

The Four Things That Matter Most
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When the Seer of Lublin, Reb Yitzchak Yakov, died, his disciples divided his worldly goods. One got his books, another his Kiddush cup, and yet another his tallit. Finally, there remained one humble Hasid and he was given the Rebbe's clock. On his way home, the student stopped at an inn. When he discovered he had no money to pay the innkeeper, he offered the Rebbe's clock as payment. The innkeeper installed the clock in one of the rooms.

A year later, another of the Rebbe's disciples was traveling and stayed at that same inn. All night, he could not sleep. All night, the innkeeper heard the restless footsteps of the Hasid pacing the floor. In the morning, the concerned innkeeper asked his guest, "Was the room acceptable? Was the bed comfortable?" But the man was preoccupied: "The clock, where did you get that clock in my room?" So the innkeeper related the story of how he acquired the clock.

"I knew it!" responded the Chasid. "This clock belonged to the great Seer of Lublin. It is a holy clock. All other clocks in the world mark time from the past — they measure us from where we've come. This clock ticks toward the future. Every time I lay down to rest, the clock reminded me how much more there is to do before redemption can be realized. It's all in how we read the clock."

How much time do we have before the gates of forgiveness close at the end of Yom Kippur, how many days before our children grow up or leave for school, how many years before our parents and grandparents are gone, and how many more High Holidays before we leave this world? We never know when we will be saying our final goodbye, so why not take the time now to say what matters most to the ones we love. The clock is ticking reminding us of the many tasks to fulfill before our life is complete.

In the last year, two of my friends lost parents after long struggles with cancer. While grappling with their parents' illnesses, they found great strength from Dr. Ira Byock and his book- *The Four Things that Matter Most: A Book about Living* and these 11 words:

Please forgive me.
I forgive you.
Thank you.
I love you.

Dr. Byock, a world-renowned hospice and emergency room physician, teaches that these are four instruments to improving our relationships and life: "The experiences of people who say these four have forced me to realize that healing can occur in many situations that I would have once thought impossible. Why wait until we or someone we love is

dying to say the things that matter most? This nugget of hospice wisdom can allow people to imagine that healing is possible and will help them recapture joy."

We are all familiar with the term healing. In medicine, healing refers to restoring a patient to a state of wholeness and good health. If a person is injured in an accident, one cleans the wound of dirt and infected tissue, and then the body's natural response is to rebuild connective tissue. Finally, the wound is healed.

A similar process occurs with emotional wounds. Rough spots, disagreements, innocent mistakes and serious transgressions all create holes and wide gaps where relationships were once close and strong. Healing occurs when the issue that caused a rift between two people is cleansed and closeness is reestablished.

For my friends, the 11 words:

Please forgive me.

I forgive you.

Thank you.

I love you.

provided the foundation for healing in a time when words were hard to find, particularly when they had to say goodbye. In our lives, we too are confronted with illness, loss, work-related stress and family dynamics.

In life, we desire wholeness and completion. The word complete implies being finished or over. However, a circle that is complete is never-ending. A relationship can be complete without ending like a circle.

However, if bad feelings arise in a relationship, the circle may be broken. It is human nature to put off the work required to make things right. We always assume we'll get another chance later. We cannot let this wait. Communication is required in order to begin the healing process and forgiveness, gratitude and love are the connective tissue of our hearts. The four things that matter most can help us restore the circle.

For those families dealing with illness and there are many in our congregation, it is common nature to close up and turn inward- to rarely talk about mother's dementia or your brother's chemo, We shut down as a way of protecting ourselves. Husbands and wives rarely share with their family or friends their stories of bitterness or disappointment. Life-long friends are abandoned and the family circle seems to shrink. This is a counter-productive process. In these times, we need the most connection and love. We do not know what to say or fear that it will be too painful to open up. For all of us, whether dealing with illness, loss, finances or simply the minor hiccups in a marriage- these four phrases offer a sacred vocabulary to strengthen the foundation of forgiveness, appreciation and love. Remember that the rebbe's clock is ticking toward the future and today is the day to begin again.

Please forgive me.

The four things begin when we ask for forgiveness. What matters most is that we open up by acknowledging our humanity- our imperfections and ask for compassion and forgiveness. That of course is the overriding theme of the Ten Days of Repentance, Yom Kippur- Teshuvah- returning and repairing that which was broken. “*S’lach lanu* or Forgive us” is the prayer that we recite three times daily in the Amidah beating our chest symbolically acknowledging our pain. And on Yom Kippur, we proclaim it threefold- *s’lach lanu*, forgive us, *m’chal lanu*, pardon us, *kaper lanu*- grant us atonement. But how often do we say it with true meaning toward those whom we love and may have hurt?

In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer taught, “Repent one day before your death.” His disciples asked him, “But does a person know on what day he or she is going to die?” Rabbi Eliezer answered, “All the more reason, therefore, to repent today, lest one die tomorrow. In this manner one’s life will be spent in repentance.” (Shabbat 153a) We cannot wait to say, “Please forgive me” with the hope that we will have an opportunity to do it later. As the Rabbis teach, “One cannot say to the Angel of death, wait till I make up my accounts.” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 8:11)

Centuries ago in the shtetl, Rabbi Israel Salanter once saw a shoemaker working late into the night by the light of a flickering candle. When the rabbi asked him why he did not stop working and go to sleep, the shoemaker responded, “As long as the candle is burning, it’s possible to mend.” And so it is for us, today is the day to turn to those nearest and say:

I forgive you.

