

The Yizkor of Secrets

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Every family has secrets.

My father in law, Vern, likes to say that a secret is something known by only one person.

It brings to mind how the Biblical Rachel absconded with her father Laban's household idols. When Laban chased her new family down in search of them, she hid them under her menses pillow. In that way, her secret remained safe with her, something known only to herself—and I guess God, since the Torah spills the beans.

But while Vern's semi-humorous observation is often true, it is not always true.

Some of a family's secrets are shared with a trusted other. When Miriam and Aaron are complaining about Moses' wife, Tzipporah, the Torah is quiet as to the nature of their complaint. But between one another, the secret is shared.

Other secrets begin as a plan, and spill out to impact those from whom the information was initially withheld.

When Rebecca instructs Isaak to don animal skins so as to trick Isaak into giving him the birthright, the plan

remains top-secret—until it is implemented. Once put into action, all the concerned parties are made suddenly aware with rather devastating consequences to the all.

Perhaps an even more destructive secret can be found in the story of the binding of Isaak, which we read on Day Two of Rosh Hashanah. Yes, God gives the command to Abraham, and yes, Isaak seems somehow complicit in his own sacrifice. But Sarah has no part in these plans. Careful readers of the Torah, including Rashi, note that after the Binding, she and Abraham never speak again. Secrets can do that. They can drive a permanent wedge between those we love best. Sarah also dies shortly after learning of what happened, apparently of a broken heart.

Every family has secrets.

Perhaps they are unavoidable. Although there is an aspect of our society that valorizes truth telling and self-revelation, it is doubtful that our age carries fewer secrets.

Even if we do, what remains true is that although sometimes necessary, secrets can destroy us.

Laura had a half-brother and the following story about him is her gift to our community this Yom Kippur.

Her father, Vern, had been married before, which is when his son Chris was born. That marriage didn't work out, in

part because Chris's mother was an addict. Her body was riddled with Demerol when he was born and the addiction passed down to him, a difficult legacy.

It resulted in many behavioral issues. After his mother died, Chris suddenly moved in with Vern, who by that time had already divorced Marilyn, Laura's mom. No explanation was given to Laura. Chris just showed up. The same behavioral issues that had wreaked such havoc in Chris's life played out in his new home. He couldn't follow any of the house rules. He got in a lot of trouble. When his anger and inability to get along posed a threat to Laura and Eric, Vern had enough and without putting too sharp an edge to it, Chris was banished.

Here's the secret, though. Just as no explanation was given for his arrival, no one told Laura why he was sent away. Imagine being a young girl trying to make sense of it all. The only thing that she could draw out of the silence and the secrecy was that if you didn't behave, you also could be made to disappear. For long years, she became a pleaser, always trying to do what those around her said. She may not have been aware of it at the time, but the secret lived within her, filling her with fear and changing her behavior and personality for years.

When Laura embraced and returned to Judaism with the full commitment of an adult, there was a long period where she never recited Yizkor. After all, both her parents

were alive. She had internalized the folk superstition that if you attend Yizkor when your parents are alive, you risk hexing them and bringing on their premature death.

Sometime in Cleveland, however, she was finally able to bring this devastating secret that had infected her family into the full light of awareness. She researched her half-brother and discovered that eventually he had turned his life around, at least partly. He had found religion, married, began to walk a new path. Unfortunately, his hard-scrabble youth took the ultimate toll and he died in his thirties.

This new story began to work its way through Laura as she realized that she did have someone to recite Yizkor for. She understood that it didn't matter if Chris was not Jewish. She was, and most likely, there was no one else alive to recite prayers for him. Saying Yizkor for Chris was powerful, emotional, and ultimately deeply healing for her.

The power of a secret to eat away at our relationships, our self-esteem, and even our peace of mind can lessen with the antiseptic of strong light.

