

Bridging the Gap

Rabbi Sam Pollak

When was a time you found yourself standing on the edge of a canyon, wondering how you would get across?

It was summer 2011, and I was working at Goldman Union Camp Institute, the Reform movement's overnight camp in Indiana. I had already spent four summers there as a camper and four on staff. It was familiar; it was my home away from home. But that summer, in 2011, I wanted to come out.

In the year leading up to that summer, I had begun telling people that I understood myself to be a gay man. First I told my roommate, then my close circle of friends, then my sister, then my parents—and slowly I became more comfortable in my own skin. But I was worried about camp.

I was afraid my old campers would feel betrayed. I was afraid their parents would think it was inappropriate for me to sleep in the same cabin as their sons. I was afraid the camp culture, so infused with gendered activities and assumptions about masculinity, would no longer feel like home.

Thank God, I was wrong.

When I told the first person who'd been my camper, then a counselor himself, he immediately gave me a huge hug. When I told the next, he said, "That's cool. My uncle's gay." And at the end of the summer, when a peer said to me, "You seem lighter, more full, more *you*," I knew the effort had been worth it. I felt more at home at camp than ever.

I can't believe I was so afraid. I had assumed the worst about the camp community, even when all my previous experiences should have primed me to expect love, not rejection. I judged *them*, thinking they would judge me.

What I received was warmth and joy. A gulf that seemed so wide was bridged with smiles.

We begin our Days of Awe with Rosh HaShanah—also called Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgement. Today our tradition compels us to consider what it would be like to stand before God, enthroned as Sovereign, and be judged. Judged for what we have done in

the past year and what we have left unfinished. Judged for the words we used to heal or to hurt, and for the words unspoken. Judged for the potential we failed to meet.

What a frightening position to imagine: each of us, alone, with the Almighty, submitting ourselves for judgement.

The fear of being judged, like the act of judgement itself, creates distance. Judgment *requires* distance. When we name God *judge*, we picture the ultimate objective lens through which we can gain perspective on our lives. We step outside ourselves in order to see ourselves.

But it would be a shame if the result of this Day of Judgment, of these Days of Awe, is to leave us each feeling alienated from God, from each other, from ourselves.

Fortunately, our prayerbook encourages us that judgement need not always lead to distance. The distancing power of judgement is balanced out by acts that force us to reach out across that distance: “*U-t’shuvah, u-t’fillah, u-tz’dakah maavirin et roa hag’zeirah.*” When we do *t’shuvah*, we reach beyond ourselves to make amends with one another. When we do *t’fillah*, we pray with other people and reach out toward God. When we perform acts of *tzedakah*, we consider how we can help others in their time of need. *T’shuvah, t’fillah, and tz’dakah* are bridge-building endeavors. They narrow the wide gulf of judgment.

Today, *Rosh HaShanah*, the gulf of judgment is widest. It is precisely the time for us to bridge the gaps between us.

If judgement is such an alienating force, shouldn't we try to avoid it altogether? We can't. Judgment is a natural part of being human. It's how we categorize our world into things that might help us and things that might hurt, and we can't turn it off.

Growing up, my best friends and I lived on the same street. Often, we would eat dinner at whichever person's house we happened to be at that day, and many nights I would walk home well after dark. It was only a few houses away, on a quiet suburban street, but still I would rush to my family's door. Every rustling bush or distant bang spiked fear, even though I *knew* I was safe.

Evolution primes our brains to respond this way: when you're in the jungle at night and you hear the rustle of leaves behind you, it's not a good idea to stop, deliberate, and consider whether or not there's a tiger.

Seeing or hearing something and judging it are so closely linked, they might as well be the same process in our brains. Sometimes, before we even figure out what's in

front of us, we've already decided whether we like it or not. In his book *The Righteous Mind*,¹ moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt gives the following example: "[T]he next time you run into someone you haven't seen in many years, [y]ou'll usually know within a second or two whether you liked or disliked the person, but it can take much longer to remember who the person is or how you know each other" (65). We judge first and think second.

To be human is to judge good and bad, right and wrong. We ate from that tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, and now we can't give the piece of fruit back. So we're always judging others and they're always judging us. That means it's easy to perceive one another as tigers in the bushes, making us run the other way.

In our partisan world, tigers are known by other names: hypocrites, politicians, bigots, snowflakes, Democrats, Republicans...pick your preferred "them" to your "us." Headline news and social media do us no favors; we're encouraged to "like" or "favorite" or comment on headlines and soundbites without reading or hearing the backstory.

The gut reaction becomes a vocalized response. We judge and we condemn. And the gulf opened by judgement grows wider.

Now, there are times when lobbing judgements across the divide is virtuous. After all, there are indeed real tigers in our world which *should* trigger judgmental anger. Such was the appropriate response to the Nazi demonstrations in Charlottesville. That is one gap I'm not willing to bridge.

But the truth is that these sorts of real tigers are few and far between. On this *Rosh HaShanah*, I'm interested in the other 98 percent of interactions—times when both a judgment *and* a bridge might be appropriate.

Consider our patriarch Abraham. When he learns God is planning to utterly destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of a few bad eggs, he chastises God for acting wrongly: "How could you possibly do such a thing, killing innocent and wicked alike?! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (Genesis 18:25).

On the one hand, the gulf between the Almighty God and the *chutzpadik*, dust-and-ashes Abraham couldn't be wider. On the other, the two figures *already have a*

¹ Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Vintage Books, 2013.

relationship. They are mutually interested in one another's success: God needs Abraham to spread God's influence, and Abraham needs God to make him a great nation.

