

The Bridge of Relationships

Yom Kippur Morning 5772

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By tova stabin

Gut Yuntif. Thank you for having me speak. I want to also thank all the people who do so much work to make today a day *without* work and with spirit for all of us. I know well it doesn't just happen magically so I want to thank the rabbis, staff, and volunteers who work endlessly so we can be together today.

Indeed, there are so many others close and far, past and present, alive and dead, who have made it possible for me to speak here today and I don't only mean me personally, though surely there is that, but I mean also as a woman, an out lesbian and lesbian parent, coming from a working-class background -- really it's astonishing. When I think about the congregation of my youth, where despite a liberal bent, girls were not allowed to be bat mitzvah and women, no less out lesbians, didn't speak from the bimah on any day, let alone Yom Kippur, a day we read from Leviticus, a word that can strike fear into any queer or queer ally's heart, I realize what an amazing journey it's been.

In some ways, the days of awe are so much about the journey. As I imagine many of you know from the song, Rabbi Nachman said the whole world is a very narrow bridge and the main thing is not to be afraid and further, he said that the beginning of the bridge is like birth and the end is death, so it is the road from birth to death that is a narrow bridge, the bridge of our lives. The days of awe mimic this -- at the beginning is Rosh Hashanah -- the birthday of the world, celebration, life, apples and honey, the fullness of birth and the journey of days of awe ahead. For ten days we walk over the bridge of life trying to make connection and heal relationships, to embrace our humanness with all its error and celebration. Then on Yom Kippur, traditionally, we dress in white, the gates of heaven, as some call it, are open and we are most like angels, closest to that place between life and death, close to where we can embrace the beauty of nothingness and emptiness.

Some have called this time between Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur a dress rehearsal for our journey from birth to death, giving us the opportunity to lay on a metaphorical four poster bed like in a movie from the '40s, and as we approach the "final act" we realize what is important in this life, what amends we need to make to friends and family. What a great opportunity these holidays give to us. We do not have to wait to get near our actual deaths to evaluate our lives and recommit with *kavanah*, with intention, to *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. It could make a beautiful movie with endless sequels, but...

Then there is the whole fear thing. Even in the dress rehearsal, I am afraid of crossing bridges, figuratively and literally. Two summers ago my family had the privilege of going to the Netherlands because of a dance scholarship my son got. While Mayim danced in The Hague, Anne and I got to stay for free in a friend of a friend's beautiful apartment on a small outer island of Amsterdam. The bus let you off a few blocks from a bridge you walked over to get to

the island. As some of you who are my Facebook friends, the bridge was amazing – even won an international award. The bridge went up stairs you could see through to the water and then made a huge arch up and a huge arch down and then more stairs. In my mind, I appreciated it, but I'm afraid of bridges and when it was windy and rainy, as it is there often, I was even more afraid. Still I had to walk the bridge. As I walked over the bridge, daily I sang the song *The Whole World is a Narrow Bridge* (and sometimes I sang *Whenever I Feel Afraid I Hold My Head Up High* from the *King and I* for those Broadway moments). I told myself this was good practice for the high holidays and for life. Every day, I would try new methods to deal with fear and remember the life lessons there were – walk slowly or quick, stop to enjoy the view from the middle, breath deep, be attentive to my insides and the outside. After a while, just the number of times I had been on the bridge helped my fear, perhaps like the collective experiences of Yom Kippur that we have that help us through the bridge of life and relationships.

For me one of the most important personal and collective experiences during this time of year is the focus on working on relationships. The Mishna in Tractate Yoma, points out that one cannot atone for wrong doing against a person on Yom Kippur until one works it out with the person who has been wronged. So, it came as no surprise when I was told that one of the things to be focused on for today's d'var was different types of relationships and transition and change. When I heard that subject and thought about my life this year and the coming year, I thought, you have a few weeks? Then I remembered it was Yom Kippur and long sermons would probably not be appreciated.

For me personally, this is a year where relationships are changing enormously. It is the first major holiday I'm spending without my 16-year-old son, Mayim. I can kvell and say he is in Seattle studying and dancing with the Pacific Northwest Ballet, but not being with him today is hard on the heart. However, I'm living up in Seattle with him most of the time in a small apartment in a large apartment building and commuting here some. Meanwhile, my partner of 24 years (this week – happy anniversary) is living here in Eugene in our home with our dog and our cat and our garden. To say there have been a lot of changes in my primary relationships would be a bit of an understatement. At TBI there have also been changes – rabbis and staff coming and going, and, of course, people moving away, new members coming in, birthdays of elders, b'nai mitzvah, births and deaths, celebrations and mournings. So much can happen in a year and yet it seems we cycle back through the lessons of our lives so many times over. A friend told me recently that 80% of learning is review – I wondered what percentile of learning I had reached this Yom Kippur.

