

Holding Grudges

In Jonathan Allen and Arnie Parnes' 2014 book, *HRC: State Secrets and the Rebirth of Hillary Clinton*, the journalists allege that in 2008, following Barack Obama's triumph in the Democratic primaries, Clinton campaign aides were charged with compiling a detailed Excel spreadsheet recording names of all those who had either remained loyal or betrayed Hillary during this frantic time in her political career. Did people stay with her or did they switch over and endorse Obama? The Clinton aides even assigned rankings to each person who made the list, from one to seven, with the latter number designating someone as a "traitor."

While this might be a common practice in Washington, to me it's a blatant case of holding a grudge. (OK, no more politics!)

Of course grudges are not unique to our elected leaders. We see them play out in popular culture, on the sports field, in academia, here in the CBI community, and even in our own homes. Every one of us has probably, at one point or another, held a grudge against someone else or even an entire group of people. We might be harboring a grudge right now. Think about it.

Now, what exactly is a grudge and how does harboring one affect us emotionally and physiologically? According to Merriam-Webster's definition, a grudge means: to give, do, or allow (something) in a reluctant or unwilling way. It also means to dislike or feel angry toward (someone) for something.

The rabbis also weigh in on describing what a grudge is in typical talmudic fashion. In BT Yoma 23a (in modern terms) we learn: *It was taught: Which is vengeance and which is bearing a grudge? Michael said to Adam: Lend me your lawnmower, and Adam, possibly fearful that his lawnmower might be abused or not returned, does not lend his lawnmower to Michael. A few days later, Adam needs to trim his hedges. He goes next door to Michael and asks if he can borrow Michael's electric hedge trimmers. If Michael says, "I will not lend it to you, just as you did not lend your lawnmower to me"—this is vengeance. If Michael lends Adam the hedge trimmers, saying "Here it is. I will lend this to you even though you would not lend your lawnmower to me." Michael, though he lends the hedge trimmers to Adam, is bearing a grudge.*

And in the same vein, according to Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, "Bearing a grudge...seems to put us on the high moral ground, though really our act of generosity isn't generous at all. Either way, by withholding or by giving grudgingly, we are responding to the other person's need improperly. We have become locked by them, and thereby with them, in a cycle of revenge—an endless loop until someone breaks it."¹

There are multiple Hebrew words for "grudge". The first is *satam* which can also mean "to hate" or "cherish animosity" against someone. We see this word used in Genesis 27. *Va-yis-tom esav et yaakov*, "and Esau hated/bore a grudge against Jacob." We also see this word used in the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 50. *Va-yomru lo yis-ta-meinu yosef v'ha-shayv ya-shiv lanu et kol ha-ra-av asher ga-mal-nu oh-toh*, "They [Joseph's brothers] said, 'It may be that Joseph bears a grudge/hates us and will fully reciprocate all the evil which we did unto him.'"

¹ <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/when-friendship-sours-vengeance-bearing-a-grudge/>

The other Hebrew word that translates to “grudge” is from the root *natar*, which means “to keep, guard, retain.” Thus, when one holds a grudge, one is keeping alive the memory of another’s offense against him. He is literally holding it close.

The best example of the use of this word is found in tomorrow afternoon’s Torah portion from Leviticus 19, also known as the Holiness Code. Verse 18 reads, *lo ti-kom v’lo tittor et b’nei a-meh-cha v’ahavta l’rey’ah’cha kamocho ani adonai*. “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am God.”

There is so much to unpack in this one verse. For instance, are we allowed to bear a grudge against non-Jews? Can one really love their neighbor in this way? How can God command us against feeling an emotion? Is there a punishment for breaking this mitzvah? Each of these questions certainly deserve their own drash. However, what I am most interested in, especially on the holiest day of the year, is figuring out why bearing a grudge is such a terrible thing and what can we do about the grudges that we are currently guarding.

While Jewish tradition comments at length on the repercussions of holding a grudge, what I found most compelling were the scientific, or medical reasons as to why we ought to steer away from harboring resentment towards other people.

Simply put, doing so makes us feel crummy, both emotionally and physically.

In fact, according to many doctors and psychologists, multiple chemical imbalances may occur when one allows a grudge to fester. There could be a dramatic decrease in oxytocin. This hormone influences our social bonding experiences, so a decrease can lead to sexual dysfunction and/or a form of depression. Another possible chemical reaction is an increase in the level of cortisol, also known as the “stress hormone.” An increase can partially shut down one’s immune system, allowing the body to be more susceptible to invading pathogens. We’ve all experienced this phenomenon before. When we get really stressed, oftentimes we’ll get sick afterwards. I just know that I’ll get a cold soon after the *chagim*. And there are other negative side effects to holding grudges, such as: anxiety and cardiovascular issues. There is an extensive amount of research describing these linkages.

Mark Twain may have summed it up best: “Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured.” And that’s exactly what is at the heart of a grudge—anger. An anger and hate so potent that it can actually debilitate us. It can keep us from moving forward in life. It stunts our spiritual and emotional growth. Holding a grudge is a constant preoccupation that diverts a lot of our energy from living our life in a healthy manner.

