

I recently came across a phrase that I had never heard before, which apparently makes me the last person in the world not to be familiar with the mantra “protect your peace.” On the off chance that I was not actually the very last person to hear it and some of you haven’t either – first I will say: you’re clearly not on Tik-Tok, which I’m not either or I would have come across it thousands of times since 2023, which is apparently when it started taking off in a big way.

“Protecting your peace” refers to prioritizing one’s mental and emotional wellbeing over all other concerns, and it is having a moment in the world of self-help. The reasons for this shouldn’t be exactly mystifying: we are living at a time and in a world where things are ugly, where personal attacks have gone from a sign of poor upbringing or character to commonplace and expected. It’s a world where self care is a religion and self-help gurus and influencers are the high priests and priestesses. It is a world where some young people casually talk about ‘going no contact’ to refer to breaking off relationships with family members they find distressing to deal with, and making that decision is an increasingly common and accepted lifestyle choice.

Experts debate the origins of this move toward prioritizing the value of “protecting your peace.” Part of it perhaps comes from Covid, when people were cut off from their usual relationships and support systems in a way that bred a certain sense of individualism and a preference for being on one’s own. Part of it is clearly generational and has to do with massive societal changes in the nature and understanding of the family with its shifting network of norms and obligations, where we have perhaps set unrealistic expectations for parents to turn out happy, well-adjusted, and fully realized children on demand. Part of it is connected to the way therapeutic language and thinking has spread from the realm of experts who are actually qualified to talk about it into the realm of pop culture, where anybody can toss around terms like ‘narcissist’ or ‘borderline personality disorder’ or ‘toxic’ with an air of authority and expertise that most of us don’t actually possess.

That last term, ‘toxic,’ is one that in particular has taken on a life of its own. I feel like I hear it being used all the time. It is a label that can be usefully applied to anyone I feel challenging to deal with and which justifies my decision to cut off or at least curtail my relationship with them. A friend doesn’t return your texts? She’s toxic. A family member doesn’t affirm you enough? He’s toxic. Sadly these are real examples, as is the statement that a friend who is depressed is also toxic because she pulls you down and drains your energy: she threatens your peace. And when that happens, the online gurus will tell you the solution is clear. As Scary Mommy, a parenting site which has 4½ million followers on Facebook and another 2½ million on Instagram puts it: “[I]f a relationship is hurting you and affecting your well-being, that’s not okay.... Even if it’s a close family member, it’s okay to end a toxic relationship without guilt. It’s not easy, but it might be the healthiest decision you ever make.”

Now, to be clear there are people in this world who truly are toxic: they’re malicious and abusive and it may be the case that curtailing interactions, setting definite boundaries, or even in some cases cutting off all contact may in fact be the right call. Mental health is crucially important, and we know there can be tragic consequences to ignoring or trying to bury trauma. But it is also dangerous to go to the other extreme – to place creating a pleasant and frictionless existence as the greatest good and thus justify cutting out anyone who doesn’t further that goal. Part of the brilliance of the term ‘toxic’ is that it pathologizes the other person and once it’s about them it’s not about us, and we don’t have to take any responsibility for the damage in the relationship because, you know, they’re toxic. This creates the justification, maybe even the

imperative, for breaking off a relationship. As journalist Allie Volpe puts it, in our current culture “Severing ties with a supposedly toxic person or family member is seen by some as a noble pursuit, an act of self-love and protection.”

For some in today’s world, taking action to protect one’s peace may seem like a no-brainer. But things are seldom so simple, and Judaism is a tradition that insists we take responsibility for staying engaged, and not just walking away. It might be about hanging in with a challenging or less-than-ideal relationship, and it might also be about hanging in with ourselves: examining our own behaviors and taking responsibility for any part that we might have to play in a dysfunctional dynamic. Yom Kippur, after all, isn’t about pointing fingers or avoiding our own faults and shortcomings, but rather about acknowledging and owning up to them, even when it may be painful. As our liturgy puts it, “[W]e are neither so arrogant nor so stubborn as to declare that we are righteous and have not sinned; for, indeed, we have sinned.” And in that sense Yom Kippur and the work it demands is about promoting mental health, because these practices are critical tools for how we develop our own emotional and spiritual resources, how we build the resilience to be able to face challenging situations and overcome them. Life will probably present us with no shortage of unpleasant and difficult circumstances, and we need to grow our capacity to deal with them not by avoiding them or hiding from them, but rather by figuring out how to negotiate them, and learning and growing in the process.

