**KN**

I have been thinking about forgiveness since well before I began to plan my sermons for the High Holidays. I can tell you the actual date: May 31st – the day the finale of Ted Lasso aired.

The show is about a man, Ted Lasso, an American college football coach from the Midwest, who is hired to coach an English soccer team with the secret intention that his inexperience will lead it to failure, but whose folksy and optimistic leadership proves unexpectedly successful.

Forgiveness is a, maybe *the*, theme of Ted Lasso. That, and the **belief** in the possibility of growth and change and healing.

In the second to last episode of the first season, Ted’s boss, Rebecca, comes clean to him about the many, many things she did to sabotage him – every chance she got. She confesses all the details and says, “Ted, I’m so sorry.”

After listening quietly, Ted simply responds: “I forgive you.” Like her, he is going through a divorce. Their common experience allows him to see her humanity and to empathize with her. While he does not minimize his hurt or her actions, he forgives her. He says: “You know, I think that if you care about someone and you got a little love in your heart, there ain't nothing you can't get through together.”

“With a little love in your heart.” This is what Rabbi Akiva thinks is the foundation of Torah. When asked what was the most important verse, he said: Veahavta le’reacha camocha – love your neighbor as you love yourself. We are meant to do both. Actually, I think this is just one of the most important verses in Torah. Another is: וַיִּבְרָ֨א אֱלֹהִ֤ים ׀ אֶת־הָֽאָדָם֙ בְּצַלְמ֔וֹ בְּצֶ֥לֶם אֱלֹהִ֖ים בָּרָ֣א אֹת֑וֹ/And God created humankind in the divine image. I think that the truth is both together: When we love another, we make a commitment to seeing them in the image of God. What image is that? As a unique, infinitely valuable, sacred being. Not as their flaws, limitations, and failings. And not just our loved ones, ourselves, as well.

And teshuvah is about being about to hold more love – for ourselves and for each other.

There is a tradition to say a blessing when you have not seen a friend in a year. The blessing is: Baruch mechayei hameitim/Blessed is the one who gives life to the dead. Why would we say this blessing? We don’t believe in resurrection! In fact, that blessing is not even in our prayerbook.

Our tradition recognizes that our relationships bring us to life. And that relationships are not generic or interchangeable. Each person draws out some aspect of us that might not be developed with others. It is only with others that we can fully become ourselves.

And the blessing acknowledges to our friend – you bring me something no one else does or can. You are a necessary part of what makes me who I am. I honor you and the importance of our connection.

It is hard and beautiful it is to be in relationship with others. We hurt each other, even people we love – maybe especially them. That might put some off relationship entirely, but *life is with people*.

This phrase is not only the title of the classic ethnography of the shtetl, but is deeply grounded in Jewish text and tradition. Genesis 2 tells us: לֹא־ט֛וֹב הֱי֥וֹת הָֽאָדָ֖ם לְבַדּ֑וֹ, it is not good for the human to be alone. Relationship does not just alleviate loneliness – which is an epidemic in our society – but is a sacred thing. The Talmud teaches that it is in relationship that the Shechinah is present: when ten people pray, when three people come together to constitute a court, and when two people study Torah together. Sacred words and holy acts in community become transcendent, connecting us to that which is greater than ourselves.

This Day of Atonement is the final of Ten Days of Teshuvah, and the 40th in the season of Teshuvah. Over the past almost 6 weeks, many of us have been considering who we are and what we have done, working to repair our relationships, and contemplating how we might heal and grow.

The teshuvah process *is* about growing. My favorite Hasidic story is one about Reb Zushya, at the end of his life. He is in his bed, surrounded by his students, when he becomes frightened and begins to cry out. His students say to him in confusion: But Reb Zushya, what are you afraid of? You were like Moshe! Reb Zushya responds: The Holy One, Blessed be God, will not ask me “was I like Moses” but will ask: “was I Zushya?”

When asked what Hasidism was all about, Rabbi Mendel of Kotsk replied: “Arbetn oif zikh”—“**to work on yourself**.” Even if not hasids, our work, too, is to become who we are, who we might be, who we are meant to be.