Rabbi Alan Lew (may his memory be for a blessing), wrote the following about grudges in his High Holy Day book, *This is Real and you are Completely Unprepared*. He writes, “I wonder how many of us are holding on very hard to some piece of personal history that is preventing us from moving on with our lives, and keeping us from those we love. I wonder how many of us cling so tenaciously to a version of the story of our lives in which we appear to be utterly blameless and innocent, that we become oblivious to the pain we have inflicted on others, no matter how unconsciously or inevitably or innocently we may have inflicted it. I wonder how many of us are terrified of acknowledging the truth of our lives because we think it will expose us. How

many of us stand paralyzed between the moon and the sun; frozen—unable to act in the moment—because of our terror of the past and because of the intractability of the present circumstances that past has wrought? Forgiveness, it has been said, means giving up our hopes for a better past. This may sound like a joke, but how many of us refuse to give up our version of the past, and so find it impossible to forgive ourselves or others, impossible to act in the present?”²

Bearing a grudge slowly sucks the life right out of us. It diverts potential positive energy from entering our lives. And because it’s a constant preoccupation, holding a grudge affects us much more adversely than it does the person at the other end. Bearing a grudge is no different than allowing “someone whom you don’t like [to] live inside your head rent-free.”³

If this isn’t bad enough, when we allow ourselves to hold on to the past so tenaciously, we can’t help but relive the hurt we initially felt, over and over again. All of this chips away at our happiness.

It is no coincidence, then, that one of the Torah readings on Yom Kippur includes this negative commandment. At the time when we are supposed to be done with seeking and granting forgiveness with others, the Torah reminds us that to really begin anew, we need to let go of grudges. How can we have any semblance of a sweet year if we continue to cling to past grievances that may or may not have been directed at us with intent?

As we know too well, moving on is not easy. Some of us here have been harboring grudges for decades, not unlike the resentment felt amongst the brothers in both Genesis stories. After such a long period, is it even possible to just release the hurt and move on? For those of us who say no, that’s its not possible, I’d like to share a story about the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, whose music we sing at nearly every service, including tonight.

Rabbi Carlebach “came to the United States from Austria as a teenager, a refugee from the Nazis. Every so often he would go back to Austria and Germany to give concerts, and people would ask him, ‘How can you go back there and give concerts? Don’t you hate them after what they did to you? Don’t you hate the Austrians and the Germans?’

“And this is what Shlomo would say to anyone who asked him this question: ‘I only have one soul. If I had two souls, I would gladly devote one of them to hating the Germans full-time. But I don’t. I only have one soul, and I’m not going to waste it on hating.’”⁴

Forget about the Germans—what about our own families? How many of us have broken relationships with our own blood? How many of us are devoting a portion of our own souls to hating the actions of those we grew up with?

² Lew, Alan. *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*. Boston: Little, Brown, 2003. 27-28.

³ Telushkin, Joseph. *The Book of Jewish Values*. New York: Bell Tower, 2000. p. 296

⁴ Lew. p. 123

Sometimes I wonder if the more challenging mitzvah to keep from Leviticus 19:18 is not the positive command to love one's neighbor as oneself, but rather the prohibition of holding a grudge.

So what can we do? We can try to forgive—the other person or even ourselves for allowing this poison in our system in the first place. The act of forgiving—of truly letting go—creates a healthier body and mind. It also helps re-write the past.

And according to Jewish tradition, letting go of grudges may even extend one's life. We learn in the Talmud (BT Megillah), *Rabbi Nehunya, the Elder, was asked by what merit he deserved long life. He said: "I have never accepted bribes, and I have always forgotten the wrongs done against me"*.

It may even unclog the channels between us and God. *Rabbi Eliezer prayed long for rain, but was not answered. Rabbi Akiba stepped to the front, offered a prayer of a few verses, and rain descended. A Voice from Heaven was heard to say: "It is not that Akiba is a greater person, but Rabbi Eliezer remembers wrongs done to him, and Rabbi Akiba forgets them (BT Taanit).*

Now, I am skeptical of these benefits of letting go of grudges as I am sure many of you are. But the message is clear from our tradition: our lives will be better off, across the board, if we observe this mitzvah.

I understand what some of us might be thinking. How can I simply forget and move on? Letting go of a grudge, however, is not forgetting about the offense. That is impossible to do. We are going to remember events in our life until we no longer can. So, the talmudic rabbis may have been a little unrealistic. But what we can do, is to make peace with the past. To realize that whatever happened, is just a bump on our journey. And the journey continues.

Or to make it seem even more trivial, Maimonides believed that bearing a grudge “can only be eradicated by a proper philosophy of life, that appreciates the...vanity of transitory everyday matters.”

However, some things are too big to reframe as trivial. And with some offenses, it just takes time. Luckily we have the rest of our lives to come to any semblance of peace. The longer we hold on, however, the stronger the bond becomes and soon the grudge owns us. It affects our daily life and relationships.

Maybe what God wants from us in this season, before we even begin to think about making teshuva—there's still time!—is to look inside ourselves and evaluate our own deeds. Maybe first, we need to ask ourselves if we've ever done or said something to someone which would warrant that person to hold a grudge against us? Are we so innocent and blameless? By acknowledging our own faults and wrestling with them, we might be more primed to either forgive or move on.

All day tomorrow we have the opportunity to begin the process of relieving our heart, our mind and our body from the weight of bitter memory. It's not easy. It's a process. But trying to follow this mitzvah, according to our tradition will get us on the path towards holiness. And it might just get us a little closer to what God commands us to do later in the verse from Leviticus: to love our neighbor as ourselves. May we all eradicate the hate in our hearts and welcome love. May each of us work on letting go and living well. L'chayim!

Bibliography

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