

Sermon for Parashat Metzora 5765

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This is a story I have told a hundred times. It is clearly one of the experiences of my ministry that has affected me the most. About a year into my rabbinate, I was confronted with a congregant tragedy that would forever shape the way I carry myself as a rabbi. It was a circumstance we never talked about in any practical rabbinics class or any of my pastoral counseling courses. I was still new to the entire rabbi thing, and the senior rabbi was away. A woman called the synagogue needing to speak with the rabbi, so I was the only one to take the call. Turns out she was 35 years old and she had a baby who was just about two. Her husband had just suddenly and seemingly incomprehensibly passed away, and she needed to speak with me. She said she was on the way over.

I quickly picked up the phone and called my dad, who as many of you know is a rabbi, and asked him what was I supposed to say, what was I supposed to do with this broken, frantic woman when she arrived. And my father told me. First say nothing. Let her talk. When you feel you want to jump in and offer advice, sit quietly and say nothing. Nod in understanding and say nothing. Then after a while, and you will know when the time is right, ask her the following question. “Had you known when you got married that this is how it would end, would you have married him?”

So I said, “Come on – how could I possibly ask that question at such a fragile, vulnerable time?”

He responded, “Because it the question she wants to answer.”

The woman arrived, and she had a glassy look in her eyes. She seemed distant and far away. We talked about the circumstances surrounding his passing. He had told her to go out to the car and to take the baby and that he would meet them there in a minute – he just wanted to change his pants before they went to the store. So she went out to the car and waited. After a while, when he didn't come out, she went back to find him. He had apparently had a massive heart attack and died. He had no history of heart disease that they knew about. We then talked about the funeral and the next few days. All the while she seemed almost clinical in her demeanor, and I felt of little use to her. So I asked her about the type of person her husband was and how they met. I asked all of the intake questions that we are taught in rabbinical school to ask in preparation for a funeral. But still the conversation was sterile. She talked and talked about how they dated and their life together. She talked and talked and talked and I listened. Then came the quiet. I was ready to say what I often say towards the end of the conversation, "Is there anything I can do for you, any questions I can answer?" But then without knowing why, I asked my father's question. "Had you known when you got married that this is how it would end, would you have married him?"

Almost immediately her entire posture and disposition changed, and she said, "Absolutely," and she cried. She wept for what felt like an eternity to me. Her sobs emanated from somewhere deep within her. She knew she was somewhere safe and that she could let go at least while she sat with me in my office with her unknowing baby on her lap. And then the mourning began, and the healing started.

I believe myself to be an empathetic, caring person, but I did not know how to employ empathy. I consider myself a gentle, thoughtful soul but I did not have the tools to seize the moment. It was something I needed guidance on. This was a circumstance in which I needed the right words. I knew the timing and the

intonation but I needed the words. My father gave them to me and I immediately internalized them. I have said them a hundred times since then.

But I cannot stress enough that it is something I had to learn. The right words are only on the tip of your tongue at the right time when the right words are implanted in your heart. Knowing what to say comes from knowing the right vocabulary. And that is something that is learned. We all learn things from those around us. The story I have shared is about my father as my teacher and that is the same message we have in this morning's Torah reading.

After a long discussion in excruciating detail about various types of skin abnormalities and their diagnosis; and after an even more specific discussion of what has commonly been referred to as leprosy, and that specific ailment's implication for acceptance in society or quarantine, and the role the *kohen*, the priest, must play in the cure and reintegration of the victim of such disease, the Torah makes an incredible statement. "This is the law for all manner of leprosy... *l'horot b'yom ha'tamei u-v'yom hatahor* – to determine when they are impure and when they are pure." (Leviticus 14:54-57) But the word *l'horot* is probably better translated as "to teach," as it was translated in the old JPS translation. *L'horot b'yom ha'tamei u-v'yom hatahor*, to **teach** when they are impure and when they are pure. The *kohen* must teach his sons how to minister to the people. That translation relies on a brief statement in Midrash Vayikra Rabbah. *Rabi amar...ba l'horot m'lamed sheh-aino roeh et hanegaim ad sheh-yoranu rabo*, the word *l'horot* is used purposefully to explain that a person ought not diagnose or treat the ailment until he is instructed in that matter by his teacher. The delicate work of the *kohen* caring for those with illness is incredibly holy and must be executed with the utmost of sensitivity. And it is something that is learned.

The Torah Temimah then takes this message one step further remarking *efshar ha-kavanah sheh- yihei ha-kohen m'kabel torato mepi rav, v'lo yismoch al limudo l'atzmo*, it is possible this verse intended to instruct, to remind the *kohen* that he ought not rely too much on his own skills, but that he should consult his teacher. We must never be so sure of ourselves that we forget to watch the true masters at work.

We select certain people to care for us because of the type of person they are but also because of the expertise they bring. We want doctors with great bedside manner, but we also want a great diagnostician. Both are critical for survival and for quality of life, and both can and must be learned. And the Torah Temimah says to pick a person who is unafraid to ask for a consult. The rabbis tell us the high priest is responsible for this task because acceptance and care from such a prestigious person can have a greater impact because he serves as a role model for others. The *kohen gadol* includes care for the people in his duties to show we must care for each other as well. We must be a *mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh* we must be a kingdom of priest and holy nation.

And the *kohen* must instruct his children on how to care for their people. It is not taken for granted that a child hanging around his father's shop will learn his father's craft. So the Torah says teach them, tell them what to do and how to do it. If we are to raise the level of our community, then we must all become students and teachers of the craft of care. Our friends and colleagues, our children and our parents are our teachers, and we must become teachers and we must all remain students. So the next time you visit a shiva house or a hospital room, watch what is going on. Watch the mourner and watch the person who is ill, and see how they are responding to those around them. Are they being comforted or are they more agitated? Then make a mental note. Ask the person you are visiting, what have people said or done that has been

helpful, and then listen. We must become better students of human interaction so we can become builders of human connection.

About five years ago my wife's aunt's father was dying. He had had a long and productive life, and his daughter loved him very much. He had moved into her house to live out his days. At the very end of his life he began to struggle and become agitated and then he became quiet. His passing seemed imminent. My father had called my wife's aunt and expressed his concern for her and her father, and he said to her, "may God be gentle with your father." At that, she cried and was comforted. In the craziness and then chaotic calm of the last hours of a person's life the words "may God be gentle with your father," slipped in. My wife's aunt told me the story in order to teach me a phrase that she found supremely soothing. I have used that phrase. It has allowed me to give voice to the empathy I feel for people who need a connection so desperately.

We must do this for one another. If we are to help one another remain in the land of the living even when we lose someone dear to us, then we must learn what to say and when to be quiet. We must learn this. The instinct must be there, but we must learn the words. We must learn how to enter a hospital room and a shiva house. We are often afraid and know not what to do and what to say. *Lo ha-bayshan lomed*, the one who is embarrassed will never learn. So I implore you: come and learn, come and ask, come and be connected, and learn how to strengthen those already existing bonds. I have taught you two phrases; feel free to use them – but only if you mean it. Say them in the name of my father, and you will feel a little more comfortable. Say them because your rabbi told you to, and you too can bring healing and consolation.