Who are you meant to be? There is no other you on this planet – never was, never will be. Only you can be you. Only you can bring to the world what you bring.

Some of us have been studying Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg’s book On Repair and Repentance for this season. In it, she writes: “The reason to do repentance work is not because you are BAD BAD BAD until you DO THESE THINGS but because **we should care about each other, about taking care of each other, about making sure we’re all OK**. Taking seriously that I might have hurt you – even inadvertently! Even because I wasn’t at my best! Is an act of love and care. It is an opportunity to open my heart wider than it has been, to let in more empathy, more curiosity about how my choices or knee-jerk reactions have impacted you, have impacted others...Facing the harm that I caused is an act of profound optimism. It is a choice to learn, to grow, to become someone who is more open and empathetic.” (p. 57-58).

Encouraging and supporting our growth is not about seeing ourselves as terrible, it is about envisioning ourselves as our best selves. Ted knew that inside of us all is not only the best version of ourselves, but a desire to be that person. And sometimes all we need to become our best selves is someone else believing in us.

And thus, our prayers are in the plural because community is essential. Because we support each other. Because we help each other grow. Because we show each other who we are. As the Zen saying puts it: “like pebbles in a bag, the monks polish each other.”

*Ted Lasso* explores this polishing at a gathering of the Diamond Dogs, the men’s support group of the leadership staff (adapted into a PG version):

Roy: for the past year, I have busted my butt/fucking ass trying to change. Apparently, I haven’t done anything/fucking shit, because…I’m still me.

Ted to Roy: did you want to be someone else?

Roy: Yeah, someone better. Can people change?

Trent: I don’t think people change per se, we just learn to accept who we’ve always been.

Nate: I think people can change, sometimes for the worse, sometimes for the better.

Roy: Not me, I’m just the same. Stupid/Fucking. Idiot. I’ve always been.

Ted: agree to disagree, big guy.

Beard: Change isn’t about trying to be perfect – perfection sucks. Perfection is boring.

Higgins: Human beings are never going to be perfect, Roy, the best thing we can do is keep asking for help and accepting it when you can and if you keep on doing that you’ll always be moving towards better.

*The best thing we can do is keep asking for help and accepting it when you can and if you keep on doing that you’ll always be moving towards better.*

Our growth cannot take place alone. Our mistakes are usually about how we treat other people, so our repair must be, as well. We need each other.

Some critics see Ted, and the show itself, as offering easy forgiveness. I disagree. In the penultimate episode, Coach Beard is not so happy with Ted’s forgiving nature. To this, Ted says: “I hope that either all of us, or none of us, are judged by our actions at our weakest moments, but rather by the strength we show when, and if, we are ever given second chances.” And he walks out of his office singing: and we rely on each other, huh huh…….

Ted’s willingness to forgive, again and again is not unique to him or to the show. Judaism has recognized this quality in God for 3000 years. *Ted Lasso* gives another form and helps imagine something we humans have always recognized as vitally important but find hard to describe: the assurance of forgiveness amid the hard work of making amends. We began this evening with that Divine assurance, taken from the prophet Isaiah: “סלחתי כדבריך – I have forgiven, according to your word.”

The affirmation of the availability of this forgiveness for us invites us to offer compassion to ourselves and to each other. We are invited, mandated even, to believe in the possibility of our own growth – and that of each other. Can we say to ourselves and to our loved ones: סלחתי כדבריך – I have forgiven, according to your word? Can we see each other as our best selves, and help each other realize that vision? If you could only see yourselves right now - you are so beautiful. It is so special to be here with you, doing teshuvah, growing together.

Trisha Arlin, our Selichot Poet in Residence last year, wrote this, about forgiveness and community:

THE FOUNDATION OF FORGIVENESS

In the divine and great love of One-ness

That is the foundation of forgiveness,

It is really good

To be part of a community of people

Who want to be kind to each other.

Sometimes that’s more aspirational for us than achieved,

But here, secure in acceptance and compassion,

We know

We are where we can keep trying,

Where kindness

And apologies

And forgiveness

And safety

Come our way when needed

And even when not.

