

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit

I want to tell you a story. I don't know if this is a true story or not. It's the story of two of the most important rabbis in the Talmud, so important that they are quoted page after page. My gut tells me that this story is true. It's a difficult story and in the end, it's disturbing. But Yom Kippur is not a time for easy stories.

This is the story of Rav Yonatan and Reish Lakesh and it begins in an atypical way. I first studied it when I was a rabbinic student, but I was reminded of it's power this year when I read a wonderful sermon by Rabbi Arthur Segal from South Carolina. He goes in a different direction than I do with the story but I want to thank him for bringing the story to life for me again. Here's the story:

So, Rabbi Yonatan was going for a swim in the Jordan river and Reish Lakesh, who actually wasn't a rabbi at the time, jumps in the water. Now Reish Lakesh was Jewish but he was a bandit, and he moonlighted for the Romans by working as a gladiator. Dangerous work but you do get to play with lions but that's not the story. So they are both swimming in the river and Rabbi Yohanan looks across at Reish Lakesh and sees this guy is great looking, and ripped and strong and Rav Yohanan shouts out to him, "Man, that strength was meant for Torah." Now, the story goes that Rav Yohanan, himself was so handsome that people would stop in their tracks just to look at him and Reish Lakesh looks across the river

at Rav Yohanan and says, “Oh yeah, my strength was meant for Torah? Well, your looks were meant for women.” And Yohanan answers, “You think I’m good looking, you should see my sister. Come study Torah with me and I’ll make sure you meet her.” See what I mean, this is pure Talmud but it’s not a typical story.

So Reish Lakesh goes back with Yohanan and meets his sister, who actually is total knockout, and who I guess, was attracted to bad boys and they actually do fall in love and get married and Reish Lakesh begins to study Torah with her brother and devotes his strength and energy to learning and becomes a man transformed. It happens. People change. Reish Lakesh gives up a life of crime and violence. You see, he has found something much better: true love with his wife, a wonderfully supportive friend in her brother, Rav Yohanan, a community of scholars and besides, if you give up being a gladiator, you don’t have to wake up, go to work and fight to the death several times before lunch, so he’s liking his new life. But Reish Lakesh doesn’t give up his headstrong, argumentative ways and he is a great foil for Rav Yohanan. They argue and disagree trying to forge laws that actually make the world a better, more just place. Rabbi Yohanan calls Reish Lakesh “his right hand,” and their arguments, productive, clear arguments, are found throughout the Talmud.

But one day, something happened. They had a horrendous argument. We know that they weren’t strangers to arguing Talmudic matters together, so maybe something else was happening between them,

some personal hurt or family trouble. We don't know the background to this part of the story but this is what the Talmud relates: They were discussing when certain metal objects, knife blades, spears, swords, could become ritually impure (tamay), unkosher, and like in many legal discussions, the two rabbis disagreed. Rav Yohanan said that these blades could only become impure after they came out of the furnace. Reish Lakesh said no, only after they were immersed in water and polished, could that become impure. You see, they were arguing a small detail but the argument took a different turn. Rav Yohanan was so sure he was right and was so bothered and angry that Reish Lakesh wouldn't agree as to when these knives and swords could become ritually impure that he finally snapped, "Well, I'm sure a bandit knows a lot about the tools of his trade!" Reish Lakesh was now an old man. He had fully done teshuvah, repentance, and had given up robbery years before but in the heat of the argument, Rav Yohanan throws his past up in his face. So Reish Lakesh replies, "You! What good have you done for me all these years! When I was the leader of a band of robbers, they called me their rebbe. Now these students call me rebbe. What's the difference!?" It's hard to believe that he meant it, but in the heat of the moment, we say cruel things. Rav Yohanan replies, "What good have I done for you! You ungrateful ... I brought you to a good, respected life, a life of learning..." not to mention, he probably was thinking, besides, you married my sister!

