

YK Sermon 5783/2022

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Thorns of Disappointment – Part 2

You know when someone says something, and your chest tightens up?

A small hurt, a slight.

And you think: “ugh!”, “really?”, “that again?”

As I shared on 2<sup>nd</sup> Day *Rosh HaShannah*, I’ve become very **sensitive to the many disappointments** we hold in our lives.

And as a reminder, I’m not talking about BIG tragedies, like the horrors of war, major illness, tragic death, or abuse.

Rather, smaller but incessant **exhales** that we carry in our hearts, that add up over time.

And I wonder, on *Yom Kippur* day, the day we **press “refresh”**, **how can we LIVE WITH our disappointments** when they feel like **dull THORNS** under our skin?

THORNS of Disappointment in...

Our friends

Our partners

Our synagogue

Our children, siblings and parents

Our work and colleagues

Our government and elected leaders

All that we missed during COVID

Even with Ourselves

Even with God

Imagine that you have a **thorn in your arm**<sup>1</sup> that directly touches a nerve. When the thorn is touched, it's very painful. It's difficult to sleep because you roll over on it. It's hard to get close to people, because they might touch it. You **can't even go for a walk in the woods** because you might **brush** the thorn against the branches.

It constantly bothers you.

**You have two choices:**

The first, make **sure nothing touches it.**

The second, **take it out.**

Let's start with choice number one. If you decide to keep the thorn in, whether you know it or not, protecting the thorn **becomes the work of a lifetime.**

Walking in the woods? Rolling over when you sleep?

You'll have to find a solution.

So, you **design an apparatus** that acts as a **protective device**. It works! Amazing. You're so proud!

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<sup>1</sup> This metaphor of a thorn is taken from *The Untethered Soul* by Michael Signer, p. 82-83, however I adapted it and changed it to a thorn of disappointment.

Yeh, you keep **thinning out the woods** when you take a walk, and it's a bit uncomfortable when you wear the apparatus to bed at night – but - OK.

Then, over time, you have a **NEW problem** – **you've fallen in love**.

**This is a PROBLEM** because wearing your “super-duper device” makes it hard to **even hug**. So, you design ANOTHER kind of mechanism that allows closeness amongst people - **without actually touching**.

Years go by, and you make a bigger and better machine that doesn't have to be unstrapped at night or changed over for hugging - but it's **HEAVY**.

So, you put wheels on it... but of course you **have to change the DOORS** in the house so that the **protective apparatus can get through**. But at least NOW you can live your life!

You announce with pride: “I've solved my problem, I'm a free being! I can go anywhere I want! I can DO anything I want. This thorn **USED** to run my life. Now it doesn't run anything!”

The truth is **the thorn COMPLETELY runs your life**.

It seems so obvious – just TAKE OUT THE THORN!

But we don't.

We walk around with **thorns of disappointment** all the time.

Why? Because we have **desires and expectations**, and we keep **hoping** others will give us what we're yearning for – but for one reason or another **they can't** or **don't**, and we **feel letdown**.

If we're honest– not one person can be the “be-all and end-all” for any of us.

Not one friend,

Not one spouse,

Not one relationship.

And surely, **WE can't be that for anyone else.**

So, it's not surprising that we **don't always meet** one another's expectations, and they don't meet ours. **Which is why we walk around with thorns in our arms, BUMPING into one another.**

**Causing pain,**

**and experiencing pain.**

**Hold for a moment** a disappointment you're sitting with...

A friend who regularly cancels on you,

A co-worker who often doesn't pull his weight,

A child who has your grandchildren living with them across the country,

All the missed simchas, conferences, even funerals you couldn't attend because of COVID,

A partner who can't love us the way we want to be loved,

Even ourselves – an aspect of **OUR BEING** that **just isn't where we'd like it to be,**

Even - with God.

And I wonder.... if disappointment happens because we have certain **expectations** of one another, and things go awry – **are we being realistic?** Maybe wearing our elaborate contraptions and removing the doors in our homes **isn't that crazy.**

Or maybe trying to **subtly manipulate** people into acting **how we WANT them to act** isn't so bad?

Don't we do that all the time?!

There's a striking story<sup>2</sup> in the Talmud about a woman who did just that.

It takes place in 3 scenes:

At home, in a garden, and in an oven.

### Scene One: At Home<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Chiyya bar Ashi used to fall on his face in prayer and say, "May the Merciful One save me from my evil inclination."

