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Life's Sabotages
Kol Nidrei – 5775

I was once asked if I took my sermon topics from the Torah or the New York Times.

This evening it is neither. The source of my Kol Nidrei musings is the Food Network. Perhaps it's not the best source for a sermon for a day on which we fast, but I go where inspiration takes me.

Except for the news, I don't watch much network TV. Few shows or series interest me. But I do watch the Food Network. It is a strange addiction, especially since I don't cook.

One of my recent finds is "Cutthroat Kitchen" hosted by Alton Brown. On this show four professional chefs compete for a prize that can add up to several thousand dollars. Each chef receives \$25,000 cash at the beginning of the show. The chefs are given a menu item to prepare, like fajitas, meat loaf, corn muffins, or Bananas Foster, and sixty seconds to shop in a well-stocked pantry.

Then the fun begins. Alton auctions off sabotages that the winner of the auction can foist upon one or more of his or her opponents. The sabotages can be pretty devious, such as one chef forcing another chef to cook all of their food over a tiki torch instead of a burner, or make a breakfast sandwich using soggy bread, or corn muffins using only candy corn, or trade their prime rib for a can of spam.

After thirty minutes the chefs stop their preparation and one of several well-known and highly respected chefs is brought out to judge their dishes. The judges know

nothing of the sabotages the competitors faced. The chefs are judged on presentation, taste, and if their dish reminds the judge of the selected item. One chef is eliminated every round. The winner is the chef that remains after the third round. The winner is allowed to keep any of the money they have left. They then engage in a ritualistic dance in which they ecstatically throw their hard earned cash all over the set.

It's a lot of fun.

Now, especially since we are not allowed any food tonight, what does Cutthroat Kitchen have to do with Yom Kippur?

Don't worry. I'm about to tell you.

Judaism rejects the concept of Original Sin, that all human beings inherit the sin of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God in the Garden of Evil at birth. We believe that human beings are born morally neutral, neither good nor bad. Throughout our lives, at any given moment, we have the choice of doing right or wrong. Our sages personified this by saying that every human being has a *yetzer tov* and a *yetzer ra*, a good inclination and an evil inclination. As I have often said, you can think of the *yetzer tov* as the little angel who sits on one shoulder and whispers in your ear to do the right thing and the *yetzer ra* as the little devil sitting on your other shoulder whispering in your other ear to do the wrong thing. We have a choice of whom to listen to, and which urge to follow.

These *yetzerot*, these inclinations, are brought into sharp relief during the High Holy Days. We think about what we have done right and what we have done wrong during the past year, and pray to God that we will have the strength to allow our *yetzer*

tov, our good inclination, to hold sway over our *yetzer ra*, our evil inclination, in the coming year.

Some people have questioned my description of the *yetzer ra* as a devil whispering in our ear telling us to do the wrong thing. They are right. Jews don't believe in the devil. But Jews are intimately familiar with the *yetzer hara*, our inclination to act in ways which are contrary to what we know to be good, right, and Godly.

I guarantee, if you don't believe in the *yetzer ra* now, you will become a believer after you watch an episode of Cutthroat Kitchen. The *yetzer hara* seems to be charge of the show. The *yetzer hara* doesn't whisper. He shouts. The competing chefs gleefully trip up their opponents. They spend a lot of the money they might go home with to win a sabotage and lay it on another chef. The more difficult the sabotage, the more ecstatic they become.

And after a chef receives a sabotage, he or she can't wait to pay back their opponent. You can see the evil gleam in their eyes. They almost froth at the mouth in their desire for revenge. They are so busy trying to get back at their saboteurs that they often ignore competent chefs—often women, by the way—who are stronger competitors.

Throughout the competition the chefs, who otherwise seem very professional and probably are very nice people, snipe at each other and make cutting remarks. Sometimes it's a friendly competition but other times they are out for blood.

When chefs are eliminated from the competition they are rarely models of good losers. They stalk off grumbling that they were the best chef and should have won.

I know that Cutthroat Kitchen is a television show and that the participants are coached to be adversarial, but their on-air behavior led me to think about the sabotages of life, and how we deal with them. How do we respond when someone throws a roadblock in our way? What do we do when someone hurts us, lies to us, misleads us, cheats us, steals from us, or somehow impedes our plans and stifles our happiness? Our response to the sabotages of life speaks volumes about who we are, and our potential for achieving happiness and fulfillment.