In this instance, Abraham is a model of the rabbinic teaching: "*Heve et kol ha-adam l'chaf z'chut*" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:4). Idiomatically, it means to give others the benefit of the doubt. Literally, it means, "Be a person who is disposed to judge others with the scales of judgement tipped in favor of their goodness." A trick of the Hebrew (*kol ha-adam*) allows the phrase to have two possible meanings: judge *every* person this way, or judge the *whole* person this way. Both meanings are valuable: as much as possible, our judgements in every instance should be based on the whole picture.

Abraham's judgement works because it takes *all* of God into account. He does not assume God is a tiger. It is precisely because Abraham believes God is a God of justice and that he wants God to live up to God's own potential. Abraham reflects Godself back to God and asks, "Is this who you really want to be?"

That is a virtuous judgment, bridged by relationship, bridged by caring for the goodness of the other being.

It's easy to care for the goodness and success of those we *already* care about. It's much harder when we don't know them or don't like them.

Once, I was taking a bus from New York to Boston, and sitting across the aisle from me was a person snacking on sunflower seeds. I didn't think anything of it, until I glanced over from the book I was reading and noticed a pile of discarded husks amassing under her seat, on the floor of the bus. *What an inconsiderate thing to do!* I thought. *She's making more work for the driver, who's going to have to clean up after her. She should do better.*

Coincidentally, the book I was reading at that exact moment, between disapproving glances at the pile of sunflower husks, spoke to the same frustration I felt. I was in the middle of *Rising Strong*,² by the social worker and shame researcher Brené Brown. In the very chapter I happened to be reading, she describes her *own* experience with an unfortunate roommate at a professional conference. This is how Brown recounts meeting her roommate:

When I walked into our room, she was sitting in the corner of a love seat eating a giant cinnamon roll. Her legs were outstretched across the length of the small

² Brown, Brené. *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution*. Spiegel & Grau, 2015.

sofa and her hiking boots were pushing into the cushioned arm...With both hands covered in gooey icing, she was wiggling around trying to find a way to change her position without touching the sofa. Just as I was about to offer to get her a napkin, she sat straight up, put the rest of the roll in her mouth, and wiped both of her hands on the seat cushion of the couch. Then she looked at her hands and, clearly not pleased with how much frosting remained, she wiped them again, carefully avoiding the patch of upholstery where she had done the first swipe. My face must have conveyed my horror as I stood staring at the frosting-streaked cushions, because she just smiled and shrugged and said, "It's not our couch." (101)

Some time later, Brown expresses her frustration at this incident to her therapist, because she can't figure out why it upset her so much. After all, *she* wasn't harmed by her roommate's behavior. What had hit a nerve was that the experience touched on Brown's own need for perfection and rule-following. She was hard on others because she was hard on herself.

Then her therapist asks her a question, which changes the course both of her professional research and her personal life: "Do you think people are generally doing the best that they can? Do you think your roommate was doing her best that day?"

The question hit *me* hard, as I sat there next to the person dropping sunflower husks on the floor. Could I bring myself to think that *she* was doing as best as she could?

I couldn't answer that question for myself, just like Brown couldn't answer it about that roommate. We never really know if another person is doing their best or not, but the question is not about them anyway. It's about how it softens the harshness of our judgments of them. It's a bridge-building thing, to assume that the person making you upset is doing their best that day. Asking ourselves if we think they're doing their best transforms the starting point of judgment from condemnation to compassion.

And when we are struggling to live up to our own expectations, we, too, can ask ourselves, "Do I think I'm doing the best that I can?" We might realize we're not, and

then we learn where we should focus our efforts. But we also might realize that we *are* doing the best we can, and then we can have compassion for ourselves.

Asking ourselves even this simple question helps bridge the gap of judgment.

Only one letter distinguishes the Hebrew words for *decree (gazar)* and *bridge (gesher)*.

When we feel the urge to make a *g'zeirah*, a judgment out loud, we ought to consider how we can also build a *gesher*, a bridge. This takes courage. It's brave to stand on the edge of a canyon and step out onto a bridge—a bridge that is just being built as you walk, plank by plank, step by step.

But if we don't take these steps, the gulf of judgement will only grow wider. We will, more and more, see one another as tigers instead of teachers. We will continue to fragment our communities and our countries. This is not a recipe for mending the brokenness in our world.

That's why the work of bridge building is so important. We need one another to lead us back to the right path, to help us chart a course when we feel lost, or to give us the courage to create the life we envision.

Imagine a world in which *everyone* paused at making a judgment and asked themselves, "Am I trying to *build up* the person I'm thinking about? Do I want to make myself look good, or do I want to help them? Do I think they're doing the best that they can?"

The Days of Awe remind us that the work starts with each of us. We make amends with others, we pray with others, and we help others in their time of need. We strengthen our connections with other human beings, so when we judge them, we will tilt the scales in favor of their goodness. We bridge the gulf of judgment for the sake of building others up. We get a little closer a society in which debate and disagreement, at every level, rests on the earnest desire to improve one another and our world.

May we draw strength from all those who have walked these bridges toward us. May we learn to balance healthy fear with curiosity. May we use our judgments to build up, not to tear down.

May we judge and be judged for our goodness, and may we be sealed for goodness in the Book of Life.

L'shanah tovah tikateivu.