Forgiving Ourselves

Ten days ago we spoke about becoming radicals as we activate the biblical injunction to love our neighbors as ourselves. I was heartened to hear from many of you that there is already something radical afoot as I heard about radical hospitality, radical compassion, radical belonging and radical peace. It seems to be all around us if only we would take notice. Yet, sometimes the most significant thing we can do while the most obvious is also that by which we are constrained by social convention or fear, often paralyzed into inaction because it presents the path of least resistance. The radical behavior I urged focused on how we behave toward others: loving them, welcoming them, empathizing with them. Even saying them out loud, ten days later, they don't seem so radical; but saying and doing are two different things.

But turning the words of Leviticus 19:18 inward, the premise begs the question: if one is to love one's neighbor as one's self, then one must love oneself before one can love others. This is not a tautology; it is a necessary step in achieving our goal. One cannot loathe oneself and dare to hope to love one's neighbor; one must truly love oneself. Again social convention and even fear may keep us from embracing this notion. How does one do that with all due humility and modesty? After all there is the very real risk of intolerable hubris and personifying the Greek god Icarus who famously flew too close to the sun.

Thinking too much of oneself is just as problematic as thinking too little. Loving oneself means accepting ourselves as we are, imperfect human beings who make mistakes, harbor regrets and experience moments of great joy as well as deep sorrow. On Yom Kippur of all days, we let our imperfections show, not before a purported perfect supernatural divine being but before one another. We don't try to hide them or ignore them; we actually can revel in them. Being here together publicly, we acknowledge we have made mistakes; perfection is an impossible standard to meet. Being truly human with all its imperfections is not. Pursuit of perfection sends us too close to the sun with the inevitable fall that follows. To love ourselves, we must enjoy our own company, even as we of course are each important parts of a greater social fabric that holds us, supports us and enriches us.

Also apropos of this day, loving ourselves means that we must forgive ourselves before we can forgive others. Leviticus 19:18 can be rewritten then to replace *love* with *forgive*, and state that we are to forgive our neighbors *as* we forgive ourselves. Indeed our tradition has taught that we are to seek forgiveness from those we have hurt before we could seek forgiveness from the biblical god; a humanistic reading of that tradition would ask of us that we forgive ourselves before we can seek forgiveness from others. As the poet Maya Angelou said, "It's one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself, to forgive." We can rightfully ask ourselves, if that's so, then why is it so hard to do? The answer lies in part in that

embrace of imperfection in ourselves and others because the moment we forgive ourselves for our actions, we are admitting our imperfections. The instant we forgive ourselves is when we accept our vulnerabilities and can move forward without being held captive to the past. We heal ourselves when we make the effort. Like a wound that leaves a scar after healing, the scar can be dealt with while the wound if unattended will fester.

The Torah portion today portrays the inner dilemma and struggle to reconcile who we are with whom we hope to be, and I think provides insight into how we can and must forgive ourselves before we can forgive others. Genesis 32 tells the story of Jacob as he prepares to meet his long-estranged twin brother Esau. Up until this point in the Jacob narrative, with his mother Rebecca's help he previously has "stolen" the birthright from their father Isaac. In a ploy that is both cunning and audacious, Jacob donned goat's skin on his arms to resemble his hairy armed brother, and brought lentil soup to his father Isaac. The reader is told that Isaac's eyes are dimmed implying that he cannot tell which of his sons is before him. The birthright is conferred on Jacob then instead of the first born Esau, further extending the biblical motif of the second born supplanting the first. Rebecca, fearing for her favored son's life at the hand's of the quick-tempered Esau, sends Jacob to her brother Laban, never to see him again. Laban has two daughters, Leah and Rachel. Jacob, we are told, "loves" Rachel, just one of two times in the Bible

where love between two people is expressed; as a result he agrees to work for Laban for seven years in order to marry her. However the morning after the wedding, Jacob discovers that he has married her older sister Leah as custom dictated the older marry before the younger. So he works another seven years to marry Rachel, polygamy being an acceptable practice in the ancient world. After all these years, Jacob is now ready to leave Laban's household and return to his homeland, taking with him his wives, concubines, children and all the animals he has amassed. In Genesis 32, verses 14-22, the writer tells us that in advance of the journey, knowing that he must cross land belonging to Esau, Jacob divides his herds into various droves, and sends his emissary ahead to Esau bringing gifts. It is Jacob's hope to appease him and perhaps persuade him from harming his entourage. Jacob significantly positions himself at the rear demonstrating his insecurity and fear.

With the gifts on their way, Jacob rests for the night before his encounter with Esau; during that night, Jacob is visited by an angel in his sleep and wrestles with him. Though the text describes the angel as a messenger from the biblical god, as metaphor, the angel can be seen as Jacob's unconscious forcing him to confront his emotional and personal issues that inevitably have come from that earlier episode with the birthright and his flight in its aftermath. Jacob has not come to terms with what he knows not to have been right. Dreams are such powerful means

to work out psychological conflicts. Clearly Jacob has not forgiven himself for what he has done. He approaches Esau from a position of weakness despite having all the outward manifestations of success. All the gifts in the world cannot possibly replace two simple words: I'm sorry. Followed by three equally simple words: Please forgive me. In the next chapter a beautiful scene of reconciliation occurs where it is Esau who forgives Jacob, hugging him and weeping into his neck; and further he declines all the gifts offered because as he tells Jacob, I have enough. Esau is not the hero of the biblical author's narrative, he does not serve the biblical author's agenda of establishing the succession of patriarchs in dialogue with the biblical god. Yet his conduct is the more admirable. From him, not the patriarch Jacob, we learn what Mahatma Gandhi said centuries later, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." It is a sign of strength, then, to first forgive oneself.

In our world today, there are websites promoting and selling so-called "apology gifts" and "I'm sorry baskets." Would we ever consider sending such things to ourselves? The idea seems silly and self-indulgent because we know as Esau knew that gifts are not the means to forgiveness. They are an easy shortcut, a temporary salve, that avoids the hard work of examining the hurts caused and addressing them, taking responsibility for what we have done and beginning with ourselves, attempting to make it right. Again we remember what Maya Angelou

said, it is forgiveness itself that is the gift. It is in the understanding that seeking forgiveness is different from receiving forgiveness. The person from whom we ask forgiveness may rightfully decline, may stubbornly hold on to past hurts, or may not even be able to receive the request, even or perhaps especially if we are simply speaking to ourselves. It is only when we can forgive ourselves that we can love ourselves. Just as Leviticus 19 admonished us not to speak ill of the deaf who of course could never hear us, and not to put a stumbling block before the blind who could never see us, the admonition is for our benefit. We are better people for not doing such things, for being accountable to ourselves and others, and for avoiding morally reprehensible conduct. Likewise we are better people for learning to forgive ourselves.

Mark Twain gave us this lovely way to think about forgiveness: "Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it." We are both the heel and the violet, but we can have the fragrance in the aftermath. Imperfection leads to beauty. Holding two truths at the same time is an integrative exercise. We can love ourselves and we must. We can also forgive ourselves as we must.