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Congregation Beth Israel  
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### Family Matters

*Three elderly Jewish women are seated on a bench in Miami Beach, each one bragging about how devoted her son is to her.*

*The first one says: "My son is so devoted that last year for my birthday he gave me an all-expenses-paid cruise around the world. First class."*

*The second one says: "My son is more devoted. For my seventy-fifth birthday last year, he catered an affair for me. And even gave me money to fly down my good friends from New York."*

*The third one says: "My son is most devoted. Three times a week he goes to a psychiatrist. A hundred and twenty dollars an hour he pays him. And what does he speak about the whole time? Me."*

While this joke might refer to the intense interconnectedness of the Jewish family – especially between a mother and son – its punch line conveys a bit more nuance than that.

I have a theory. It is not based on any statistical analysis on collected data, or even interviews. It is simply based on my own experiences with others as well as stories I've heard. This is my theory: There are relationship problems in every family. In other words, "we've all got issues." Every one of us right now can probably think of some relationship turned sour in our own family. Maybe one sibling doesn't speak to another sibling. Perhaps there are first cousins who don't know each other because of a fight their parents had years ago. I am sure some children haven't spoken to their parents in years or vice versa. Unfortunately, the examples can go on.

In fact, all we have to do is look in the Torah, and especially in today's Torah portion to see more examples of unhealthy family relationships. In one family, a boy kills his brother. In another, a father sends his son away into the wilderness because his wife doesn't want the boy and his mother around. This same father also attempts to kill his

other son. The son survives but they never speak to each other again. That's where we are today. In another family, a father favors one son over his others and the sons, jealous of the favored son, argue whether to leave him for dead or sell him into slavery. This is all pretty sickening, right? I mean we're talking about family. Besides Joseph forgiving his brothers who sold him to a caravan of Midianite traders, few other Biblical characters perform any kind of teshuva and patch up old wounds.

So what are we going to do about our family issues that hopefully pale in comparison to the ones from our sacred texts? We have two options. We can either ignore them since that's the easiest road or we can tackle them head-on. Left unresolved, problems become more deeply entrenched leading to discouragement with little hope of getting resolved. Often people run from problems and conflict. We all have been tempted to escape from time to time. The weight of family problems can be formidable and troublesome. Facing the issues is the best approach. We know that. But, solutions are rarely immediate. We want solutions now, but many interpersonal issues take time. Fear, pride, uncertainty, and family dynamics can all get in the way. Re-connecting with one cousin, for instance, might anger someone else in the family.

To be fair, some family problems run so deep and are so terrible that even thinking about reconciliation is a near impossibility. The problems described in our Torah portion for today would be an example of that. But those aside, when are we going to start on a path towards reconciliation and re-connection, or at the very least, encourage it of others?

Hillel's famous quote "*Im lo akshav, e-matai?*" (If not now, when?) is not just a catchy phrase. It's meant to push us to act, just as the shofar blasts sounded a month prior to Rosh Hashanah push us to engage in teshuva and seek forgiveness.

I'd like to share a couple stories with you. They both occurred five years ago when I was working as a hospital chaplain in San Francisco. The first story takes place as I am waiting at home while on-call for the first time. On a mid-July Sunday at 1 in the morning my pager goes off. Startled by the piercing sound, I leap out of bed like I'm in boot camp. I grab the pager on my bedside table and see that it is indeed what I had been nervously waiting for all evening; an emergency at the hospital. I put my robe on, walk into the living room with phone, notepad, pen and pager and call the number. I am connected to the nurse's station where, soon after I mention who I am, the nurse patches me directly to the patient's room without revealing what the emergency is. In the hospital chaplaincy handbook, it states that a chaplain will get a page in the middle of the night *only* in the event of a crisis. A crisis might be a death, agitation over imminent surgery, a family arriving to the emergency room, stopping life support, etc. This specific elderly patient, whom I'll refer to as Jon, has no such emergency. He just wants to talk. I attempt to calm him down and ask if he thinks this conversation could wait until morning. Absolutely not. Jon has things he has to get off his chest and there is no postponing. At 1:30 in the morning I enter his room, pull a seat next to his bed and listen for next 2 hours.

Jon had been in the hospital a while due to a complication with his liver. His condition was not improving. Lying in bed all day for weeks became a breeding ground for constant life review. This is what he tells me: "My brother and I haven't spoken for 15 years. I can't even remember what we were fighting about all those years. We didn't even hug each other at our momma's funeral; I never told my dad that I loved him. He died soon after I left the house; My kids don't even know their aunts, uncles and first cousins; My grandchildren haven't called me in a year. They haven't even visited me and they live 45

minutes away. I have no idea what they like to do; My son thinks I'm a no good drunk; My sister's husband was abusive and I never fought for her. Her son won't have anything to do with me now, or the rest of his family; I could have done so much differently years ago. I've got no one."