The Biblical Samson was a fierce warrior. He derived his strength from his mother's Nazarite vow. She vowed to God that her son would never cut his hair. Samson fell in love with Delilah, an agent of his enemy, the Philistines. One night Delilah cut Samson's hair while he was asleep. He woke up powerless. The Philistines tied Samson up in their temple, mocked, and ridiculed him.

Samson got even. He prayed to God for strength, pulled the pillars of the temple down, and killed hundreds of Philistines. Samson dealt with his sabotage by taking revenge.

One possible response to the hurts and impediments we encounter in life is to become angry and seek retribution, to pay back the ones who have hurt us with even greater pain.

When a friend spreads a rumor about us, we can, in turn gossip about them. When someone gets promoted over us, we can become negative and sabotage their success. When someone betrays us, we can undercut and hurt them in return. Although the Rabbis long ago explained away the literal meaning of the *lex talionis*, an eye for an

eye and a tooth for a tooth, it is still widely employed by those who seek revenge for the hurts and wounds they have received in life.

People often feel good when they take revenge, at least at first. But in the long run we hurt ourselves more than we hurt others. We become someone who causes pain. We become the aggressor instead of the victim. In the story about Samson I told you earlier, I didn't tell you the end of the story. When Samson pulled down the pillars and took revenge on his enemies, he killed himself as well.

Revenge and retribution are not the best way of dealing with the sabotages that are thrown our way. There is an alternative: accepting and overcoming them.

Sabotages are one of the key elements of Cutthroat Kitchen, but I don't watch the show because of the sabotages. I watch Cutthroat Kitchen to see the resourcefulness and creativity of the chefs as they defeat roadblocks and treachery that come their way.

Some chefs who have no sabotages lose the competition, while others who have every sabotage in the book thrown at them win. How is that possible? Winning and losing depend not only on each chef's talent and experience, but also their ability to overcome their sabotages and create delicious and attractive food.

I have watched a chef cook a winning omelet on the underside of an overturned frying pan. I watched another chef prepare a gourmet meal in a phone booth. Yet another had to do all of her cooking and baking in lemons.

Sound insane? Yes it is. But in the face of adversity, the best chefs do not throw up their hands and walk away. Despite their sabotages, they work creatively and

prepared dishes that please the judges. They accept their sabotages as challenges rather than roadblocks.

One of the most beloved stories in the Bible is that of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph's father Jacob favored Joseph over his eleven brothers. Jacob gave Joseph a coat of many colors, which became a material symbol of that favoritism. Jealous of Joseph, his brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt.

Instead of sulking, stewing, and using his time in Egypt to plot against his brothers, Joseph seizes the opportunity to advance himself. Despite the obvious impediments to success, he is a stranger in a strange land who begins his life there as a slave. Through his own abilities, wisdom, and humility, Joseph becomes the second most powerful man in Egypt.

Joseph's brothers eventually came to Egypt for food because of a famine in Canaan. They did not recognize Joseph until he revealed himself to them saying:

אני יוסף אחיכם אשר-מכרתם אתי מצרימה : ועתה | אלתעצבו ואל יחר בעיניכם כי-מכרתם אתי הנה
כי למחיה שלחני אלים לפניכם

“I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you.” (Gen. 45:5)

Anger and lust for vengeance is one way to counter to the challenges, roadblocks, and impediments of life. Joseph models a different kind of response. When he comes face to face with his brothers, his attackers, he does not demand retribution. He forgives them. He not only reconciles with his brothers, he saves their lives by bringing them down to Egypt. Joseph repaid their evil with love.

I recently watched a Youtube video posted on Facebook which also demonstrated a positive and creative response to a difficult sabotage. The video was of a young woman who was born without arms. She combs her hair, eats soup with a spoon, brushes her teeth, types on her computer, and drives a specially equipped car, all using only her feet. She was pretty amazing. This young woman did not wallow in her disability, in the genetic sabotage thrown her way, she overcame it.

How we deal with the challenges of life speaks volumes about who we are and the “stuff” we are made of.

All of us face a choice when a sabotage or obstacle comes our way. We can seek revenge and rail against an unfair world, or we can do our utmost to let go of our anger and resentment and be grateful for the blessings we have. We can learn from our failures, and use our creativity and positivity to turn mountains into molehills, lead to gold, and hamburger to steak.

The night before Rosh Hashana I took a break from writing sermons and watched a new episode of—yes, you guessed it—Cutthroat Kitchen. In this episode the chefs were asked to make crab cakes. (Yes, I know what crab cakes are. I don’t eat them because they are not kosher, but I know what they are.)

