

Adam Gopnik, writes for the New Yorker. I want to share with you today a thin slice of an essay called “Bumping into Mr.Ravioli,” a story about Olivia, Gopnik’s five year old daughter and her complex unfolding relationship with an invisible playmate, Charlie Ravioli. Within the hustle and bustle of Manhattan, it seemed that Olivia and her friend Charlie Ravioli had an impossible time translating their scheduled appointments into an actual face-to-face meeting. Charlie Ravioli’s receptionist, Laurie, kept calling Olivia to let her know that Ravioli was so overbooked that he had to cancel their meeting at the last minute.

Olivia’d dad called his sister, a child psychologist:” Have you ever ever heard of an imaginary friend with an assistant?” His sister paused. “Imaginary friends don’t have assistants. That’s not only **not** in the literature. That’s just...I mean ... In California they don’t have assistants. “You think we look into it?” **“I think you should move.”**

Some time later, Olivia informed her parents that Charlie Ravioli got married to a woman named Kweeda... and I’m fast-forwarding to this scene; the tragic news. But today there is a new seriousness. “Mommy,” she says as she eats her tuna sandwich, “I’m sorry to tell you that Kweeda has died.” “She’s died!” Martha says, genuinely shocked. “I’m sorry to hear that. What did she die of?” “She died of **Bitterosity!**” Olivia nods grimly. Bitterosity had taken down Kweeda; it could happen to anyone.

As for defining the disease, Gopnik described it as a combination of jealousy, resentment, and disappointment. My meditation teacher, Sylvia Boorstein thinks bitterosity is a combination of greed, hatred, and delusion. What is especially alarming about Bitterosity is that this widespread ailment hides in plain sight. We can mask the condition with a reasonably convincing smile or a pleasant manner...and all the while, **quietly - maybe even unconsciously**, we grasp at the stories that make us rage, remind ourselves of the wounds visited upon us, wishing punishment upon our foes. We find ourselves disappointed or even enraged when a particular turn of events doesn’t unfold the way we planned, the way we dreamed. Along the winding road each of takes, we probably have found ourselves turning the the wound over and over from so many angles.

“Why did this happen to me? How could she do that? Why did he say those things? It was supposed to happen like this; it is not fair.”

The disease can be virulent, and no ethnic populations are immune. Last year, Terry Jones, Pastor of the Dove World Outreach Center, in Gainesville, Florida, posted signs on his church property declaring Islam to be of the Devil. The posted signs did not attract much attention. And this year, bitterness has affected the pastor in a more serious fashion. Despite a carefully calibrated public note of caution from General Petraeus, Jones’s church plans to gather this coming Friday for a day of publicly burning the Quran. This will definitely gain plenty of attention in the form of condemnation and anger. Bitterosity is highly contagious. Half a world away, this past week, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, one of the leading authorities in the Israeli Sephardic community, offered these words: **“May our enemies and those who hate us be put to an end, Abu Mazen and all these evil people, may they be made gone from the world. The Holy One, Blessed be He, should smite them with plague, they and these Palestinians, the evil Israel-baiters.”** Here we are nearing the end of the month of Elul; the time to examine our interactions with others, the time to build bridges - and **these** are the words held aloft as a beacon by one of the leading rabbis in the community?! Judging from the muted reactions to Rav Ovdiah’s pronouncements, it would appear that the virus has made inroads even the Holy Land.

The examples of Pastor Jones and Rav Yosef have that over-the-top feel, but, in truth, they are two human beings. No more, no less. They struggle with anger, resentment, greed, and delusion - along with the rest of us. It’s easy to scan the public pronouncements of famous people, and notice signs of inflamed anger or seething contempt. But even in our own less-than-famous lives, we can detect traces of the same resentment and scorn. The disease is quite old. Back in Genesis, chapter 4, Cain was stricken with a lethal case of bitterness toward Abel, his brother.

No wonder, that we find these private words of petition at the end of the Amidah, a prayer that is central to every formal prayer service throughout the year:

אלהי, נצור לשוני מרע ושפתי מדבר מרמה

My God, guard my tongue from evil, and my lips from dishonesty.

ולמקללי נפשי תדום ונפשי כעפר לכל תהיה

To them that curse me may my soul be silent; let my soul be as the dust to all.

The 4th Century Babylonian teacher, Mar bar Ravina, brought these humble private requests before God. Listen to his words: He was well aware of our tendency to lose our way with misleading speech.