Jon may not have been coding, but this certainly was an emergency. As I listened that evening to Jon pour out his heart to me, I doubted whether one family could have so many issues. I mean, dysfunction had grabbed a hold of his family and suffocated them. There were so many broken relationships in Jon's family it was difficult for me to keep track.

In his book, *Deep Medicine*<sup>1</sup>, Doctor William Stewart's thesis is that "everything is either health creating or health negating, everything." For Jon, the buildup of emotions surrounding his family had reached its peak. The regrets, the unfinished business, the loss, the shame – each and every one weighed on his conscience since he was no longer able to repress those events and issues. Repressing these broken relationships for as long as he did was very health negating. Jon mentioned to me that he was able to cope with his failing liver and dim prognosis. He wasn't, however, able to do the same with all his family *tsures*. It was just too stressful.

Jon never picked up the phone. I imagine I was the only person whom he confided in. Had he begun the healing process early on, who knows how his life would have played out. The stress he was harboring could have been transformed into health creating encounters years ago. When I was sitting at his bedside, I asked myself why *we* wait until we're in the most vulnerable states to make amends. Do we want to be in Jon's place, lying

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart, William B. *Deep Medicine*. Portland, OR: Book Partners, 2006

on a hospital bed in the twilight of our lives, wishing we can turn back the clock and patch up old wounds? Wishing we could forgive or ask forgiveness from a loved one after they've left this world?

The second story. A patient of mine "Ann" is told she no longer qualifies for a vital organ transplant. In essence, she is informed that death is right around the corner. No more than 70 years of age, she begins to think of all the things she needs to do in order to die with peace of mind. For Ann, this includes contacting a sister whom she hasn't spoken to since a falling out during the death of their mother 25 years ago. It also includes spending more time with her three grandsons all under the age of 10 that don't really know her the way she wants her grandchildren to know and remember her. She also wants to have the family dinners she never experienced as a working mom. Like Jon, Ann feels worse about all the things she had not done with her family than her recent prognosis. In the last few months of her life, Ann was able to accomplish many of these goals. Ann's sister was even at her bedside as Ann took her last breaths, holding her hand. Ann was lucky. She had the opportunity to make teshuva. She acted. Jon didn't. Ann's only regret, she told me before she died, was that she wished she had been on the path of healing years earlier. Too much time went by without doing anything.

Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl wrote, "Man...may well change himself, otherwise he would not be man. It is a prerogative of being human, and a constituent of human existence, to be capable of shaping and reshaping oneself. In other words, it is a privilege of man to become guilty, and his responsibility to overcome guilt."<sup>2</sup> Though this quote is clearly connected to the High Holy Days and their power to instill

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<sup>2</sup> Frankl, Viktor E. *The Will to Meaning; Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy*. New York: World Pub., 1969. 73.

renewal and change within us, it also applies to our capability of tackling the uncomfortable or dreaded situation at any stage of life.

Unlike other species, we can change the way we are at any point. The month of Elul and the High Holy Days, are a reminder to the Jewish people that this need exists.

Unfortunately for many of us, the hospital bed or death of a loved one is also a reminder. On my way home from the hospital at 3:30 in the morning I felt deep sadness for Jon that he never had the opportunity to tell his loved ones the things he shared with me. His outpouring of emotions, though not a substitute for true reconciliation and re-connection, was indeed health creating.

Recently, as I've thought about the relationships in my family that have gone sour or are non-existent for reasons that often make no sense, I've been transported back to many campfire song sessions and the lyrics of Harry Chapin's *Cat's in the Cradle*. The last stanza reads:

I've long since retired, my son's moved away  
I called him up just the other day.....  
I said "I'd like to see you if you don't mind"  
He said "I'd love to Dad, if I could find the time.  
You see my new jobs a hassle, and the kids have the flu.  
But it's sure nice talking to you, Dad,  
It's been sure nice talking to you....."  
And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me  
He'd grown up just like me,  
My boy was just like me.....

If we don't take that leap and repair the broken relationships in our families, then our children are bound to feel the same way we do. Our wounds will transfer to them. They may already have. We might even be those children.

My prayer this year is that we make health creating choices not only for our bodies and minds, but especially for our relationships. People die, relationships don't have to. The opportunities to change and heal are always present. Let's not let them slip away.