If we look at this morning's parsha, Vayikra, we can infer much about relationships. The Cohen Gadol (high priest) is instructed on how to prepare for atoning for personal wrong doings and the wrong doings of the community. One of the ways that he (or she) is supposed to do that is by sacrificing an animal. The Cohen is instructed to find two totally identical goats, as if they were twins in every way, and then draw lots to see which one will be sacrificed in the most holy of ways in the sanctuary and which one the "sins of Israel" will be confessed to and then sent out to Azazel, a word with too many interpretations to go into here, but for brevity sake, sent out to the dry desert wilderness to fall or be pushed off a ragged cliff and be sacrificed, making the goat the first official "scapegoat." How do these goats seemingly identical in every manner,

wind up on such different paths? It's common to discuss the different fates they meet, but what if we add in that they are identical, but meet different fates. What if we view it as showing us that both of these goats live inside each of us, that like other Torah twins such as Jacob and Esau, we may have holiness within us, but we still need to acknowledge our humanness, our errors and our harshness, we need to wear our animal skins on the outside, like Jacob had to in order to receive a blessing. We need to acknowledge all these roles as our own – we can be the Cohen who can seemingly without rhyme or reason, by lots, decide who will be holy and who scapegoated, and we can also be the one that is holy and the one that is scapegoated. How will we view our relationships, our community, and ourselves if we acknowledge these seeming dualities, this complexity? As we lay on that metaphorical four poster bed (and I don't mean the one you'd like to be napping on later today), perhaps worn down of our defenses by fasting and long days of prayer and clothes white and simple, how will we look at our relationships, past, present and future? What about relationships are we afraid of and how will we deal with that fear?

This has been a year when memories of my relationships from my past have flooded back to me. Every time I enter my apartment building in Seattle the sound of the buzz and the clique of the door, provokes a visceral memory of all the buzzes of the tenements of my childhood in Brooklyn. A deluge of memories wash over me about the relationships of my youth – strong, basic, violent, direct, loving, protective, abusive, multi-generational, multicultural – parents and grandparents, siblings and cousins, landlords and neighbors, pimps, gang members, and prostitutes. I learned something from each of these – even if it was that they needed to be cast off into the desert. There are parts of these relationships I miss sorely and parts that I have worked hard at and continue to work hard to get them out of my life, not only in their physical actualities, but also in their persistent place in my mind and heart.

Those relationships were filled with contradictions – it wasn't only metaphorical twins, but more like sextuplets. Adults who would literally punch you out for saying a cross word to their kid, would go home and beat those same kids. The diversity, though not called that at the time, was an integrated part of daily life, generally and within the Jewish community. Knowing different types of peoples, values and cultures were part of the natural beauty of that territory. But along with that beauty, there were challenges and severe discrimination – there were protests and picket lines against school integration in my grade school and race riots in my high school. Individuals and communities did not agree, sometimes violently did not agree and I do not use the word violent lightly. Relationships were not smooth or clear, and while certainly my relationships are different now and generally for the better, they still are not always smooth or clear or predictable or just one thing. Two years ago, I wouldn't have thought I'd be living in two places, with and without my partner, with and without my child.

The journey of the high holidays is, however, not only individuals' journeys, but also collective journeys. We sit here together, pray, chat, and say the *Vidui* as a community. As I mentioned earlier when I think about the changes that have happened that have allowed me to speak, it's really amazing. But as amazing as it is, I also know there are still many who don't want me to be here. I tell my son that I can't believe there are kids who are out in middle school and high-school and that I'm glad (and proud of him for) how out he is that his parents are lesbians. And

yet I have to use the very same breath to talk with him about kids who kill themselves because they are queer or perceived to be queer and can't take the bullying or rejection from family.

It's hard for me to believe that people are afraid of my relationships simply because I'm a lesbian. Certainly, I can address that fear by reasoning that my relationship should be accepted because it is just like straight ones. True enough, my 24 years with Anno can be as "boring" as anyone else's relationship – we watch bad TV after a hard day, worry about bills, debate how much time Mayim should take for his homework, laugh and cry with each other regularly, see friends, help each other with our middle aged aches and pains and more. But it's also true that our relationship and queer relationships are NOT like straight relationships and if we are to really address people's fears, I believe, we have to acknowledge that too. We are lesbians who live in a homophobic world – I still have to think about where and when we can hold hands in public and when that's just my comfort level and when that can be life threatening – that impacts our relationship. We are two women who live in a sexist world and so societal roles ingrained in all of us about what our roles should be in a relationship play out in a different way than in straight relationships. All this and more impact our relationship beyond that we are two people who love each other deeply. I want people to walk through their fear of accepting relationships not only because they can see how they are like their own, but indeed, because they can see how they are different.

