

*Rabbi Daniel Berman Kol Nidrei 2025*

Erev tov and *g'mar chatimah tovah*.

Over the years, I've shared stories about people I represented who were seeking political asylum in the U.S. It was more than twenty years ago now, but memories seem to come back when I need them.

This past year I have been thinking a lot about a woman who became very important to me personally. She grew up in a home with severe violence that went back two generations. She tried to leave home many times, but was not able to escape. She didn't have any resources, and there were no social services or other forms of protection for her. Finally, as a young adult, she successfully fled to the U.S. It took her months to get here, working, hiding and bribing.

Soon after reaching the U.S., she gave birth to a girl she named Hurriya. Hurriya is Arabic for freedom.

One of the many painful parts of seeking asylum is the need to constantly retell your story. It can be retraumatizing to have to recall the experience.

As we prepared for her trial, she'd cry as she described what happened, right up until it was time to go pick her daughter from daycare. Then, in an instant, her entire demeanor would change. She would run towards her daughter as if she hadn't seen her in weeks. Just unbridled joy.

And although patterns of old relationships and old pains would sometimes seep through into their relationship, it's actually hard to describe how much she loved her girl.

I quickly learned that asking about her daughter while we prepared her case helped ease her mind and bring some small measure of comfort.

She loved talking about being a mother. She often described simple interactions: time together in the morning before day care; bedtime books; weekends at the park; and puppet shows at the local library. She loved her daughter the way parents love their children.

One afternoon as we prepared, I asked her why being a mother was so important to her. She thought about it for a few minutes. "After everything that happened to me," she said, "I look at my daughter Huriya and I remember I am a person who can *create*."

I didn't quite understand the full gist of it at first. It turns out she was using specific

religious language, which is present in both her Islamic tradition and in Judaism.

*Creating* has some shared themes with *giving birth*, but from a religious perspective, it

is different. It has existential tones. It's healing. She suffered for so many years - and

when she gave birth to her daughter, she remembered she had the *ability, the capacity*

*as a person to create - to bring something or someone new into this world after a long period*

*of abuse.*

That self-understanding, grounded in a religious worldview, cascaded into new forms

of personal agency and fulfillment: she would soon teach her daughter to be creative

and generous and give and receive love.

I think of all the stories of women in our tradition who suffered, unable to give birth,

Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, and Hannah. Their lives were *renewed* by giving birth, but

*transformed and healed* by their new self-understanding of self - that they had the

capacity to create.

That ended up being the first of many conversations we had about her understanding

of her sense of purpose. We did the work we had to do, then I just listened.

A week before her trial, her fear and anxiety became overwhelming. I did my best to help her focus on her daughter. “What are your hopes for your daughter as she grows up?”

That’s when she said something that I’ve held onto all these years.

“That girl can do and be anything she wants,” she said. “As long as she is not like me.”

Very tentatively, I followed up.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’m never going to forgive the people who hurt me. Even if they were standing right here in front of me, on their knees - pleading for forgiveness, I wouldn’t forgive them. But Hurriya - I am teaching her to be a forgiving person.”

Over the last year, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about this woman and her daughter.

Of our many concerns about Israel and Jewish community right now, the one that feels the most poignant and the most potent is our fear of the long-term, multi-generational impact of violence and trauma. Not just in Israel. Here, too. And

throughout the Jewish world. It is very rare for children who witness or experience violence or war to escape that inheritance.

Trauma doesn't go away when circumstances change. We pass it down. Studies over many decades have shown that *even indirect* pain can show up in future generations as patterns of behavior, emotional responses, or mental health conditions.

We know this from testimonies of first-, second- and third- generation Shoah survivors, Russian families who suffered repeated persecution and exile, and those in Israel who experienced constant violence. The tragedy can go on and on and on.

We don't always feel it acutely. Mostly because of the extensive freedoms we have, which are unprecedented in Jewish history. But it gets activated quickly and forcefully whenever there are incidences that feel threatening in any way. These events are painful just on their own; but they also bring all the old pains to the foreground. When even one person is threatened or hurt, we all feel it, and we can carry it through generations.

This concept shows up even in our ancient rabbinic texts. In the Talmud, it is

animated in a discussion about conversion to Judaism.

When a person expresses a desire to convert to Judaism, the sages suggest the rabbi should encourage them lovingly - but also ask: "do you know about the persecution, suffering, exile we have experienced?"

The question isn't meant to shock the person about the extent of Jewish suffering, or even necessarily dissuade them from converting. The question is very real - do you understand that you will be throwing your fate in with this people?" This isn't an individual matter. It's not just *your own* life that is at stake here. You are becoming part of something much greater than you. You will be responsible for the whole - the collective - and you and your children will be *personally* affected by its joy and its sadness.