In the realm of interpersonal relationships, I don’t think we do ourselves any favors when we idealize relationships that are entirely free of friction, because when we do, we set unrealistic expectations and deny ourselves opportunities to grow and strengthen our connections. Are there people in my life I find difficult or draining to deal with? Sure. Are there people I let go through to voicemail because I don’t have the energy to talk with them at exactly the moment they want to connect? Yes there are, because setting some boundaries is both understandable and healthy. But the point is, I do call them back. And I do stick it out with challenging relationships, even if I sometimes take steps to protect myself like centering myself before a conversation or choosing not to share certain types of personal information. Taking these steps keeps me in relationship, keeps me engaged – allowing for uncovering or creating new opportunities and openings and possibilities. It is a form of grace extended to another person who may rub me the wrong way but is nonetheless well-intentioned and worthy; and I pray this grace comes back to me as well in the form of other people also being patient with me, and not just writing me off when they find me difficult.

Psychologist Joshua Coleman, a senior fellow at the Council on Contemporary Families at UT Austin despairs, “‘Protecting my mental health’ has become the new moral framework.” While Judaism cares about and values our sense of well-being, it also doesn’t place it as the sole and highest good, as the pseudo-therapeutic approach does. And that means the primary questions we ask can’t just be about our own ease or comfort or gratification. We need to ask what it means to be responsible family members, friends, community members, and citizens. We need to ask how we live out our responsibilities toward the rest of the world. We need to ask what it means to be the heirs of an ancient and precious covenant and how we can increase Godliness in our neighborhoods and communities. We don’t get to turn our back on the world and things that are hard; Judaism demands that we be engaged and do our small part for *tikkun olam*, of helping to bring the world to the fully created state God wishes for it. As Rabbi Tarfon famously said: we are not obligated to complete the work but neither are we free to desist from

taking part in it. And doing the work does require a degree of self-care along the way, of joy and gratitude. But the self-care isn't the goal, the greatest end, for we are in service to something much larger than ourselves.

We are living in a world where 29% of Americans – more than one in four – report being estranged from at least one immediate family member. A world where people are growing increasingly isolated and withdrawn into their screens; where as I discussed on the second day of Rosh ha-Shanah 70% of teens are turning to AI Chatbots for companionship, including a significant percentage that rely on Chat GPT for emotional and mental health support. Where people are literally being labelled online as 'heroes' for having the 'courage' not to attend their own parents' funerals, as recently happened in the New York Times. A world where the strong connections of family, community, and institutions have been fading and where increasing numbers of people are unwilling to put themselves in the uncomfortable and challenging situations necessary to cultivate and develop the resilience in which true mental well-being is rooted.

I saw something a few weeks ago that showed up in my news feed that made my jaw drop. It was formatted like an inspirational quote – you know the type, words floating in front of a background of the sun setting over the mountains. The quote reads: "Forgive them even if they aren't sorry. Let them be right if that's what they need. Send them love and send them off. Don't tie yourself to small mindedness, it will steal your wellbeing." The thing that's so insidious about this quote is that it talks about forgiveness in our relationships, but that's not what it's actually about. 'Forgiveness' becomes code for separation– I'm not going to stay mad with someone, I'll just avoid having anything to do with them. I'll 'send them love and send them off' in order to avoid having to deal with people who threaten my wellbeing, my peace. That's not forgiveness, that's disengagement.

Yom Kippur is about forgiveness, which means Yom Kippur is about hanging in. Yom Kippur calls us to be engaged: in our relationships, in the world, and in ourselves. Yom Kippur demands that we confront things that are difficult rather than turning away, and this includes making an honest and searching assessment of our souls and acknowledging and taking responsibility for when we have come up short. We acknowledge our inadequacies – not as a way of beating up on ourselves or trying to make ourselves feel bad, but as a way to encourage ourselves to do better next time, to confront our issues and learn and grow in the process. We seek forgiveness for our faults and shortcomings and try to do the same for those of others.

Yom Kippur isn't easy. Hanging in isn't easy. Engaging isn't easy. What's easy is opting out, what's easy is making excuses. What's easy is labeling others toxic. On this Yom Kippur we pray for the courage to face ourselves and face the world honestly and wholly. We pray for the will and insight to overcome the challenges we face and to live lives of honesty, accountability, and truth. To find peace in letting others in rather than by keeping them out. Let us turn bravely inward this day for the sake of turning outward tomorrow with purpose and resolve: to allow ourselves to be present to the world in all its glory, pain, hardship, and hope. Help us remain open to recognizing the image of God in ourselves and all people around us – and may this help seal us and them for goodness – and for peace – in the New Year.