In the divine and great love of One-ness

It is good to remember.

Amen

**YK**

In July, my wife Dinah and I traveled to Israel to spend two weeks visiting family and friends. We arrived in the midst of a very intense time – in fact, we were not sure we would be able to arrive. The day before we left, there were protests at Ben-Gurion Airport and it was unclear if planes would be able to take off and land. We arrived after 27 straight weeks of Saturday night protests, which were now moving into weekdays.

Dinah’s family had participated in each one of those 27 protests in Tel Aviv. They say, somewhat ruefully – “this is what we do now on Saturday nights. It’s our ‘date night.’” It was extremely powerful to walk to the heart of Tel Aviv with thousands of other people carrying Israeli flags and, when we arrived there, to sing together HaTikvah, which means “The Hope,” sharing the hope of a democratic Israel.

We arrived during the Three Weeks, the weeks leading up to Tisha B’Av, the date that commemorates the destruction of the Temples and the two previous periods of Jewish sovereignty in the land. The leaders and speakers at the protest we joined in Tel Aviv – along with 150,000 other people – spoke of their fears of the "destruction of the Third Temple," - this third period of Jewish self-governance in the land.

Micah Goodman, the Israeli public intellectual whom we read when we studied Maimonides together a couple of years ago, has put this current moment in historical perspective: there were only two other times in Jewish history we Jews had sovereignty over ourselves: the first Jewish state established by King David and the Hasmonean dynasty of the Second Temple period. In each instance, internal strife in the 8th decade precipitated the downfall and destruction. Goodman calls this The Curse of the 8th Decade.

The modern state of Israel was founded in 1948, on the ashes of the Holocaust and the destruction of European Jewry. Do the math. This is the 8th decade. Israelis – and not just Goodman – were talking about this when we were there, with real fear and concern.

Perhaps this sounds melodramatic to you, but Israelis across the spectrum see this is a moment of true crisis. Some say it is the most important moment since the War of Independence.

So, what is it that Israelis are protesting?

The main issue is the government’s intention to weaken the power of the Supreme Court – limiting, perhaps eliminating its ability to serve as a check on the Knesset. And since the executive branch and the legislative branch are essentially one and the same in Israel, without an independent court, nearly all power would reside with the government.

This right-wing government has the support of the ultra-Orthodox religious parties, which seek to firm up and expand laws around observance of shabbat and kashrut in public places – as they have already done this past spring, forbidding individuals from bringing chametz into hospitals in their own bags, pass laws limiting rights for women, lgbtq folks, and change the definition of Jewishness used for the basic law that governs the law of return.

The protesters see this this judicial overhaul as effectively a coup - a power grab that would give the coalition government unlimited power and would severely limit the Supreme Court's authority to strike down laws that violate human rights and democratic principles.

Coup is a strong word, but many Israelis do not think they are being melodramatic. They are consistently showing up – last night was 38 straight weeks of protests. The chief of police reported last week that between 6 and 7 million people have participated in protests across the country since January.

A recent poll suggests that more than a quarter of Israelis are considering leaving the country. But – many others wear t-shirts that say: ain li eretz aheret – I have no other country. While many Israelis are taking advantage of the citizenship opportunities offered by European countries for descendants of those who fled or were expelled, Moshe, Dinah’s dear family friend, refuses, saying just that. Ain li eretz aheret – I have no other country.

These protestors are protesting, are fighting for the democracy of their country, out of patriotism. In the community where Dinah’s family lives, and throughout Israel, many homes display both the Israeli flag and a banner that reads: We believe in the Declaration of Independence.

Today, on the Jewish calendar, is the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. At last night’s protests, veterans and family members of soldiers in that war spoke. Reservist Maj. Gen. Eyal Ben-Reuven said “Netanyahu, 50 years we went off to war. We faced live fire thanks to a people's army. Thanks to this, we were able to secure peace with Egypt. Today, we stand in front of your violent, terrible government that's causing soldiers to go backwards. We are fighting to preserve the values of the Declaration of Independence. 50 years after the Yom Kippur War, it is impossible not to see the stark similarity between the existential threat we were facing in October '73, and the existential, security, economic and legal threat to our dear country in October '23. We are fighting again today for the existence of the state, and we will win. We don’t know how to lose when it comes to our values and moral foundation."

