

Learning from the Arroyo: A lesson in forgiveness

Rabbi Malkah Binah Klein

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We are preparing to begin the *selichot*, or forgiveness, prayers. Forgiveness is central to thriving as a human being, to living in joy and connection. It's also hard to do, and we are co-creating this beautiful communal container on Yom Kippur to do this important work.

I'd like to share a story with you from my retreat in New Mexico last summer. I was studying with Rabbi Shefa Gold, a teacher to many of us, and she taught us to approach individual elements of the natural world, such as a plant, and to listen for its song, its Torah, its wisdom for us. I found this to be a beautiful practice and was pleasantly surprised by how much I learned by tuning in. Standing before a tall evergreen tree and listening with my heart and imagination, I heard from the tree, "I have been here a long time, and what I know is the importance of deeply rooting yourself and also reaching for the sun" A wind blew and the high branches moved with the wind and I heard, "be strong, yet flexible. allow yourself to move with the spirit." One morning during the retreat, I was drawn during our silent breakfast to take a bowl of diced, roasted sweet potatoes. As I joyfully received nourishment from these bold orange sweet potatoes, the message I received from them was, "much goodness and sweetness grows underground, out of sight. trust the process of growth, even when you can't see it."

On my walks in the arroyo, the dry riverbed near our retreat center, I would pass and tune in to the various wildflowers and shrubs. This was a delightful and heart-opening process, a new pathway for connection. However, there was one plant that I passed regularly that I kept avoiding. It has many 4 inch stalks coming off the main stem, each stalk covered with perhaps 100 small white flowers. I started to be curious-- why am I avoiding this plant? Why do I have an aversion to it? I was surprised by what I discovered about my aversion.

The location of the retreat in Northern New Mexico was only an hour from where I grew up, and this particular plant, or what I had known as a weed during my childhood, grew on our property and in the woods nearby. My friends and I would sometimes carelessly run our fingers up the stalks,

popping off all the flowers. I don't even know why we did it...it was somewhat enjoyable, in the category of the joy that comes from teasing someone on the playground for no particular reason.

What I first thought was dislike of this plant I came to realize was shame. Seeing this plant reminded me of a behavior that was dishonoring this plant, which I now know is called white sweetclover, and all its hard work to bring forth flowers that, among other things, provide nectar for the local bees. I had been exercising my power to destroy, and I now got in touch with my shame.

The story fortunately does not end here. After passing white sweetclovers many times over the next few days, noticing my aversion and fear, I finally mustered the courage to approach one that was about as tall as me. What I heard was, "you can apologize to me, Malkah Binah." I apologized, saying "I'm sorry that I did not honor you when I was a child." The apology felt good, a release, and I turned to move on, as I have a tendency to continue to feel embarrassed even after I have made amends. I heard another message from the plant, "Come closer. You have made your apology, now come see my beauty." I approached and looked closely at the beauty of the delicate flowers and smelled their honey-like scent, and I smiled and was amazed at the journey from aversion to joyful connection.

This journey is possible with friends, with neighbors, with teachers, with co-workers, with family members from whom we have been estranged. We may not even know why we are staying away. We may be holding tightly to a violation that either we committed or that the other person committed, and by holding on, we keep ourselves from the joy and beauty of connection. Forgiveness opens us to one of our most fundamental needs, the need for loving connection.

The communal confessional we are about to recite gives us an opportunity to unblock old hurts, to practice being vulnerable and admitting that we have behaved in ways that cause pain. I recently watched Brene Brown's Ted Talk on the power of vulnerability, and what she discovered in her qualitative social science research is **that those who know their worthiness of love and belonging are people who are ready to embrace vulnerability, who have the courage to be imperfect, who have the compassion to be kind first to themselves, and then to others, who are**

able to say, "I'm enough." According to Brene Brown, vulnerability-- letting ourselves be seen for who we are-- is the birthplace of joy and creativity.

By embracing our humanness, our imperfection, our capacity to make mistakes and learn from them, we come more alive, more connected. This is the wisdom of our selichot practice.

Before we rise for the traditional selichot prayers, we prepare ourselves with a meditation practice.

Meditation:

May I fully accept myself as one who makes mistakes

May I learn from my mistakes

May I be forgiven for my mistakes

Start with self

then bless a loved one for whom the love flows easily

then an acquaintance

then someone with whom you have a challenged relationship

then all people in this community/

then leaders in positions of power and influence/ then all people

Chant to close: *vayomer adonai salachti kidvarecha/ And the breath of life said, "I have forgiven as I speak"*