

I wasn't going to do this to y'all again, but I have conferred with in-house counsel and was advised that it would be in everyone's best interest for me to offer the following

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We send our kids to Jewish school. A main reason we do so is that inherent in SJCS's mission is to foster ethical attitude and behavior – to teach kids to be become good people in the world. Happily, this important mission was recently directly supported by Bet Alef when we collectively put together dinner for the folks living down the street here at Tent City #4. I told my kids where we were going and why. When I came to pick up the kids at school to take off for Tent City, everyone and their parents were out on the playground as school had just let out. This is how my boy greeted me, as loud as he could from atop the monkey bars: "You can't make me go feed the poor

people. I don't want to help the poor people. I'm not going to feed the poor people!" (Just what you want all the other parents hear from your kid! I had to claim him. Yup, that's my boy!....) (By the way, he was wrong – I \*could\* make him go and I did and he had a swell time playing blackjack with one of the residents and didn't want to leave....)

Kids often say those things, that, even \*if\* we were thinking them we surely wouldn't say aloud, but they don't have that self-sensoring mechanism in place yet, so the underlying issues of trepidation, not knowing how to relate to an unknown, dealing with uncertain outcome—this shutting out-- is how it expresses. Most of us eventually learn that lesson about what NOT to say (OK, obviously, I'm not talking about myself.....), but I think I'm correct in assuming that for most of us the harder lesson is learning when and how to speak up. And this takes nothing less than courage, defined thusly: Courage is simply acting in a way that puts you at risk in a fearful or uncomfortable situation in which the outcome is uncertain. This portion is a call for us to meet life habitually with increasing courage—to model it—literally to \*rise\* to those occasions where it is required of us to nitzav – take a firm stand.

You are standing here today – this covenant is meant for all of you –with the following exceptions: corrupt politicians, indifferent Wall Street types, corporations, (after all, they're psychopathic people, right?), criminals, personality-disordered people, intractable substance-abusers)—(fill in your own blanks here)--truly, any unmanageable person you'd rather not deal with being responsible for.

OK, the text \*doesn't\* say that, but we'd like it to, wouldn't we? I mean, how do we deal with it being up to us to deal responsibly for those who don't act responsibly –

who don't hold themselves to the same standards, who unflaggingly follow their own self-serving agenda? And when I suggest you fill in our own blanks, I'm not speaking of your ex-, your in-laws, or run-of-the-mill folks you simply have a hard time liking. No—this particular category of people I'm speaking of here is either staunchly unwilling or simply incapable of remorse (OK, maybe your ex-); I'm speaking of folks who have offered \*repeated\* evidence over time that in this lifetime, they will not or cannot partake in the process of tshuvah--atonement—what this season, and particularly this day is for.

## **AZAZEL**

I have little doubt that these patterns of intractable bad behavior have been around since time began. (After all, remember Abraham from last week? Hard to find a worse track record than his...) What did our ancestors do with their “unmanageables”—those who really couldn't help it—those who we know will continue patterns “...that cause pain to themselves and others...”? For that, we need a bit of Levitical background. Another Torah portion that more traditional synagogues chant on Yom Kippur is taken from Leviticus 16. It describes this weird wacky rite that was performed every Yom Kippur whereby the High Priest was to take two goats—one was sacrificed in the usual manner as the community's atonement offering. The other was designated for Azazel. What or where is this Azazel, you ask? Good question!... that no one seems to know exactly how to answer. A favored interpretation is a type of goat-demon associated with the remote wilderness. This is really hard on the poor rabbis, who are hard-pressed to explain what the Israelites were doing on their holiest day making an offering to a goat-demon! Whatever the case, the High Priest would lay his hands on the goat's head and confess all of the sins of the Israelites, then send it off to into the

wilderness. There are all sorts of commentaries that attempt to clarify what this might actually be about. I have my own explanation:

I think that back in the day, we had the same trouble with these unmanageable people and their untamed impulses --which a goat nicely symbolizes—as we do now. They couldn't offer up this goat as atonement for sins because this goat was saddled with the sins of those who had no intention or ability to atone. But \*something\* had to be done. So I think they did the best they could to keep these unrestrained impulses from affecting others, And with the wishful thinking that maybe \*this\* year we'll finally rid ourselves of the problem, the goat was sent off—to Azazel. We think of this ritual as magical thinking – as an archaic idea. But guess what? We still do it. Here's how:

### **Azazel today**

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Once upon a time there was a rabbi. He lived in New York. He was a charming, charismatic, brilliant teacher—a spiritual master entrusted with the care of souls. He was young and made bad judgment calls that got him in trouble and hurt people. In his 20s he behaved badly, violated people's trust and hurt people. He moved to another Florida where he behaved inappropriately.....and hurt people. He moved across the world to Israel. In his 40s he established a spiritual center and taught there. Guess what? Three complaints were made to the police accusing him of inappropriate behavior. He violated an entire community's trust and was removed from his position. He's a brilliant teacher. And he hurts people. He moved across the world again. Five years ago he showed up out West where he was embraced by a non-Jewish spiritual community who offered him the possibility of reinventing his life yet again. He is a

charming, brilliant and charismatic teacher entrusted with the care of souls. He wrote and taught and dazzled everyone with his unique contributions.....until a few weeks ago, when it was discovered that he was engaging in inappropriate behavior that violated an entire community's trust. He is charismatic. He is brilliant. And you know what? It doesn't matter.

He hurts people.

I wish I could tell you I made this story up. But I'm so sorry to say I did not. Do you see what I mean? He takes his old sins and runs off with them into the next wilderness and does it again...and again-*ad nauseam*. And some did their best to warn others; and some created the conditions that allowed him to hurt people.

So, things aren't always what they appear to be. And we often err on the side of gullibility—not because we're so naïve or stupid, but because the best of our human nature believes in the best in others, wants to give the benefit of the doubt, strives to be fair. And not only that—people with this patterning consciously or un- --use our best instincts against us. They insidiously prey on our emotions, goodwill and sense of trust. Yet, even the most trusting, open-hearted of us ought to consider that when you see a consistent pattern unfolding over time (in this case literally \*decades\*) skepticism ought to have a place in the equation, no?

## **THE 'GIVING' TREE**

Here's a true instance of "don't judge a book by its cover" —a book beloved by its millions of inexplicably devoted fans....It's an unlikely covert early teaching of this type of patterning. If you have children in your life, you're no doubt familiar with Shel

Silverstein's "The Giving Tree." Yet despite the book's benign title, the underlying message is undeniably disturbed and disturbing. Well, see for yourselves....

The book recounts a relationship between a tree and a boy throughout the boy's life. The tree loves the boy. The boy loves taking everything the tree has to offer. He starts out playing in the branches, eating its apples, sitting in its shade. And every time the boy uses the tree, the text states.... "and the tree was happy". But her offerings are never enough for the growing boy. He counts on the tree's devotion to continue to give of herself (oh yeah, does it surprise you that the tree is feminine?) So, without a word of gratitude the thoughtless, selfish, narcissistically-challenged boy takes her apples to sell to make money; her branches to build a house; and finally her trunk to carve a boat. And then he leaves her. And the tree, happy she could make him happy, was happy. (Is this bothering anybody yet?) But we're not yet done; here comes the final insult. After he'd quite literally used her all up, the boy, now an old man, returns to the tree. She \*apologizes\* to him, given that she has nothing left to offer, save the stump that she is now reduced to. So he takes what he can get and rests on her remains and.....Wait for it.....! And the tree was happy. (Does that not just give you the creeps?!)

And no doubt our tree has some \*serious\* psychologically shortcomings too – utterly self-sacrificing –blinded by her love and devotion to the Taking Boy. And, although it's all done with the tree's consent, do \*you\* think it's too much to call what the boy did violation? Abuse? (Incidentally, just because the two examples of people with these destructive patterns that I've given have been male, I don't mean to imply that men have a monopoly on such behavior. They don't.)