The Talmud tells us that Reish Lakesh was so stung by Rav Yohanan's words that he literally became heartsick. Who knows exactly what

happened, perhaps he had a heart attack, or a stroke, but in any case, he became deathly ill. His wife, Rav Yohanan's sister goes to her brother and pleads with him to go and apologize, for her children's sake, so their father won't die, for her sake, so she won't lose her husband. But Rav Yohanan is so angry and hurt that he refuses to apologize. These were older men now and their health couldn't have been great and Reish Lakesh got weaker and weaker and then died. At that point, after it was too late, Rav Yohanan was inconsolable. He couldn't think straight. He couldn't study. The rabbis of the Talmudic academy tried to comfort him by sending him one of the young brilliant scholars, Rabbi Elezar, to study with him. But every time Rav Yohanan would bring up a point to discuss, the younger Rabbi Elezar would agree with him and that drove Rav Yohanan crazy and he cries out, "When Reish Lakesh was my study partner, he wouldn't agree with me! He would disagree and ask me question upon question! How do I know if I'm right if I can't argue and dispute and test out my arguments!?" But at that point, Rav Yohanan was a broken man and it wasn't long after that that he, too, passed away.

I'm sorry to tell you such a sad story on this Kol Nidre evening. But it resonates especially on Yom Kippur, this holy day when we are judged for our actions over the course of the past year. When we are told, again and again, that it is in our power to change, apologize and set things right, right with our friends and family, right with our colleagues, set things right with God. So what does that story of Rav Yohanan and Reish Lakesh teach? Does it teach that people's character's don't really change over time? No, it doesn't teach that: Reish Lakesh had grown

into a respected rabbi and a good husband and father. Does it teach that good people should never get angry? No, when Rav Yohanan says “well, a bandit knows the tools of his trade,” Reish Lakesh’s anger was an understandable human response. Does it teach that it’s wrong to argue and we should avoid intense arguments in our community? No. Not at all. For years, these rabbis were closest friends and they argued continually. I think the story teaches that we should never, never let a friendship fall apart and die over some stupid argument.

Even if you think the argument is principled, even if you say, or hear cruel things in the heat of the moment, even if you are really hurt, you should cool down and do everything within your power to apologize, to forgive and to set things right. Unfortunately, this story from almost 2000 years ago is too common in our lives. We all know friends who have fallen away from one another, family members who have stopped talking to one another over some silly, stupid disagreement or angry words. When a friendship, when a family is torn apart by anger, or stubbornness or self-righteous indignation, our responsibility is to work toward reconciliation. So this Kol Nidre evening, I want to speak about how we might learn from the story of Rav Yohanan and Reish Lakesh and, in this new year, set ourselves on a course of healing, forgiveness and repair.

First, I want to talk about anger. Then I want to talk about being wrong. Then I want to talk about the courage to actually raise an issue with a friend when something just doesn’t feel right. Ugly conflict between

friends and family is a dark hole and there are things we can do to both keep ourselves from falling in and if we do fall, to find our way out.

Let's start by talking about anger: There is a quote in the Talmud that states "When a wise person gets angry, his wisdom will leave him" (Nedarim 22a/b). And anger certainly does make you stupid. You stop seeing things clearly. People hit immovable objects like walls and hurt their hands. Your vision become so narrow that you only see your own point of view. The anger wells up and becomes your whole being. It makes a lot of sense that the Talmud also teaches that a person is known by his or her anger. How and when and why you get angry shapes the way people see you and remember you. To be angry at the injustice in the world is admirable. But if you hold on to anger because of a petty slight, or a misunderstanding or foolish disagreements it's like holding on to hot coals. Ultimately, you are the one who is burned. Ironically, do you know who the rabbi was who was quoted saying, "when a wise person gets angry, his wisdom will leave him?" It was Reish Lakesh. Like many of us, he might have known this intellectually but he was unable to put it into practice.