As some of you, perhaps most of you, know, Basic Rights Oregon is strongly considering whether to begin gathering signatures for a freedom to marry for LGBT couples Oregon ballot initiative. I would urge you to support this initiative in ways you can with your voice, time, networks, and finances. I know there are people in this community already hard at work and you can connect through them and I hope you do – a number of them are sitting here. And given that it's Yom Kippur and right wing religious groups will surely use some parts of Leviticus to point to why giving rights to LGBT is the end of the world, as a religious community it's particularly important to have your voice heard. The implications are not only about getting invited to the great LGBT weddings we might all attend, but indeed is a civil rights issue. In addition to higher taxes, among the rights not granted to LGBT couples include issues of hospital visitation, social security benefits, health insurance, estate taxes, family leave, pensions, home protection and more. According to a report given to the U.S. General Accounting Office, there are 1,138 benefits the United States government provides to legally married heterosexual couples. It is not a small matter.

But let me not stop here because I want is to stop the fear of relationships in a deep way and so I do not want this activism to be the end of any bridge. Even if we get to be a little steadier in winning this particular debate, the winds shaking the bridge are still strong. As we know, for instance, the African-American community fought courageously, often with their lives, for their civil rights. It has made for amazing changes in my lifetime, but it did not end racism. I would say, that part of the racism that persists today is by the people who say "we've arrived," living a post-racist world, when there is constant evidence to the contrary – locally, just a few weeks ago a 16 year black teen was the victim of a hate crime in Creswell and was beaten unconscious on his way home from school. Yes, marriage rights are essential and will give LGBT couples social security, but what if social security is cut for everyone including LGBT people and

everyone gets nothing? Yes, marriage rights are essential, but if you're queer and you and your spouse are walking down the street holding hands and some homophobic persons are thinking to beat you up, they probably won't stop if you have a marriage certificate. And what about young queers who are homeless, kicked out by homophobic straight parents? Or poor queers without homes or food or health care in relationships or not? What about other types of relationships like lifetime queer friends or people who live collectively? I want this work to help us be open to all healthy loving relationships and families; for this hard work not to be the end, but an acknowledgement of being in the middle of the bridge of fighting for all basic human rights for all people, a world safe and supportive for all.

It's Yom Kippur, so I confess, I am afraid of being even this honest, really. Afraid of saying do this, you need to do this, you should do this, but it's not enough. There are big holes to be filled and this doesn't fill them all, so fight hard for all civil rights, while you know it's far from everything and that we must always think critically of all of our actions and realize the many complex sides of them. I'm afraid of saying we are still in the middle and even if this happens it will be great in some ways, but we will still be in the middle.

Why am I, are we so afraid of being in the middle, of ambiguity, of complexity, of holding more than one idea, of saying two truths, two goats, two twins, holding many things in our hands at the same time. Whenever I do diversity trainings, someone(s) always tells me they only see people as human – they don't see color, sexuality, class, gender, religion, size, etc. That's true, I say, we are all human, but it's not the *only truth* in the world we live in. I always tell them about a poem by Pat Parker in which she says the first thing you have to *remember* when you see me is that I'm a black woman and the first thing you have to *forget* when you see me is that I'm a black woman. My goal is to hold these two truths at exactly the same time all the time for all people.

So, let us work towards respect for all relationships, not just because they are the same, but also because they are not. Let us use the privilege we have for this annual dress rehearsal for life to remember there are many bridges with many complexities and duplicities. We need to honor not just beginnings and endings, but middles and in between places – we should remember that we see our doorposts as holy, that place in between the outer and inner world, and so we adorn them with mezzuzahs that contain the Sh'ma, the prayer of oneness, uniting duplicities and complexities. And we say the Sh'ma traditionally first thing in the morning and last thing at night, that place between consciousness and unconsciousness where we seem to spend so much of our lives. Today is the Day of Atonement, at-one-ment, so let us join the many sides of ourselves personally and collectively, knowing each of us can be the Cohen who tells the goats their fate, the goat that gets treated holy and the goat cast out to the desert. We can stand on the bridges of life communally or individually and not be as afraid, even for all the times we are in the middle, because the view from the middle *can* be divine. Even if there is a strong wind blowing on us, if we honor all the pieces of ourselves, our differences and our similarities, then the wind between us can turn into a truly collective wind, a *ruach*, which also means spirit, a collective spirit, a collective *ruach*, from which we can sing and dance to beautiful songs from our ancestors about the bridges of life. Thank you and gut yuntiff.

