving through the world requires holding a bit of ourselves at bay.

And then there are the barriers that we place around what we say. We want to be accepted and acceptable, liked and likable, approached and approachable.

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud, B'rachot 7a - translation adapted from Ruth Calderon, *A Bride for One Night*

That's a lot of stuff getting between who we are and who we talk to. The Jewish scholar Yochanan Muffs teaches that all conversations require the courage to reveal oneself, he wrote: "Any meeting of personalities requires great bravery. One who attempts to communicate with another endangers one's own life, for to do this, we must reveal what is in our own hearts. Such an act is potentially dangerous because we do not know ahead of time if we will find a receptive ear. There is always the possibility that the ear of the listener will be impervious. Any real communication, then, is a dangerous leap."<sup>2</sup>

Reaching out to one another is risky. It always has been.

Abraham is our radical model of hospitality because reaching out to help people was seen as accepting unreasonable dangers even three or four thousand years ago.

And hospitality is only the beginning. When was the last time any of us took the time to truthfully and seriously answer the question "How are you?" I really work on connecting authentically to each and every one of you, and to everyone else I may meet as both rabbi and human, and still life gets away from us. It takes a lot of time, and a willingness to see into ourselves, bare parts of our souls, and then to share an assessment of how we really are at any time.

Let's go back to Rabbi Yishmael, the High Priest, when he went into the Holy of Holies - the center of the ancient Temple - on this day, on Yom Kippur, in order to make the annual offering. While the Talmud doesn't share with us Yishmael's thoughts, there is a story that tells us about this moment. It says that the High Priest would always enter the Holy of Holies with a rope tied around his ankle. He was the only one who could enter, and so if something happened to him, the rest of the priests would need to be able to pull him out without going in after him.

Yishmael would normally enter an empty Holy of Holies - the Ark of the Covenant had disappeared long before his time. This time when he entered the vacant room, Yishmael found someone there before him. Sitting on a high and exalted throne was the presence of God. Without any pause or introduction God said: "Yishmael, My son, bless me!"

What would, or could, we say at this point? This is such an amazing expression of intimacy and closeness. God addressed Yishmael as "My son", with the closest of familiarity and then asked for a blessing. Offering blessings for

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<sup>2</sup> Yochanan Muffs, *The Personhood of God: Biblical Theology, Human Faith and the Divine Image*, page 16

people is a big deal - we do so with care and attention, and hopefully some preparation. We only ask people who know us or respect us to offer blessings. Even then it doesn't always go well - just think about wedding toasts.

Still, this is God, and God knows Yishmael. And Yishmael is a great teacher and rabbi, and the High Priest. Even for Yishmael God doesn't normally show up in person, and the rabbi must have been surprised. Still, if anyone could come up with the right response to God's request for a blessing, it would be Yishmael.

Let's hear his response again:

Sovereign of the Universe

May it be Your will that Your mercy conquer Your anger,

That Your mercy overcome Your sterner attributes,

That You behave toward Your children with the attribute of mercy,

And that for their sake, You go beyond the boundary of judgment.

Now this was the High Priest in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur! He kept it together, offered God praise and made sure to focus God's attention on the time of year and people's needs, needs that God also cares about. And Yishmael took the lead from God's directness and closeness and cut right through to the fact that the best blessing that a person can offer God is that God do well by God's own promises to the people Israel.

The Talmud continued with another teaching:

God nodded to me.

God accepted that Yishmael had done a good job. I can only imagine the relief that Yishmael felt then.

The Talmud isn't finished though, as it concludes with the moral of the story:

What does this come to teach us?

It teaches us never to underestimate the blessing offered by an ordinary person.

The rabbis of the Talmud took this story as an opportunity to remind us that everyone has something to offer. If even God seeks the blessing of a person and appreciates it, how much more so must all of us reach out to everyone, ask for their blessing, and then acknowledge it with thanks?

Admittedly, this is not easy.

God and Yishmael knew each other well. In order to engage in this kind of conversation with someone with whom we are much less familiar, we have to

accept a degree of vulnerability. The High Priest was also vulnerable - the Holy of Holies, a place of sacred encounter even without the presence of God, required him to enter with a safety rope around his ankle.

So of course we are frightened of connections. Self-revelation has always been dangerous. People may find out about our deepest selves, and find out who we really are. They may not like what is beneath the layers we use to protect our inner cores from the outside world. Perhaps even worse, they may see into our hearts and souls and see that we may not be worth the time or effort. Who would risk that?

Jude, our eight-year old, and I were discussing the challenges of making new friends, and we came up with something that might better motivate us to take that risk to reach out to another in a real way. We started with the situation of needing a new friend. Then we looked at the options: be brave and see if that person wants to be a friend, or avoid the issue and not find out. The possible results are pretty simple - in the first situation, being brave, the worst case scenario is that we still don't have a new friend. In the avoiding-asking scenario, we definitely don't have a new friend. So what's the risk here?