As a story-teller, one of the most profound stories I know is called the Secret-Keeper. In this imagined village, the town has appointed one reclusive woman to hold their secrets for them. Kalli lived in a small cottage in the woods, and whenever a towns person had a secret that

was too immense of painful for them, they visited her and deposited it with her. They left relieved of the weight and the millstone of the secret. But while they departed unburdened, Kalli grew sicker and sicker. As a townspeople remarked, “The secrets are so heavy, dim, dark, sad—like a child lost in the snow.” Eventually, the town creates a yearly ritual of joy to counteract the poison of their secrets. Kalli is nursed back to health and is able to return to her role. Amazingly, however, the tenor of future secrets in that town were never as harsh. Their inner lives all improved.

The Yizkor of Yom Kippur is our Jewish ritual for confronting some of the secrets of our personal histories. This is why I always think it a lost opportunity when people file out of services on Yom Kippur before Yizkor. Like Laura, they abide by the superstitious belief that they don’t want to harm their living parents. But it’s a real and important opportunity that they relinquish as a consequence.

Because not only does every family have secrets, but secrets can even kill those who are still alive. Sometimes, that is literally true, but more often, our secrets drive a wedge between those who are still here, making them psychologically dead to us. The problem, of course, is that a secret strengthens our negative bonds while weakening the joyful ones. They make our souls sick.

Every family has secrets. It is one of the things you learn as a rabbi. Like Kalli in the story, we are sometimes called to be secret-keepers. Sometimes I wish we all entrusted our secrets with more people, because revealing them to another person is the first step in healing.

Yizkor creates a charged space for memory. It allows us to reconnect with our loved ones. Ideally, beautiful memories surface. A person's smile. Their kindness. Yet within the Mahzor, we also find the El Malei memorial prayer for victims of the Shoah. So many survivors spent years bound to the darkest secrets imaginable, unable to let us carry some of the pain of those most evil years. I am grateful that over time, the Jewish community has found a way that allowed more people to tell those stories and unburden themselves of some small measure of pain.

That is perhaps the most dramatic example of the danger of secrets to eat us from within. Yet even in the most loving of families, secrets remain. Things were left unspoken. Old family dynamics continue to haunt us. Some of us may live from a place of deep gratitude and even so, the secrets are often there.

Why do we keep secrets? Sometimes, as in business, holding proprietary knowledge is necessary. Other times, we keep secrets because we haven't committed to change our actions. If we revealed our vices to our loved ones, they might expect us to change, or grow so angry

at broken trust that they might end the relationship. That is one worry.

But much of the time, shame prevents us from disclosing our secrets. We find ourselves locked alone in a doorless room whose walls are built from our secrets. This alienation makes it even more difficult to break free.

The High Holiday liturgy recognizes this. In the Musaf Vidui confessional, we read:

*Ha-lo kol-ha'nistarot v'ha'niglot atah yode'a?
Atah yode'a razei olam, v'ta'alumot sitrei kol-chai...*

*You surely know both the secret and the revealed.
You know the mysteries of the universe,
the deepest secrets of everyone alive...
nothing is secret from you,
therefore...forgive us for all our sins...*

This powerful prayer cracks open the walls of *our* chamber of secrets. Once we can admit our secrets to God and understand that we can be forgiven for these acts, some of the shame dissipates. As our shame lessens, we find it easier to accept ourselves and that in turn makes it a little bit easier to open up to the people in our lives who matter most.

When we share our secretly-held grief, it's not that everything is suddenly transformed. More often, there's a process involved.

While this year's Yom Kippur services are abridged for safety, in a normal year, this confessional is recited throughout our 25 hour fast. The repetition is itself an accretive process by which we gain courage to face the shadows of our secrets. Like affirmation therapy, we are exposed to the fact that things can be different, and that we no longer need to be held captive by the past, represented by our secrets.

As we turn to Yizkor, we choose to remember. We remember those we lost. This year, may we also remember the secrets and find a space, in the silence of our reflections, to give them their voice again.

We remember because it is human. We remember because love never dies, even when the person does. We remember, because when we do, the meaning of the past can change. When it does, our present also changes.

Remember well. Remember what you dared not speak.

We turn to Yizkor.