And that brings me to my next point, which is – when a relationship is at stake it is more important to be creative and make peace than to stand on ceremony, insist that you are right and that your friend must be the first to apologize. It's an unusual argument where one person bears all the blame. Of course, Rav Yohanan should have apologized for his initial cruel comment, "Well I guess a bandit knows the tools of

his trade!" but Reish Lakesh could have disarmed him by being quick to say, "I was wrong to say what have you ever done for me. You know how much I love your sister, and my students, and you for that matter." People, especially people of the male persuasion, that is, guys, do not find it easy to admit that we might possibly, maybe be wrong. We are hard-wired that way and I think it has something to do with fighting saber tooth tigers but we don't back down easily (that's when the tiger jumps on your neck). Perhaps you women have an easier time admitting it when you are wrong but we men have a very hard time backing down and it sometimes makes our lives pressured and difficult.

It also makes it hard for us to keep friends because there comes a point in every friendship where you do something wrong. And if you are convinced that are not supposed to do things wrong, and can't admit to doing things wrong, you set yourself up for a lot of conflict. A couple of years ago, a friend told me he had had a revelation. He's a smart guy, the president of a bank. I was interested. What was the revelation? He said, "'I realized that I don't always have to be right! Sometimes, I am wrong. It's amazing! Of course now it seems self-evident but I did not realize that I could still be a leader, and have people look up to me, and still occasionally be wrong. Once I admitted that, it was incredibly liberating." The pressure to be right all the time is huge but more than that, it is a wall that ultimately separates us from our friends and loved ones. Our real friends don't require us to be perfect. They want us to own our mistakes and admit to them. Because once we admit to ourselves we don't always have to be right, we can begin to reconcile

with the people we have hurt. As Bob Dylan sang, "Swallow your pride. You will not die. It's not poison."

Finally, I want to talk about how difficult, and important, it is to take a risk when you and a friend are falling into a conflict. I know this from personal experience. Here's a story about a time I nearly had a major fight with one of my closest friends. I teach a classes in both Judaic Studies and Ethnomusicology and a while back I had to attend an academic conference and I was looking for a good person to guest lecture in my Introduction to the Talmud class. I asked my friend if he might lecture and he said sure. I assumed that I would compensate him in some way for the favor but he was a close friend and I had often done favors for him. I didn't want to insult him by the impersonal gesture of writing him a check to teach the class. So I knew he was a scotch drinker and after he taught the class, I bought him a really special bottle of scotch and wrote a nice thank you note. I thought all was fine. But after that, my friend started acting strange: not so friendly, a little cold, something was clearly not right. But I had no idea what was wrong. Finally one morning when we were running together, I just couldn't hold it in any more and I said, "Please. I know you're angry or upset about something. I have no idea what it is." He was hesitant at first but with some prodding finalize told me: "I can't believe you only gave me a bottle of liquor when I taught that class for you. I know you get paid to teach the course: I only thought it was fair that you would pay me the appropriate percentage for teaching that session." "Wow, I replied. I simply had no idea that was how were thinking about this. Why didn't

you tell me sooner?" He replied, "I didn't think our friendship could survive the disagreement." I said, "survived the disagreement? Even if we have very different ideas of what was "fair" compensation, our friendship is infinitely more important than the money. I'll pay you whatever you think is appropriate." And I did. But what I learned from this was how important it is to take a risk and talk to a friend if something seems to be wrong and I certainly wasn't going to lose a good friend over some small money.

Yom Kippur is a day when we struggle to make right what has gone wrong in our lives. The rabbis understand that this is hard and encourage us, even if we can only begin the process of change: "You take the first step and God will come to meet you . You open the door just a little and God will open it all the way." It like this when we approach a person we've wronged. It takes so much energy to open that door. But sometimes a simple admission – I'm really sorry. I acted like an idiot--will make the door swing open. The other person is caught off guard and thrilled that there is a way out of the fight. The image we are working with on Yom Kippur is the image of the gates of mercy slowly closing, until tomorrow night when they will lock at neilah. But it is in your power to jam the doors, to keep them open, -- to apologize, to forgive, to reconcile--and walk into the new year lighter, more centered and more at peace. May you be sealed for blessing in the book of life.