No matter how reasonable it seems to take that risk to connect, we still shy away from it.

We flee from the self-imposed risk. This is a perceived danger. The real risk is going through life without the new friend. We need the help getting a push to go into that innermost place and connect.

Martin Buber presents an entire philosophy on this topic of connecting profoundly, that this is in fact a center of the Jewish concept of God and holiness.

Buber writes that the way we approach the world is not only about what we think about others, but also what we think about ourselves. Our attitude towards the self is the beginning. When we think about ourselves, in order to understand the self fully, we must admit that we are connected to something deep and valuable within us, something of great untapped potential. We must see myself as filled with mysteries that we can still develop. When we do this, when we accept worthy conversations of discovery always remain within us, then we can turn to the world as a source of conversations of value too. The key to connecting to other people is not just seeing everyone as a fellow traveler, but also being open to the idea that every person, in fact every aspect of the universe, bears mystery worth learning about, because they are the only way to discover another part of our journey.

Here is a story that may explain this more clearly.

Once there was a very old monastery filled with old, sad monks, and old, dusty, buildings. Everything was stale and still, even the monks dragged themselves into all of their labors and prayers. They had no enthusiasm for anything. The abbot who led this monastery had tried doggedly to revitalize the place and the brothers who lived there. He enlisted local churches to create partnerships for charitable works, and local businesses to try to engage the monks in entrepreneurial pursuits. He spoke to the bishop and the archbishop who had both come and given inspirational sermons and retreats. Nothing seemed to work. At long last the abbot, desperate, turned to his old friend the local rabbi and asked for assistance, even though the rabbi really knew nothing about monks or the monastic life.

The rabbi thought about the predicament of the monastery for a few weeks before coming back to his friend the abbot. When he returned he asked the abbot for a very private meeting, and in the back of a closed office said to him, "Abbot, I asked around among Jewish and mystical scholars for solutions to your problem. They had no suggestions. I am so sorry. Still, one sage that I know told me an unbelievable piece of news, absolutely confidentially. The herald of the messiah, Elijah the prophet, is here in this monastery, hidden, in secret. Please don't tell a soul, because if word gets out then redemption may even be more delayed."

Well, the abbot was surprised to say the least. Still, he tried to honor the rabbi's request about keeping the news a secret. Of course, he couldn't. Soon everyone in the monastery knew that one of them was a hidden prophet. Within weeks the place came back to life. Everyone treated one another with awe and respect, with enthusiasm and courtesy - anyone could be the prophet so everyone was potentially a source of great teaching, wisdom, and holiness. The monastery began to attract new monks and was saved from a slow and fatal decay.

So what is Buber teaching us, and how does it connect to this story? When we treat everyone around us as the bearer of some as of yet undiscovered secret of meaning, then we change the world itself.

How we connect starts within us.

Many of you already know about Rabbi Judy and I participating in the NAACP's Journey for Justice this summer - each of us helping carry the Torah for a day on this epic walk from Selma, Alabama to Washington DC. Organized around many of the justice issues facing our country this year, each of the

marchers and advocates had their own personal take on the purpose of the march.

One of the most inspiring individuals on the Journey was an African American man who had legally changed his name to Middle Passage, in reference to the route by which Africans were transported to the New World as slaves, and as his statement that we have still not coped with slavery in this country. Middle Passage started walking at the beginning, in Selma, and led the march every day carrying the American flag in front of the line of marchers. After walking 922 miles of this thousand mile journey, MP, as many called him, collapsed of a heart attack, and never got up again.

On the August day after we walked, sweaty and tired, returning to the barracks where all the men were staying that evening, I was cleaning up quickly before getting into the car and driving back to Charlotte. Middle Passage, may his memory always be for a blessing, and the rest of the regular marchers, were deep in a discussion about the history of Civil Rights. I paused and found myself listening. My presence didn't interrupt their argument, or lower their somewhat raised and intense voices. MP insisted that any attempt to shorten the struggle for Civil Rights to a period defined by history books diminished the struggle. He said that the struggle for Civil Rights began with the first enslavement of a person, and continued to this day. He wouldn't budge from his position no matter how many important historians his fellow marchers quoted.

I listened, and now carry this tiny piece of Middle Passage's life and message with me. MP made himself a living representative of a struggle for justice. I aim to do this in a small way, to be an ambassador for connecting in a Jewish way, for noticing the specialness and holiness that dwells everywhere and in everyone. It is my hope that these words will give you the opening to reach out to me, and more importantly, to each another.

The impact that MP made on me was sacred. I allowed myself to be open to the holiness all around us. It turns out that we are always in the Holy of Holies. Everyone around us is asking for a blessing, including our own souls, and every day can be Yom Kippur.

We must let down our guard, we must let people in, even when they are not asking for it. It is only then that we can find the holiness within us, and connect to the holiness that is everywhere, and in everyone, all around us.