

Ki Tissa 5782
No Time for Resentment
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We once had a goat—one that nobody understood why he did the things he did, and he resented us all for it, so much so that he would head butt and attack anyone who tried to get close. One day, I was looking out the window with my morning coffee when I saw that a passing stranger was sitting atop the old rusted '55 Chevy pickup that sat in the pasture, petting our resentful goat. I watched, amazed, as this stranger reached a closeness with the goat that I myself would never know. "Wow," I whispered to myself, "that man really gets my goat!"

How nice for my resentful goat to find a happier relationship with a complete stranger. Living with resentment is far less simple for the characters in today's parashah, and for us, too, as we consider how resentments seeded in today's *parashah* fester.

Upon seeing the Nation of Israel worshipping the Golden Calf, God tells Moshe, "I see that this is a stiffnecked people" and threatens to annihilate them. Moshe defends them immediately, and God renounces the plan to destroy them. I wish that were the end of the story. Instead, a series of confounding events take place.

Moshe orders the Levi'im to "put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin...Some 3,000 of the people" die by their sword.

Moshe then goes up to God, to ask forgiveness on behalf of the people, again. It's not at all clear why Moshe does this, because God renounced their punishment *before* 3,000 people were killed, but as it turns out, Moshe correctly intuits that God is still angry. God tells Moshe, "Here's what's going to happen now. You are going to lead the people, as we had planned. My angel will go before you—not My Presence any more, but a proxy. I will hold off on further punishment for now, but at some future time, I will make an accounting and hold the people responsible for what they did."

Before the people have a chance to digest that fearsome warning, God sends a plague upon them. God's resentment seems so intense that it leaks.

God tells the repentant nation decked out in mourning garb at the foot of the mountain, "If I were to go in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Leave off your finery, and I will consider what to do to you," We then read: "So the Israelites remained stripped of their finery, from Mount Chorev on."

I find this terribly sad.

Neither Moshe nor God lets go of their resentment of the nation. At the end of the Torah, Moshe's final words to the nation refer back to the fateful event of the Golden Calf—even though the people Moshe addresses at that time are the children of those who committed the sin.

Resentment will come to lurk between God and Moshe, too. God's last words to him point back to a regrettable incident in at the waters of Merivah in the Tzin Wilderness, when the people complain of thirst, and Moshe derides them, calling them “you rebels!” and angrily hits the rock God from which God has told him to ask for water. Moshe's long-held resentment of the people boils over in that moment, setting off a chain reaction that portends his death without leading his people into the Promised Land.

This compendium of resentments looms from our *parashah* throughout the remaining three Books of the Torah, decisively altering the tenor of relationships between the main characters, all the way to the end.

All of that is so regrettable. I will not attempt to redeem it, although the Torah does try. In Leviticus at the very center of the Torah, we are instructed:

לֹא־תִקֹּם וְלֹא־תִטַּר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאֶהְבַּת לרַעֲךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

“Do not take vengeance, and do not bear hatred nor bear a grudge against any of the Children of your People; but love your fellow as yourself: I am the Eternal.:

(Leviticus 19:18).

I cannot explain how our biblical ancestors rationalize the commandment not to hold a grudge, when God and Moshe hold such a large one against them, but I can tell you that from the time of the Prophets to now, our tradition has done a much better job of taking this verse seriously and making the case against harboring resentment.

I spent an entire semester at JTS studying תרעומת, resentment with Rabbi Eliezer Diamond. A whole section of Talmud deals with this topic. We studied texts like this one: If someone hired artisans and they misled the employer, or the employer misled them, they have nothing but resentment against each other. That is to say, there is no legal claim, although the matter likely will cause resentment, which could and should have been avoided. In what case are these things said? When the workers did not go to work. But if ass drivers went and did not find produce to carry, or if workers went and found the field waterlogged, the employer gives them their wages in full (Bava Metzia

76a-b). These situations and others are unpacked at length so that we will understand the importance of preventing resentment when possible.

We are cautioned against a person spending even one night in a resentful state. Rabbi Nehunya taught: “Nor did I ever allow the resentment caused by my fellow’s curse upon me to go up with me upon my bed.” Of the sage Mar Zutra, it is related: “When he would go to bed at night, he would first say: ‘I forgive anyone who has vexed me’” (Megillah 28a). It is significant that the Talmud takes the time to share the bedtime reflections of these great sages expelling possible sources of resentment from their psyches prior to sleep.

