



High Holy Days 2019
Rabbi Jan Uhrbach

Kol Nidre
(Part C, After Selichot)
Speaking and Not Speaking Redux

Before we close with Avinu Malkeinu, let's go back to the question of when to speak and when to stay silent, looking specifically at #6 on list of 11 principles (Part B): *v'herpa lo nasa al k'rovo* (וְהִרְפָּה לֹא-נָסָא עַל-קְרֹבֹי).

It's a very ambiguous phrase. *Herpa* means disgrace, shame, insult, reproach. *Al k'rovo* is "about" or "on" one's relatives, people who are close. The problem is *nasa* -- it has so many meanings: to lift up, raise high; to carry or bear; to place upon or bring upon; to forgive (as in the 13 attributes, *nosei avon vafesha* -- God forgives our sins).

So among other things, the phrase could mean:

- a) don't raise up things that will cause shame to those close to you. I.e., don't reveal their wrongdoing. Don't search family closets looking for skeletons. Be like Noah's sons who "covered their father's nakedness," so to speak. Or
- b) it could mean don't let slide shameful things among people you're close to. Rashi, for example, interprets it to mean don't go easy on or forgive someone just because they're a relative.

As the Talmud teaches:¹

רב ורבי חנינא ורבי יוחנן ורב חביבא מתנו בכוליה דסדר מועד כל כי האי זוגא חלופי רבי יוחנן
ומעייל רבי יונתן
כל מי שאפשר למחות לאנשי ביתו ולא מיחה נתפס על אנשי ביתו
באנשי עירו נתפס על אנשי עירו
בכל העולם כולו נתפס על כל העולם כולו

Anyone who has the ability to protest [the wrongful conduct] of their household and does not protest, is held responsible for the members of the household.
If the people of their town, they are held responsible for the people of the town.
If the whole world, they are held responsible for the whole world.

Most of us can't change the world, or even our town. Almost all of us have work to do in our homes and our hearts.

The ambiguity of *v'herpa lo nasa al k'rovo* sharpens the issue of when and how to speak out, focusing specifically on *k'rovo* - people close to you. Or, matters that hit close to home.

The Torah here is cautioning against having a double standard, and it's also recognizing the complexity.

1. Shabbat 54b.

We do have a natural tendency to trust people close to us, to want to see them in the best light. And that's a good thing. We have a heightened obligation to our intimates to be protective, even to defend their honor. Relationships matter. I certainly hope the people I'm close to would give me the benefit of the doubt no matter what, would never rush to judgment.

But, if critique feels like disloyalty, no one grows. Parents who are unable to see fault in their children aren't responsible parents. And adults who need to see their parents as perfect find it nearly nearly impossible to make meaningful change in their own character and behavior; you can't see who you are accurately without looking accurately (to extent possible) at whence you came, the context in which you're you. And of course, the natural tendency -- the obligation -- to trust and protect those closest to us can be a problem in another sense: it's one reason why abuse gets covered up and denied in families and business and schools, and why people in power get away with terrible behavior.

The dual definition of *וְחִרְפָּה לֹא-נִשְׂא עַל-קִרְבּוֹ* puts us right in the tension between being forgiving/not judging others/looking with a generous eye, and not settling for cheap grace. On the one hand, not dredging up the past and not embarrassing others - on the other hand not making excuses or living in denial. The work of teshuvah holds both. It's a delicate art.

And it's a very live, salient struggle right now. As our society becomes ever more divided, some of us have discovered that people we love may hold views that we find morally objectionable, even painful or harmful to us personally. What are our responsibilities -- kindness and justice, compassion and challenge, forgiveness and accountability -- toward problematic behavior of people we love or admire - mentors, teachers, parents or grandparents, other family members, friends? Political figures we've supported, leaders we've partnered with or trusted, cultural heroes we've admired or take pride in? Organizations we've volunteered with or benefitted from?

What do we say aloud, to the person directly, privately or even publicly? How does it impact our relationship, whether and how we continue to engage?

וְחִרְפָּה לֹא-נִשְׂא עַל-קִרְבּוֹ Don't dredge up things that are embarrassing.

וְחִרְפָּה לֹא-נִשְׂא עַל-קִרְבּוֹ Don't offer cheap grace for serious wrongdoing, just because it's embarrassing, or hits close to home

I'm not going to try to tie this up in a neat bow and offer answers -- that's not possible, these are thorny and uncomfortable issues. And Yom Kippur is all about sitting with them, so I'm going to let us all do that.

I will say that I think the best way to manage the tension is to focus not on whether, but on how and why -- indeed, everything I said earlier about speech applies forcefully here. We need to talk about things that are embarrassing, painful, even shameful; it's not acceptable or helpful to just look the other way. *And* we need to do it in a way that is forward-looking -- that doesn't constitute *lashon hara*, that doesn't destroy another person's or group's dignity. It needs to come from our love of kindness.

We all make mistakes.

We all need people to support and stand by us.

And we all need people to call us out - gently, lovingly.

As I said, Judaism is about real human beings in the real world. No one has a perfect record, and purity is for angels, not us. But we do need to be honest.

And here's where "*aval anaḥnu va'avoteinu ḥatanu*" comes back in. It is not a betrayal of our ancestors to acknowledge their error and sin; it doesn't mean we can't love and respect them. Any more than it's a betrayal of ourselves to look honestly at ourselves! It's actually an act of self-love, and self-respect. Because when we look at ourselves honestly, we can do better. That's the great gift of Yom Kippur.

Only when we look honestly at *avoteinu v'imoteinu* -- our own parents and grandparents, or more generally our Jewish forebears, our American forebears -- can we do better, repair damage, and atone. That's the best way to honor them.

It's admittedly hard, sometimes threatening. But it's especially important this year. The mess our world is in didn't just emerge in this moment, in our generation. None of this sprang from nothing, and none of it is new.

And I know this is going to sound weird, but that's actually a source of hope. Each generation has its own work of teshuvah to do -- for its own flaws, and for the flaws in its inheritance. We're meant to work in and with the world we're given.

Our generations are becoming aware of sins of our forebears at an almost unprecedented level, and we are starting to take responsibility for fixing them.

It's easy (and I admit, sometimes tempting) to dismiss some of the calls for repair as identity politics or the politics of grievance. Occasionally that's a well-grounded critique. But overwhelmingly, what we're witnessing is a large portion of society opening itself to the need for communal teshuvah, even as we're simultaneously witnessing backlash, denial and retrenchment among others.

It's tempting to say I'm not responsible for things prior generations did; but as we saw before, that's actually not normative Judaism.

And it's tempting to say I want to focus on the future, not the past. For sure, "let's not dwell on the past" is sometimes an act of grace, generosity, forgiveness, that allows us to move forward. Is that a gift you can, honestly, give to someone in your life this Yom Kippur? If so, do it. It's one of the most precious things you can give. And sometimes, "let's not dwell on the past" is a way of avoiding discomfort and responsibility.

One additional thought to throw in the mix: *k'rovim* here refers not only to our relatives, but also people we relate to, people close to us in the sense of people like us. We tend to have a double standard favoring not only those we know intimately, but those we see as "our kind of people." We trust them more, credit what they say, extend more understanding. We empathize. And this double standard is another reason it can be hard to acknowledge inherited biases, structural inequities, caused by the sins of our ancestors.

So we have to be especially careful about another mitzvah in our text: speak truth in your own heart. We'll pick up there tomorrow.