That same idea that we feel each other's pains and are accountable to one another - even across generations - is at the center of Yom Kippur.

Yom Kippur is based on an ancient practice in the Temple in Jerusalem. Only one person, the *Kohen Gadol*, the great priest, would enter the inner Sanctuary to atone. Everyone else - the entire Jewish community - stood together in the courtyard, and

when they heard the kohen call the name of God, they would fall to the ground, all at once. They - and we - are in this entirely together.

There is no "I" in Yom Kippur. This day is when that sense of "we" is most acutely alive in our prayers. Hundreds of people will stand in shuls; thousands across the area, millions across this globe pounding their chests. Listen to our language. This day is entirely in the plural. Throughout this day, again and again, we will chant prayers that are meant to help us acknowledge pains we have withstood, and the pains we have caused.

The question that often goes unexamined is how to disrupt the patterns of pain we feel and we pass on and begin a process of healing. It is very hard to do. These last two years, it has been particularly complicated.

One of the challenges that has come up for Jewish community is the feeling that there is so little that we can do. We feel a lack of *agency*, both individually and collectively, to impact or influence the things that concern us the most.

To some extent, that feeling is the heart of Yom Kippur. We confront the limits of the power we imagine we have. It's humbling to stand before God kind of unveiled, unprotected, acknowledging our constant mistakes. And yet, Yom Kippur also insists: you have *enormous capacity* to repair and to heal. This is where your power - your agency - is. It matters. It impacts you and others, across generations.

We don't have to be *beholden* to all these pains we carry. We don't have to pass them along. We can disrupt patterns and begin a process of letting them go.

*It's here I think about my former client. After suffering much of her life, she focused on two paths of healing: one, she rediscovered that she had the ability, the agency, to create, and two, she taught her daughter to be someone who forgives.*

That discovery of new creativity, and that commitment to forgiveness makes me feel so hopeful for Jewish community.

First, right alongside the collective experience and consciousness of pain is a long, rich Jewish history of *creativity*. After every tragedy, historically, Jews renewed themselves, discovering some hidden reservoir of creative spirit. Every tragedy in Jewish history was followed by a new wave of creativity.

After the destruction of the First Temple came the renewal of Torah as a publicly read text. After the destruction of the Second Temple came the emergence of rabbinic Judaism. After the Crusades, Jews developed new forms of spirituality in North Europe. Following the Spanish expulsion came Lurianic Kabbalah. After East European persecution and poverty, the Hasidic movement emerged, with a whole new world of stories and songs. [paraphrasing Jonathan Sacks].

And on and on...

We know the experience of pain. We have responded through creativity. It is a form of healing.

*And second, right alongside the collective experience and consciousness of pain is a long, rich Jewish history of *forgiveness*. Like my former client who taught her child to be forgiving, we too, teach forgiveness. We place it at the center of the most sacred day of the year.*

Historically, we have held pain without letting it become hatred. I heard a sermon delivered by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks several years ago about forgiveness. I remember this amazing line - he said: in the face of tragedy, forgiveness is the narrative of hope.

As hard as it is, at times it is the only path through the thickets of hate to the open spaces of coexistence.

Yom Kippur is where this all begins.

We disrupt old patterns and hold repair in our hands when, on Yom Kippur, we remind ourselves and we say to our children, let's be a forgiving kind of people.

It's hard to overstate how important this is Jewishly.

Forgiveness here doesn't mean forgetting or excusing significant harm others have caused us. From a Jewish perspective, forgiveness means acknowledging the pain, understanding its roots, and choosing to release its hold on us and on future generations. It is not a gift to the one who injured you; it is an act of grace to yourself and your children to lighten its weight.

The woman seeking asylum I described - we've stayed in touch every so often.

Maybe once every couple of years, probably even less. But a few months ago, I was thinking of her and I sent her an email. "Hello. How are you? I think of you."

She just emailed back the "thank you" emoji. No words.

But attached were two pictures. In the first photo, she stood next to her daughter.

They seemed happy.

It was the second photo however, that gave me the most hope.

It turns out her daughter has a daughter.

Her name is also Huria.

They started a new tradition, unheard of in their family and community, of naming a child after her mother.

The wounds that might be passed down were disrupted; their freedom - just getting started.

That is Yom Kippur.

There is one Hebrew word that captures all of this. The word is *mashber*. In modern Hebrew, it means crisis. In Biblical Hebrew, it means the process of giving birth.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we have this very thick and dense prayerbook, with lots and lots of words.

But I can't help but feel that there is only one prayer: *From the experience of pain, new worlds can be born.*

*G'mar chatimah tovah.*