Beyond his commitment to control his tongue, Mar bar Ravina teaches us to strive for humility and openness. **Why does he yearn for his soul to hold silence in the face of those who curse him?** I don't think the silence has to be understood as passivity and meekness. By holding silence, after being wounded by hostility, you are avoiding the needless suffering which comes from stumbling further into a narrative of conflict and indignation. This is the silence of equanimity. I witness the anger of my foe, and that anger cuts into me. But I have the chance to let go of the **bitterosity**. Notice the phrase לכל תהיה – let my soul be as dust **to everyone**. **Humility can't be selective.**

Throughout the holiday davening, we petition God: סלח לנו, מחל לנו, כפר לנו – forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement. How do we muster enough nerve to petition the Judge of all the Earth, knowing that all of us have fallen short? Every year we return, hat in hand: please God! Even though our deeds are wanting, even though we have not met our ideals - give us a new page, help us renew ourselves. We remind God: אנו בניך ואתה אבינו – We are Your children, You are our Father, our Mother, we are Your flock, You are our Shepherd, we are Your creatures, You are our Creator, we are Your treasure, You are our Protector...

Basically, we want the Judge of all Creation to be overwhelmed with Compassion; to overlook the details on the ledger, if necessary. **That is a lot to ask.** How dare we ask אבינו מלכנו to deal kindly and gently with us, while we secretly wish that God would withhold that nurturing and loving feeling to other human beings - people who are just as much children of the very same אבינו מלכנו? **Without humility, our prayers aren't going anywhere.** Without humility, our prayers are wasted breath.

A couple of Wednesdays ago I was studying some tefilla with students from grades 3-5 at Schechter. We spoke about the Divine Scales of Justice; about those who are wicked - רשעים - and those who are righteous, צדיקים. We agreed that most people are someplace in the middle, in a rather large group we called the ככה-ככה club. We're pretty much okay, not perfect, by any means. But we have this nagging feeling, that unless we seriously raise the bar, come next year - and the year after that - we will still be card-carrying members of the ככה-ככה club. Graduating out of the ככה-ככה club will require far more than the New Year's resolutions we make from time to time. The only way to pull this off is for us to grab our bitterness and toss it overboard. It won't go quietly.

Bitterosity, by the way, almost did Jonah in. **Angry man overboard! Swallowed by Big Fish!** Can you hear him praying from the belly of the fish? Terrified sailors wondering who the sleeping stow-away was and how they got mixed up in this mess... **What a self-centered, self-righteous angry guy!** He was miffed about God being gracious to the sinful people of Nineveh; fools, who - just like us - don't know their right from their left. Jonah didn't understand that God is gracious by nature.

He didn't understand that every breath of every day that each creature breathes is a brand new kindness, a gift that we didn't earn. So we revisit Jonah's comic and tragic 15 minutes of fame in order to learn the truth about letting go of our suffering stories. We might laugh at Jonah or wonder at his self-righteous hostility toward the people of Nineveh. But as we reflect, we may be reminded of **our own** bitterness. So much angry, wounded baggage weighs us down.

This is the season us to toss our crumbs of resentment and jealousy and meanness into the water. Throwing the crumbs is the easy part. The real challenge is letting go of the rage which settles in our bellies. There are many strains of bitterness, including the way our eyes skillfully throw darts at the enemy, or they silently size up others with scorn and haughtiness. Some of us have even trained our eyes to look straight through certain people whose presence gives us heartache or nausea.

In more than a few people, bitterness shows up as a box full of stories that identify them as victims, and other folks as aggressors. Bitterness underlies many of the items on the list of transgressions we recite on Yom Kippur.

What happens to us if we fail, God forbid, in our struggle with bitterness? Something inside of us dies. Our sense of *mentschlichkeit* would be diminished. When I mentioned the mysterious demise of Kweeda, the make-believe wife of Charlie Ravioli - he himself, a figment of the imagination of a 5 year old girl, named Olivia - it didn't really mean much, because nothing significant is at stake. It was just a joke. Now, when we consider just how widespread - and **real** - the ailment is, we have to acknowledge that we are at risk. **No one** wants this new year to be blighted by a relentless attack of bitterness. I have not heard anything yet about any inoculations being offered locally, but I will share you a realistic course of action.

God gently guides us to unclench our hands, to open our hearts, to find the key which opens the lock which holds the painful chains of past grievance and complaint, along with shackles of worry about what might be, and we find ourselves **open and in the present**. Leaning into the challenge, we embrace the possibilities that can be found in forgiving others and even forgiving ourselves. We nurture the hope that we can heal, and that - with the help of our family and friends - we can write new chapters, stories of joy and consolation. And we reach for the most powerful cure to bitterness - another natural gift; something money cannot buy, the ultimate antidote - which is called **generosity**.