

**Yom Kippur 5778**  
**The Courage to Confront**

*I was angry with my friend;  
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.  
I was angry with my foe:  
I told it not, my wrath did grow.*

*And I waterd it in fears,  
Night & morning with my tears:  
And I sunned it with smiles,  
And with soft deceitful wiles.*

*And it grew both day and night.  
Till it bore an apple bright.  
And my foe beheld it shine,  
And he knew that it was mine.*

*And into my garden stole,  
When the night had veild the pole;  
In the morning glad I see;  
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.  
- A Poison Tree, William Blake*

Last night, I spoke about the phenomenon of cheap speech and how important it is to try, within this community, to guard our own tendencies towards *lashon ha-ra*. If we can do so, we could begin to make our community a refuge from so much of the tongue-lashing - both in speech and in writing - that is permeating the atmosphere at the moment.

We considered how we talk *about* each other. This morning, I want to do something a little more tricky: I want us to explore how we talk *to* each other.

Having frank conversations goes to the heart of the wellbeing and welfare of any community. When this aspect is working well, the community is energized and healthy; when it is not, there is awkwardness and discomfort of a kind that might not even manifest on the surface, but which works insidiously beneath to undermine the very relationships that turn us into a community in the first place.

When the Jewish tradition addresses this issue, the Rabbis identify a mitzvah - a sacred obligation - they call *tochechah*. The word is very often translated as 'rebuke,' or 'admonish,' but I think of it more as the means by which individuals in a community call each other to the highest standards of behavior. One possible translation is 'confrontation.'

We should notice our reactions to what I just said. If we believe that a community is supposed to be a safe place, a refuge, suffused with friendliness and a shared sense of purpose, what possible place could admonishment or confrontation have in it? And yet, when the Rabbis are considering the worst disaster they could imagine - the fall of Jerusalem - and asking themselves why it happened, one of the reasons they give is that the community did not confront each other [BT *Shabbat* 119b].

Indeed, *tochechah* situations present themselves to us all the time. They are really quite innocuous to begin with. They usually start with the thought, 'I notice [a particular person] behaving in such a way...I think there's something wrong with that...should I say something...?' The Jewish answer to this question is a firm 'yes.'

The source of the mitzvah is in the Torah - in Vayikra 19:17:

*lo tisna et akhika bilvavekha; hokheiah tokhiah et amitkha ve'lo tissa alav het* – 'You shall not hate your brother or sister in your heart; You shall confront, yes confront them, and you shall not bear sin because of them.' Right from the outset we have the suggestion is that unexpressed rage is destructive. Like the William Blake, the poet who wrote the words with which I began, the Torah knows that the fruit of the poison tree is deadly.

The end of the verse - *you shall not bear sin because of him/her* is cryptic. The 'sin' that we bear might simply be the burden of the unexpressed feelings; but often interpreted to mean that failing to confront makes us complicit in the other person's wrong. If so, *tochechah* has a double benefit, both to the person being confronted and the person confronting; and failure to perform the mitzvah puts a community into double deficit, with one person continuing their wrong behavior in ignorance of its negative effect and the other 'bearing sin' - partly responsible, now, for the other person's wrongdoing and probably enraged as well.

And soon those suppressed feelings, as feelings will, begin to spill out. There might be explosions of *lashon hara*. There might be ghosting - the dropping of a relationship without explanation. There might be misdirected rage - we don't tell our colleague at work what they are doing wrong but we come home and are impatient with our families instead. Bonds of trust and friendship begin to be eaten away to be replaced with frustration, cliqueness and gossip. Guests to such a community or organization pick up the feeling that it is not a happy place, and do not return. The costs of avoiding the mitzvah of *tochechah* are significant, and ongoing.

Here is the paradox: without the difficult conversations, everything that we value in a community - safety, friendship, common purpose - is put at risk. So somehow there has to be a way to have them, or risk the community being undermined.

And fortunately the teachers of our tradition have guidance for us.

First, we should prepare. *Tochechah* should never be unrehearsed. Preparation of this kind requires us to work out how best to phrase what we have to say so that it will be received and understood. It also enables us to master our wish to resolve the situation by just punching the person in the jaw. As we frequently say to little children, we too need to *use our words*. This practicing phase helps us to give our criticism its proper shape and weight.

The *tochechah* also has to be specific. One size doesn't fit all, and a confrontation that works for one person won't work for another. We have to consider even before we go in: what will speak to this person's heart? We need to be flexible and inventive.

The next idea we need to internalize is that the confrontation has to have a supportive purpose. And this is challenging, because it requires us, even before we open our mouths, to recognize that person's humanity and to have a real sense of them. *Tochechah* between strangers is pointless; it is intended to resolve already existing relationships.

We also have to be very clear - without being patronizing - that the purpose of the *tochechah* is build the person up and not tear them down. We are calling out their behavior so that we can call them towards something better. And this means that we should be prepared to listen to what they have to say as well. I often quote my grandfather and will do so again: we have two ears and one mouth for a reason.

Prepare; support; be specific; be constructive. Do we see anything happening here? It would appear that even though we thought that *tochechah* might be to enable *us* to feel better, it is just as much about the other person. Remember the Torah verse - we must confront, yes confront, so that we do not bear sin *because of the other*. The conversation will be as much about them as it is about us. These preparatory steps force us to confront not only our feelings but the humanity of the other person. It is precisely this mutuality that makes *tochechah* so effective and sets it at the heart of healthy community. There is a great deal more to it than getting things off our chest.

Once we have done the preparation, Rambam, Maimonides, sets out four steps for us to take:

- *Tochechah* should be done in private - facebook, take note;
- It should begin with a question: 'why did you do this/why did you do X to me?' expressed patiently and gently, with time for the other person to answer;
- We should clarify our motivation - I am not doing this to hurt you.

And step four is that if we are not listened to, we are obliged to repeat the whole exercise. *Tochechah* is an ongoing obligation.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah I spoke about courage. Here it is again. To commit to perform the mitvah of *tochechah*, and to practice it, places very high demands on us. It tests our capacity for intimacy, our integrity and our compassion. It injects an element of honesty into all our relationships. It forces us to recognize that the power to make changes is with the other and not with us, while demanding that we retain our respect for them and make it an active principle.

But it's worth it. *Tochechah*, properly undertaken, helps us grow morally and spiritually just as much as it helps the other person.

I opened with William Blake's Poison Tree. Let me close with it too - but just with the beginning:

*I was angry with my friend,  
I told my wrath; my wrath did end.*

The Rabbis knew all about that. The third-century Rabbi Yosi bar Hanina's comments on the proverb "Rebuke a wise person and they will love you" [Proverbs 9:8] teach that any love that does not contain an element of *tochechah* is not true love [*Bereishit Rabbah* 54:3]. The flip side of *tochechah*, when properly performed, is that we trust each other to be each other's teachers, advisors and motivators. We look after each others' moral and spiritual welfare. And that is a form of love; and a community that loves in that way will be strong, safe and healthy.

So on this day where we deal with what is difficult and contemplate both what we have expressed and what we haven't - let us give some thought to the conversations that we *didn't* have over the course of the year.

And see if this year is the year we decide to have them.

Gmar hatimah tovah.