“The disaster has returned – but this time it’s from within – not from an enemy,” veteran Uzi Ben Zvi said.

Some of you might ask: what about the Palestinians? The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has not been a focus of these protests, although there are always some with signs that say: there is no democracy with occupation.

Those who care about the future of Israelis and Palestinians must recognize that democracy is essential to the future well-being of everyone who shares the land.

What does this have to do with us, American Jews and our loved ones?

A few things, I think.

1. Nearly half of the Jews in the world live there. They are family. We do not want anyone living under a nationalist, authoritarian theocracy, but especially so our own family.
2. The ultra-Orthodox parties believe Israel should be a theocracy and seek to make changes that will be to the detriment of women, lgbt folks, progressive Judaism, ethnic and religious minorities, and anyone who doesn’t practice Judaism the way they do. While we were in Israel, people blocked a bus because a woman was driving. In another incident, the bus driver told girls they had to cover up and to sit in the back of the bus. Another driver wouldn’t answer the question of a passenger because, as he told her husband, he “doesn’t speak to women.”
3. One of the reasons Israel was formed was to be a refuge for Jews. A change in the law of return will significantly limit access to Jews who might need: children of one Jewish parent, people converted outside of Israel, and others.
4. Many of us feel deeply connected to Israel. It is the land where, as the Declaration says, it: was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.

It is disconcerting to see Israel move away from the language of the Declaration:

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will…will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

As we know, many countries are moving towards authoritarianism. Poland and Hungary have authoritarian leaders who were originally elected democratically but have since limited the power of the judiciary and civil rights in their countries.

We have similar concerns here. We have elected officials who strive to limit voting access, civil rights, and tried to overturn an election. And after the Dobbs decision and the loss of reproductive freedom in more than half of the country, I ask myself: how are we not in the streets every week?

I was, and continue to be, inspired by the faith and persistence of Israelis to struggle for the vision of what their country can be. I have to admit to feeling somewhat demoralized when, after all the sustained protests, the huge turnouts, the 30,000 people walking into Jerusalem at the close of Shabbat – and then to have the government repeal the reasonableness clause on less than 48 hours later as though the peaceful uprising of the people was irrelevant, or non-existent.

I asked myself, does all their effort have any effect?

When I shared this with my chavruta, Rabbi Eli Herscher, he said: The Jewish people prayed daily for 2000 years: tolicheinu komememiut le’artzeinu – lead us, proudly independent to our land. How could people say this for 2000 years with no possibility of return? A rational approach would have been to give it up years ago.

From the perspective of our history, 38 weeks is nothing.

In a recent address to the Knesset, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Reform Movement, recalled a phrase from the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai from his poem, "*In the Old City*." In it, Amichai says that as a people we are *negu'ay tikvah* (infected with hope). Indeed, we have a sense that there is some better way for us to be. We are not naïve by being hopeful. Rather, hope is a commitment that the world as we see it and as we live in it is not the only one. It is a world we can shape -- for the Jewish people, for the Jewish state, and for all the world.

We are*negu'ay tikvah*. We are a people of hope.

Our Torah reading today began:

You stand this day, all of you, before your God ’ה —your tribal heads, your elders, and your officials, every householder in Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to waterdrawer— to enter into the covenant of your God ‘ה, which your God ’ה is concluding with you this day...in order to establish you this day as God’s people and in order to be your God, as promised you and as sworn to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I make this covenant, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before our God ’ה and with those who are not with us here this day.

If you have not been engaged with Israel – this is a good time to start.

Get an Israeli perspective - read Israeli press – not just American. The Times of Israel is a very good place to begin. American Jews have always supported Israel financially – you can support the movement for democracy and civil society. And you can visit.

We are all part of the covenant that formed our people more than three thousand years ago. This is not the time to abandon it. Today, we join with Jews all over the world – as the reading says: you stand here today, all of you. Let’s stand together. Let’s join those who are infected with hope.