I have heard of contemporary Jewish congregations that have enacted this mode of compassionate listening, inviting those who have come to the synagogue after experiencing a crisis to literally circle the sanctuary to the left, with other congregants extending greetings and prayers to them. But whether or not this ritual is enacted literally, we can take inspiration in how our ancient Sages urged the entire community to communalize the life challenges of individuals, especially at times of festive gathering.

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TORAH FROM JTS

Emor 5781 אמר תשפ"א

Struggling to Celebrate

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While Parashat Emor contains one of the Torah's discussions of holidays and instructions for their observances, rabbinic literature provides guidance for their observance in the context of the complexities of the participants' lives, even those who might be struggling to celebrate.

Six of the seven holidays mentioned in the Torah are referenced in Leviticus chapter 23 (Shabbat, Pesah, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot; only Rosh Hodesh is absent in this passage.)

Verses that open and close this discussion of the holidays appear in the holiday liturgy, including as insertions in the Ma'ariv service and before the kiddush preceding lunch: "These are the set times of Adonai, the sacred occasions, which you shall celebrate each at its appointed times" (Lev. 23:4) and "So Moses declared to the Israelites the set times of the Lord" (Lev. 23:44).

Parashat Emor begins with instructions designated for the *kohanim,* the dynastic religious leadership, with God instructing Moses to speak with "the priests, the sons of Aaron" (Lev. 21:1). The parashah shifts to God directing Moses to engage all of the Israelites regarding religious responsibilities and activities for the entire community. Rabbinic commentaries find significance in Adonai instructing Moses to tell the people "These are My fixed times, the fixed times of Adonai, which you shall proclaim as sacred occasion" (Lev. 23:2).

The authors of the Mishnah (edited around 200 CE) gave thought to the lived experience of people coming to the Temple during the pilgrimage

holidays of Pesah, Sukkot, and Shavuot. They imagined that individuals would reenter the larger Israelite community after periods of time apart. They specifically wondered about interpersonal dynamics when encountering one another during emotionally charged times in their lives.

A passage from the Mishnah, (Middot 2:2, and a parallel passage in one of the Talmud's minor tractates, Semahot 6:11) imagines a variety of difficult circumstances a person might be experiencing when coming to the Temple, and proposes a choreography and script for the encounter. Typically, most people who would enter the Temple precincts would move from the entrance to the right; however, some people would enter to the left, based on recent experiences: people would enter to the left if they were experiencing a hardship, including a person in mourning; a person who had been shunned by their family or community; the caregiver of an ill family member; or one who is preoccupied because of the loss of an important object.

The passage goes on to provide guidance to typical pilgrims when they would encounter those circling in the other direction. They should ask, "Why are you circling to the left?"

If the person responded, "Because I am in mourning," one should offer the prayer, "May the One who dwells in this house comfort you."

When encountering a person who says, "I have an ill family member," one should respond with the prayer, "May the One who dwells in this house have compassion upon your relative."

Perhaps most surprisingly, the Mishnah specifies that one who was in *nidui*—a form of excommunication in which someone was shunned by their family or community—should also circle to the left, so that so that those encountering such a person could offer a blessing. The Rabbis debated what blessing to offer this person so that they did not feel judged; the consensus blessing is, "May the One who dwells in this house grant in the hearts of your family or community members to draw you near."

Underpinning the Mishnah is a care and concern for the affective experience of the observance of the holiday. Though the scripting of

exchanges has the resonance of a call and response liturgy, the ultimate goal is human engagement during significant and often difficult times. The cases provided are invitations for future innovation. The person moving to the right who is not experiencing hardship is instructed to begin the encounter not with a gesture of help but with a question—"Why are you circling to the left?" The encounter begins with the caregiver not knowing, and with deference to the one who is literally walking a different path against the mainstream.

The model of caring that the Mishnah describes resonates with the insight from psychiatrist Jonathan Shay that "[h]ealing from trauma depends upon communalization of the trauma" (Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, 4). Assuming that people going through hardship *will* go on pilgrimage, will convene with the larger community, and will give voice to their suffering, the Mishnah paves the way for a relational approach to healing.

According to Dr. Shay, "Categories and classifications play a large role in the institutions of mental health care [. . .], in the education of mental health professionals, and as tentative guides to perception." Similarly, categories and classifications also play a large role in religious systems of guiding people through major life events. Dr. Shay continues and warns of the dangers of reifying a care system:

> All too often, however, our mode of listening deteriorates into intellectual sorting, with the professional grabbing at the veteran's words from the air and sticking them into mental bins. To some degree that is institutionally and educationally necessary, but listening this way destroys trust.

In the same way that the Mishnah instructs that the caring encounter should begin with compassion and deference, Dr. Shay advises that "before analyzing, before classifying, before thinking, before trying to do anything—we should listen." Listening to others establishes the foundation for building trust. However, fully open-ended approaches can be daunting and anxiety-provoking. For this the Mishnah provides us with a mechanism to reconnect after a difficult time apart.