(In other words, he was having a difficult time with his overactive sexual drive. So, for years he prayed to keep it in check.)

One day his wife overheard him praying.

She said to herself, that's odd. (He hasn't slept with me in years. Why is he praying that?!)

### Scene Two: In the Garden

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<sup>2</sup>Talmud, Kiddushin 81b

<sup>3</sup> My reading is based on Ruth Calderon's interpretation of this text found in *A Bride For One Night*, p. 43-47

One day Rabbi Chiyva bar Ashi was studying in his garden.

Noticing him in the garden, she adorned herself and repeatedly walked past him.

He said: Who are you?

(Amazing that he didn't recognize her! Was it because she had changed her dress and demeanor so much, or was he so consumed with his study that he wasn't paying attention?)

She said: I am Ḥaruta (חַרְוּתָא), (who was a well-known prostitute.)

(I have to point out how funny this is! Maybe there are a dozen women<sup>4</sup> who are named in the Talmud, and **this prostitute** was one of them: Ḥaruta. Her name literally means “**liberty**” – meaning she's a FREE woman who makes her **OWN decisions**, and goes by one name – sort of like Lizzo and Madonna 😊)

Without a beat, he propositioned her.

She said to him: Give me that pomegranate from the TOP of the tree as payment.

He leapt up, and brought it to her...

(Dot, dot, dot.... the Talmud then let's you fill in the blanks.)

### Scene Three: The Oven

When he came home, his wife was lighting the oven.

(That's interesting. A metaphor? Was she still on fire? Excited by the parts of herself she had previously repressed? Proud of herself for changing the trajectory of their relationship and finally taking matters into her own hand?)

She was lighting the oven...

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/180234?lang=bi>

And he went and SAT **INSIDE** THE OVEN.

She said to him: What are you **DOING**?!

He broke down and told her everything he did.

She said: Honey, don't worry, it was ME!

But he didn't listen.

Until she gave him "signs" that it really WAS her.

(But it didn't matter.)

He said: In any case, my **intension** was to transgress.

And the *Gemara*<sup>5</sup> ends this story by saying:

All the days of that righteous man's life he would fast for the transgression he THOUGHT he committed - until he died. (The end.)

Moral of the story?

We might THINK we can "**creatively manipulate**" people into **acting in ways that meet our expectations** and **desires**— but eventually, that backfires.

People get resentful. We don't like feeling pushed around.

So, what other **contraptions** do we build to ease the irritations of our thorns?

We **DISTRACT** ourselves (we're great at that!):

We pour ourselves into our work,

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<sup>5</sup> *Gemara* is another word for Talmud

Exercise constantly,

Obsess over our food intake or meal planning,

Build a life revolving around our children or taking care of others,

Read, binge-watch, or waste hours on our screens,

You fill in the blank...

**Or just turn to the list of *Al Chet's* we just chanted - pick your vice!**

Essentially, **we close off, in order to protect ourselves**. But in the end **closing** only serves to **lock US inside ourselves**.<sup>6</sup>

YES, there's always been choice number two: We could **REMOVE our thorns of disappointment** and not have to lug around our heavy contraptions. But how?

Remember that forest – where we **kept brushing up against branches**? Follow me in...

But first, imagine **one person** who keeps disappointing you....

You KNOW that person's strengths – **that's why** they're still in your life.

But you're struggling with a **WEEKNESS** of theirs – that **POKES you like a thorn**.

**Surface** the expectation you have of them, that keeps rubbing against you...

Now imagine laying it down. Giving it up. Putting down your gear.

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<sup>6</sup> Concept found in Michael Signer's book *The Untethered Soul*, p. 130-131

I know, it means **you'll most likely get hurt, you're unprotected....** But stay with me.

Now walk into the forest.

The first step in gently living with our disappointments is – **ACCEPTANCE**.

It sounds simple, but it's REALLY difficult.

It takes deep **humility** to acknowledge that we're just a **speck in the large** scheme of things. **"A shimmering thread in a great web."**<sup>7</sup>

And yet, lately, I've **sensed feeling surrounded by my ancestors** – those I **knew** who have passed, and those I **FEEL** but have no idea who they are. I **sense** them **by** me, **holding** me, **helping** me make my way through the forest.

And when I feel let down by what **I'm NOT getting from another**, I'm drawn to the writings of Rainer Maria Rilke who reminds me to have the "courage ... to meet what is **strangest, most awesome and most inexplicable**"<sup>8</sup> in others and in myself. **NOT to shape them** into who I **WISH** them to be.