The chefs were given their usual sixty seconds to shop. When time was up, one of the chefs looked in his basket and realized that he did not have any eggs or mayonnaise to bind his crab cakes together. Without them, his crab cakes would not hold together and would fall apart.

On Cutthroat kitchen this is known as a “self-sabotage.” A “self-sabotage” occurs when a chef does something to impede their own success before any of their competitors do.

Oftentimes the worst sabotages we face in life are “self-sabotages,” those of our own making.

When Moses went up Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah from God, the Israelites worried that he would not return. Instead of waiting patiently, they built the Golden Calf. As we know from the Torah, God was none too happy about it. The Israelites paid the price. When confronted by the power of God, Pharaoh did not acquiesce, but hardened his heart. Egypt suffered and in the end, and Pharaoh lost his firstborn son. In the Sinai desert when the people cried for water, Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it, as God had commanded. By disobeying God, Moses condemned himself to die before entering the Promised Land.

These are just three biblical examples of “self-sabotage.” The Israelites, Moses, and Pharaoh had to face the repercussions of their own bad behavior.

Contemporary examples of “self-sabotage” are plentiful: President Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky. Actor Phillip Seymour Hoffman overdosing on drugs. NFL player Ray Rice punching out his fiancée. These are but three examples of famous people who should know better, doing stupid things that negatively affect, and in some cases, end their careers and lives.

We not so famous people are also be guilty of self-sabotage. We miss deadlines, we don’t return phone calls or emails, we arrive at work late, we don’t come home when we say we will, we overspend, we don’t pay our bills on time, we eat the wrong foods,

we don't exercise, etc., etc., etc. Every time we fail to do something we know we should do, we not only hurt others, we hurt ourselves as well.

Most of us can be quite creative and inventive when it comes to overcoming the sabotages of our own making, but the most effective way to deal with them is to change those behaviors we know to be self-defeating and self-destructive before they occur.

There are also subtler self-sabotages that are more difficult to correct because they are found at the core of self-perception. These are the sabotages we create for ourselves when we feel ourselves to be failures, or undeserving, or stupid, or phony, or incompetent, or unworthy of another's approval or love.

On Yom Kippur we are supposed to recognize and acknowledge our sins against others, but we are also supposed to recognize and acknowledge our sins against ourselves. Just as we forgive others, so are we to forgive ourselves, though admittedly it is much easier to change what we do than to change who we are.

Finally, and I almost hate to bring this up but it is Yom Kippur when we must be honest with ourselves: I know that all people, and especially Jews, like to think of themselves as victims, as those who are recipients of injustice and hurt. But sometimes we are not the victims, but the perpetrators. Sometimes we are saboteurs.

The Torah warns:

לֹא־תִקְלֹל חֵרֶשׁ וְלִפְנֵי עֵוֵר לֹא תִתֵּן מְכֻשָׁל וְיִרְאֵתָ מֵאֲלֻקִּיךָ אֲנִי ק'

“You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your God. I am the Lord.” (Lev.19:14)

What the Torah is teaching us is that we should not do anything to harm or sabotage our neighbors. The Talmud says this includes providing someone you know has no power to resist temptation with the means to do wrong or provoking a short tempered person to act in anger. (BT Pes. 22b & BT Kid. 32a) Even though we might not be doing something wrong, we are encouraging someone else to fail.

We don't like to admit it, but there are times in our lives when we are the ones throwing up the roadblocks or strewing nails on the road. There are times that we throw those who are floundering anchors instead of life jackets. There are times when we create the impediments to other people's happiness. There are times when defeating other people's successes is more important to us than creating our own.

Sometimes our sabotages are not so obvious, but they are sabotages nonetheless. We use mean words and neglect to lend a helping hand. We ignore or don't listen to our family and friends. We give those around us unsolicited and unwanted advice. We brag about our accomplishments in the face of others' failures. We sabotage others when we put our own needs and desires above the needs and desires of those we love.

On Yom Kippur we should be thinking more about the sabotages we create than the ones we receive.

Please allow me to summarize the questions we face tonight: Will we respond to the problems that come our way as sabotages or opportunities for growth? Will we respond to those who hurt us by seeking revenge or striving for forgiveness? Will we continue to beat ourselves up over our own shortcomings, or learn to accept and forgive

ourselves? Will we better the lives of those we love or place stumbling blocks in their way?

On Cutthroat Kitchen the judge chooses a winner. On Yom Kippur the Judge Above wants us to choose life.