So if it hadn't occurred to you before, now you know. If you can still stomach reading "The Giving Tree," do you think you'll ever see it the same way again?

### **Knowing What We'd Rather Not KNOW or Some are guilty; all are responsible**

When we see such a pattern in a person--when we see someone cycle through the same process of damaging behavior, clearly disingenuous, unrepentant and continuing to perpetrate the same offenses time after time, we simply don't have the ethical luxury to un-know what's become clear—that there's a reasonable and high likelihood that more people in their sphere will get hurt. And when it's a spiritual leader, it's ever more damaging because it cuts to a person's very core and can decimate their fundamental ability to trust.

Yet so often it seems that we pretend to – or we creatively convince ourselves that we don't know what we know. We are \*consciously\* \*choosing\* not to know. To be clear, this means we ignore our gut, deny other people's testimony and diminish another's courage in professing the truth. Why would we do such a thing!? I think in our awkwardness or discomfort, we tend to maintain some semblance of status quo instead of figure out how to actually address the problem. The upshot of this strategy is that we adopt our own personal or collective "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy. Oh, yes!....we all have seen how well \*that's\* worked out! There's always a price to pay when we do weird inauthentic dances around what's true.

Consider that such a strategy is hard on everyone, yet the ones who pay the highest price are those isolated on the "don't tell" side. Consider that if you are a Giving Tree who's been hurt by a charismatic leader with a devoted following, you likely feel

deflated, embarrassed and isolated because after all, who are you going to tell? Who would believe you? You scarcely believe it yourself, yet you know it to be true. Unless you are lucky enough to share with someone who's been wounded too, you'd likely be ostracized because a charismatic spiritual teacher or financial guru or politician can do no wrong in the eyes of GivingTrees. Therefore, at the time when people have the most need of support, they have the least access to it.

But among the many other reasons we might dupe ourselves out of our knowing, I believe the most compelling and seductive of all is this: we (simply) want the goodies !

### **GIVING UP THE GOODIES**

Goodies' take many forms – money, business connections, money (oh, and have I mentioned 'money'?), inner-circle privilege, belonging, community and those delicious profound spiritual teachings. Ooooooh. Yum! What more could an ego want? But come back. Remember the rabbi of our example? He hurts people. Well, yes, but.....

That 'but' says it all. In that 'but' we abscond with a piece of our humanity. And that's how we are complicit., *AL CHEIT* ...We downplay "maybe it's not as bad as it seems...". *AI CHEIT*...We rationalize. "After all, there are two sides to any conflict," *AL CHEIT*...We justify. "He does so much good for so many and only wounds a relative few..." *AL CHEIT*...We overlook. "What his teachings, advice, love, and brilliance do for ME is all I choose to pay attention to."

Here's my argument (and I don't suppose that you'll all agree with me) but I maintain that when ignore we the red flags and opt to drink in all the deep and

wonderful goodies, **we abdicate responsibility for one another**. We allow the predation to carry on unchecked. Even if we can't bring ourselves to warn others, at minimum we are *\*not\** to support such a teacher teaching, as we are obligated to do our part to contain the damage.

The woman who was largely responsible for re-legitimizing the aforementioned spiritual teacher in her community posted an admirable admission of responsibility. Here's a piece of what she says, "I have to move away from a source of such unknowable inspiration and energy because the cost to me is too great and the risk to others is too high." ..... "the cost to me is too great and the risk to others is too high." To me this is the essence of courageous stance. It is honest. It is difficult. It means she had to override her desire to have access to the goodies, opting instead for the higher value of acting responsibly for the sake of others.

When we're able to admit that we know what we know, our greater awareness begets greater responsibility. It is, in essence, a moral mandate. And that mandate is one of critical and thorough examination--of looking anew at a person, event or circumstance in order to integrate the new information and make conscious choices. So what are we to do? I think we're to share with one another—to share judiciously.