Because, as Rilke taught, love is not about **merging**.<sup>9</sup>

Now walk a little further with me into the forest.

Yes, **we're NOW officially LOST**. We're not sure which direction to go.

But we have one another.

Jewish tradition teaches that **each soul comes into the world to both learn and teach**.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Path of Blessing*, Reb Marica Prager, page 46

<sup>8</sup> *Letters to A Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke, 8<sup>th</sup> letter, Aug 12, 1904

<sup>9</sup> *Letters to A Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke, 7<sup>th</sup> letter, May 14, 1904

It could be **that YOU came to teach, something I need to learn!**

Or **I** am here to **teach**, something **you** need to **learn!**<sup>10</sup>

And on top of that, our learning **it's not linear**. The Hebrew word to learn, *lil'mod* (לִלְמוֹד) begins with a **crooked letter** – a lamed (ל). Just like the forest path, it twists and turns – our **learning is often crooked**.<sup>11</sup>

And sometimes learning **REALLY hurts**, especially when **that thorn is close to the surface**, trying to make its way out from under.

Even though it's a winding path, would you go in further with me?

**We can ASK** for directions.

There's no rule against **asking good questions!**

One of my favorite stories is about the Nobel laureate in physics, Isidor I. Rabi. He was asked "Why did you become a scientist, rather than a doctor or lawyer or businessman, like the other immigrant kids in your neighborhood?" he said "**My mother** made me a scientist without ever intending it. Every other Jewish mother in Brooklyn would ask her child after school: 'So? Did you learn anything today?' But not my mother. **She always said: 'Izzy, did you ask a good question today?'** That difference - **asking good questions** -made me become a scientist!"<sup>12</sup>

What if every time we feel a thorn of disappointment peeking through our skin, instead of wondering "**What should I DO about it?**" we ask with **CURIOSITY**, "**What PART of**

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<sup>10</sup> *The Path of Blessing*, Reb Marica Prager, page 46

<sup>11</sup> *The Path of Blessing*, Reb Marcia Prager, p, 122. Here she speaks about the letter *lamed* in the word *melech* (king), however I took this idea from her.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/01/19/opinion/i-izzy-did-you-ask-a-good-question-today-712388.html>

**ME is being disturbed by this?”<sup>13</sup>** What button is being pushed? What am I yearning for that I’m trying to fill?

Sit with your questions – they are much more interesting than the answers.

You’ve been patient with me.

We’re still in the forest.

**Yes, we’re lost.**

Yes, **no one seems to be able to show us a straight path out** – it’s becoming clear we need to **do this ourselves**,

and also, we have a **web of souls** guiding us.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbie of the **Warsaw Ghetto**, created what he called a “**conscious community**.” Followers who meditated, journaled, and gathered regularly to **process their feelings** in the ghetto.

Just THAT blows my mind – in the GHETTO he ran a PROCESS GROUP?!

He taught that it’s possible to **transform** a disappointment by opening one’s soul like a **FAUCET**. He described a **disappointed soul** as “a flowing source of water that’s **blocked**.”<sup>14</sup>

His solution was to **PAY ATTENTION**. To bathe in a **mikveh of our feelings**, by quieting down and observing every sensation that passes through our body. Then we will witness God’s heavenly **roadmap** for our **individual soul**.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The Untethered Soul, Michael Signer, p. 15

<sup>14</sup> *Conscious Community*, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, p. 33

<sup>15</sup> *Conscious Community*, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, p. 45

Bathing in our feelings...we're deep in the forest now – the memory of our “super-duper contraption” begins to fade.

As we soak in our **mikveh of feelings**, our **thorns release**. (Which reminds me of when I was a little girl. I lived in a pre-war apartment building with wood floors. I always got splinters. My dad used to soak my splintered foot in hot water. My skin would soften, then the splinter would release.)

Our breathing slows down – and we're calm enough to tenderly,  
while no one is looking,  
remove  
our thorn.

- Acceptance
- Learning
- Questioning
- Attention

The real question this Yom Kippur is:

**HOW do we want to LIVE?**

With **contraptions** around our bodies, protecting us from our **thorns of disappointment** – and closing ourselves off to those who DO love us – even in **their** limited way, and even in **our** limited way?

Or a life where we **FEEL our thorns of disappointment poking through** (because they're **not** going away) – AND we **gently** pull them out,

one

by one

by one

by one.

The **choice** is in our hands.