Matzah demonstrates a different lesson about resentment. When we say, in *Ha Lachmah Anya*, “this is the bread of oppression our fathers ate in the land of Egypt; let all who are hungry come in and eat,” we are saying that we do not carry our resentment forward. What transforms the bread of oppression into the bread of freedom is our willingness to reject resentment and the greed it might have bred, in favor of our willingness to share our bread with anyone who might be hungry.

Those various practices emerge because the hard truth is that it is very difficult not to harbor resentment, and the resentments we harbor inject a steady drip of alienation into the veins of our most important relationships.

The God of the Hebrew Bible takes a long view with regard to managing a relationship with the People of Israel. Indeed the Prophets, who strive to redeem the Israelite nation from their legacy of resentment, issue statements on God’s behalf like this one from Jeremiah: “‘Turn back, O Rebel Israel. I will not look on you in anger, for I am compassionate,’ declares the LORD; I do not bear a grudge for all time.” **God may have forever to work things out with people, but we do not have that luxury. We do not have time for resentment.**

Researchers in the field of Social Epidemiology assert that the basis of health and longevity is the quality of people’s closest relationships with friends and family. Leonard Syme, at UC-Berkeley, has produced compelling data showing how unhealthy relationships compromise our immune systems. When we fail to process and create healing around past regrettable incidents, our bodies hover at the edge of our fight-flight response, even though it looks like we have moved on. Attending to our significant relationships and doing the work of understanding and supporting one another actually can extend our lives. Syme’s data are astounding: he finds that people who enjoy thriving relationships with the key people in their lives live a mean of 17 years longer, are less susceptible to infections and bodily irritations, and bounce back faster when they do get sick.

I have learned from experience that the healthiest path forward from a ruptured relationship or regrettable event is backward—back to the person with whom I experienced the regrettable encounter and to the work of healing hurts and sharing understanding. It's not easy, and truth be told, I don't like it much—but I love how it feels when it works, and my relationships are always better for it. Even with awareness gained from experience, I know how easy it can be to slip into the breeding ground of resentment.

When we make a practice of turning *toward* people rather than turning away, we nurture the trust we need to go the distance in our relationships. Giving voice to our complaints shows our investment in them. If we cherish what we love about the people in our lives, we're going to talk to them about what's bothering us. Heading off resentment is an act of fidelity and commitment and a constant responsibility that requires sustained effort over time, in a spirit of care that honors what we cherish in the people to whom we are close.

Regrettable events are bound to happen in most relationships, especially in the important, long-term ones. The work of repair, rather than fertilizing the ground with the seeds of resentment, is what saves them.

Sometimes we feel resentment not toward an individual, but toward an organization or a group of leaders of an organization that is important to us. I have been in situations like that and those experiences sometimes have been painful and disillusioning. I have found there, too, that if I valued the organization as part of my life, it was usually worth the work of repair.

My first week as a new Jewish Day School teacher, the first day began with a meeting of the Teachers Union. Excited about meeting my new colleagues, I went cold when the Union President introduced me as “our newest victim.” She carried a great deal of resentment toward the school's leadership. It turned out that the Teachers Union had fomented so much resentment that it corroded the professional environment of the school. Sadly, it took dismantling the Union and the departure of many long-time employees for the culture of the school to shift and the focus of faculty energy to return to teaching and learning.

Resentment has a way of backing us into corners, poisoning our perspective and keeping us from the closeness we seek with the people and organizations that matter to us. That is why it hurts. Beneath the veil of cynicism, anger and biting remarks lie profound sadness and loneliness.

Throughout the push and pull of nearly all Biblical relationships, closeness is what the characters seek. When injury turns to resentment instead of healing, we get some of the best-known stories in the world. Their staying power lies in their relatability. Of course, not all Biblical conflicts involve resentment, but as we see in today's parashah, it is baked into some of the most dramatic and memorable ones. Over the course of the Torah, it becomes apparent that resentment causes key relationships to lose their sparkle, to the detriment of all involved.

May we not make the same mistake. May we seek opportunities to mend what breaks, as it surely will, and may the healing work we do bring us closer to one another and to all of the people we love.

Shabbat shalom.