The Zohar portrays the miracles of living a life based on the compassion of saying “I forgive you.” Rabbi Abba once sat at the gateway of the town of Lud and saw a traveler sit down on a pile of rocks at the edge of a mountain overlooking a cliff. The man was exhausted and immediately fell asleep. Rabbi Abba watched this innocuous scene for a bit until to his dismay he watched as a deadly snake slithered out of the rocks making its way towards to the sleeping man. Not a moment later, a giant lizard jumped out between the rocks and killed the serpent.

Rabbi Abba who was frozen in shock continued watching and saw that the man stood up and was perplexed to see a dead snake lying in front of him. He quickly gathered his possessions and rose to continue his journey. At that instant the pile of rocks he was sitting on collapsed and fell into the ravine below.

The man was about to wander off when Rabbi Abba ran after him and recounted everything he had witnessed. Rabbi Abba asked the man, "My friend to what do you attribute all these miracles that just transpired?" He answered, "Throughout my life I have never let a person harm me, where I did not pacify him. Never have I gone to sleep without forgiving someone for hurting me in any way. Anyone who would hurt me would I endeavor, with all my heart, to resolve whatever animosity was between us. And lastly,

I would turn the hateful situation to doing acts of kindness for the person involved in the misunderstanding."

According to the laws of teshuvah, you do not have to forgive those who do not ask. Although not required, the Talmud records that the sage Mar Zutra recited this prayer every night before going to sleep: "I forgive all those who pained me." (Megilla 28a)

Similarly, the bedtime Shema opens with the words: "*Ribbono shel Olam hareini mochel l'chal mi she'hichis o shekhata k'negdi*- Master of the Universe, I hereby forgive anyone who angered, antagonized or sinned against me- whether against my body, my property, my honor or anything of mine- whether by accident, willfully, carelessly or purposely, through speech, deed, thought or notion- I forgive all. And may it be Your will that I sin no more. And just as I forgive everyone, so may You grant me favor in everyone's eyes so that they will grant me forgiveness."

Each night before our day is complete, we express to God and ourselves that we seek forgiveness and will in turn be forgiving. We clear our hearts by expressing forgiveness to God, but we must also communicate these to our loved ones- we have to forgive and seek forgiveness from our spouses, parents, siblings, children and friends regularly so we can strengthen those bonds and erase any bitterness which could cause cracks in our relationships.

Thank you.

As Jews, we recite three types of prayers daily- words of praise, requests and thanks. We end our meals with words of gratitude in the birkat hamazon. As children, our parents taught us to say thank you and we were taught in Hebrew school to thank God at every moment with prayer. So why is it that we often take for granted all that our parents, spouses, friends, children and siblings do for us? Why is it so much easier for us to thank the stranger that holds the door for us? Why do we assume that those we love know how much we value their time and effort? We can assume God knows our appreciation and still the rabbis require us to say thank you one hundred times a day. So say thank you to your parents for teaching you or driving you, to your children for showing you love, to your spouse for washing the dishes and to your friends for listening.

When Rabbi Irving Lehrman was a child in the 1920s he accompanied his mother to get a bracha from the Lubavicher rebbe. They stood in line for hours and when they finally reached the Rebbe, he asked her, "How are your children?" She replied, "Baruch Hashem- Thank God." And how is your parnassah or livelihood? She answered "Baruch Hashem." "How is your family's health?" Baruch Hashem.

The rebbe finally asked, "So what kind of bracha do you want me to give you?" She answered, "Zol nisht farshtert veren – that the good in my life should not be spoiled." She took the opportunity to not focus on what was missing from her life but to appreciate that which she had and to say thank you.

I love you.

Mother Teresa taught, “There is more hunger for love and appreciation in this world than for bread.” On this Day of Atonement when we are fasting and hungry, we too hunger for love and connection. We appeal to God’s loving nature. Like forgiveness and gratitude, love is also a daily ritual in Judaism. From the words of the Shema and V’ahavta, we are guided to wake up with love and go to sleep with love. And why does it sometimes seem difficult to express our love to those closest to us? “You shall love with all your heart, with all your soul and all your might.” These words of the v’ahavta teach us how to love God, our model relationship for how to be loving to all those in our lives. The Baal Shem Tov was approached by a man who had suffered a painful falling out with his son. “What shall I do?” asked the man. The Baal Shem Tov answered: “Love him more than ever.”

The student that found the rebbe’s clock at the inn leapt for joy and danced every hour that the clock chimed. As our clocks tick each day, remember that time is not simply passing but consider the work that is still unfinished. The four things that matter most remind us to strengthen our relationships with forgiveness, appreciation and devotion.

G’mar Tov- May we all be sealed for a year filled with forgiveness, gratitude and love.