### **TO SPREAD THE WORD or NOT TO SPREAD THE WORD**

But, you may protest, Jews are not supposed to partake in lashon hara – in gossip. Well, sometimes we give ourselves permission to talk when we shouldn't, and don't give ourselves license to talk when we should—when, in fact, we must.

As Jews we take words seriously—both their creative and destructive powers. According to the Talmud, there are more sins relating to improper speech in the Yom Kippur confessional than any other category of wrongdoing (BT Yoma44a) (p. 681). The Talmud points out that although slander has no physical reality, it can be carried far and wide with serious consequences. The Halacha (Jewish Law) ups that ante a notch with the claim that spreading humiliating or harmful information is akin to shedding blood. And yet, still, there are times when we are not only permitted, but are in fact mandated to share information.

### **WHEN TO ‘GOSSIP’**

The Hafetz Hayyim tells us that “...the guiding principle for disseminating negative information is when the information’s recipient will suffer from a “clear and present danger”...” And given a long pattern or personal encounter, therein lies our mandate to meddle.

Surely, it’s a judgment call. Yet clearly, it **is** allowable to spread information to keep others from physical harm. Why should potential financial, emotional, psychological, or spiritual harm be any different? This is aligned with the Talmud’s take on gossip in that although emotional, psychological and spiritual realms have no physical reality, I can hardly think of anything that has more potential for causing damage to a human’s being.

Look, as a person gains in social, political, emotional power - as one gains recognition as a leader, the responsibility increases and when there’s abuse, it is more far-reaching. But abuse of trust is abuse of trust—whatever the context, and it is not

protected by the moral directives of lashon hara . Everyone deserves a chance to do teshuva, but when you have owned it, repented, and professed change, but then re-abuse, your sin is graver, because you cannot claim ignorance from the responsibility of your actions. And thus, you forfeit the right to privacy or silence because then the person who remains silent in such a context is complicit in the abuse.

If we raise these concerns from a deep place of integrity and are willing to talk to one another more about issues that we find challenging to broach, then we really do provide a community of support for one another and we create healthy safe space for everybody. I am convinced that it is really important to make room in our awareness to know that people who exhibit such patterns exist in our world, because otherwise we don't recognize it when it shows up and more damage ensues. So wish for us all that we will get increasingly more comfortable stepping into our discomfort, as we do our best to navigate these brilliant shades of gray.

### **Sofo shel Davar**

Here's been the particularly confusing part for me: what about all the wisdom, teachings and potential allowed to flower in myself that I gained access to \*because\* of relationship with unmanageable persons? That is, how do I reconcile that some of the best of who I am comes out of the "goodies" of abusive relationships—the interactions, the teachings, the great light that also flows through?

I think in holding the paradox of the situation we recognize that what we genuinely, honestly, really did not know, we cannot judge ourselves harshly for, and so

self-forgiveness is in order. On the other hand, the wonder of the lessons from the past simply remain the wonder—because it was experienced authentically as such.

Having been vulnerable and burned, **my** challenge is *\*always\** trust, yet **with** that awareness, I work to maintain the **best** instincts of that Giving-Tree in me. Reb Nachmans teachings say that we share a basic commonality with trees: in order to grow, we need to be watered. The “water” we can always count on, he says, is that of strife. (Sanhedrin 7a) Strife causes us to search and grow, he reasoned, and “being humbled”--cast into the ground as a seed” forces us to unlock potential we may not have known we had. As I was thinking about this, I was surprised to discover that two of my most profound friendships were forged as a result of the ethical struggles within myself that came about because of the drenching those three Taking Boys liberally showered on the Giving Tree that I was. And how I still rather hate to admit that, yet for me, this is an undeniable truth. And although I would not have consciously chosen these ordeals, I am indescribably grateful for the deep connections they catalyzed after I was able to make it all the way through to the other side.

May we be willing to struggle this year with challenging ethical questions, and in doing so take seriously our responsibility for one another. May we be blessed with the kind of clarity and courage to act in keeping with our own highest integrity that is born out of that struggle. Oh, AND, may the tree you are get *\*juuuust\** the right amount of water. Amen.