

## **Forgiveness in a New Year**

Yom Kippur Morning - September 28, 2009  
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California  
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If there is one word at the heart of Yom Kippur it is: forgiveness.

We come to Yom Kippur services in order to seek forgiveness from God for our sins. We beat our breasts and proclaim: Ashamnu, Bagadnu, and offer an alef-bet of wrongdoing. We say Al Cheit Shechetanu and beseech God: V'al Kulam, Elohai Selichot, S'lach Lanu, Mechal Lanu, Kaper Lanu - for all we have done wrong, O God of Compassion, forgive us, pardon us, and grant us atonement. On Yom Kippur, we recite Avinu Malkeinu many times. Avinu Malkeinu, Chaneinu V'aneinu, Ki Ein Banu Ma'asim - O God, we stand vulnerable before You, show us kindness and respond to our plea.

On this holiest day of the year, we seek forgiveness by fasting. We empty ourselves and reach for the divine. We pray that by tonight, when the gates of heaven close, we shall be purified and inscribed in the Book of Life for a good New Year.

However, in my view, seeking forgiveness from God on Yom Kippur is relatively easy compared to asking forgiveness from another person. I do not mean to suggest that praying with sincerity and confessing wholeheartedly before God is not a challenge. Yet, on Yom Kippur, we are surrounded by an entire support system that encourages our reconciliation with God. We recite prayers that have been hallowed by centuries and sing melodies that have been offered for generations. We are surrounded by family and friends, standing shoulder to shoulder as a congregation as we offer our confessions. Hopefully, these support mechanisms help us reach atonement with God.

In contrast, seeking forgiveness from another human being is a singular process. We cannot simply offer our prayers here in synagogue in the wish that it will bring about reconciliation between another and ourselves. As the Mishna declares *Averot Shebein Adam L'chavero, Ein Yom Hakippurim M'chaper Ad She'yiratze Et Chavero; for transgressions between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not bring atonement, until one person is satisfied with the other (Yoma 8.9)*. So our tradition is very clear – for sins we have committed against another, there is no other pathway than by approaching that individual and asking for forgiveness.

It can be very hard to admit that you have caused another person pain. In addition, when someone wounds us, finding forgiveness can be a very difficult spiritual challenge. So often, when another person afflicts us, we find it challenging to find in ourselves the capacity to forgive. Some wounds are too fresh, too vivid, for us to toss aside. But Yom Kippur reminds us of the centrality of forgiveness in our lives. It is only by finding the humility to ask others to forgive us – and having the compassion to forgive others who have harmed us -- that we are able to live our lives most fully. Through the power of forgiveness, we find it possible to bear our wounds and not be incapacitated. Through forgiveness, we can find healing and hope in the New Year that has begun.

On this morning of Yom Kippur, I want to share with you three stories about forgiveness. Each of these stories is true. The first is written by my colleague, Rabbi Dayle Friedman, who has for many years worked with elderly Jews in Philadelphia. Rabbi Friedman tells a story of her visit with Sam, an old man who is 95-years-old and nearing death. Her narrative depicts how Sam found reconciliation with his daughter, Deborah, and son -in-law, Irv.

Rabbi Friedman writes: *In the 30 years Deborah and Irv had been married, Sam never gave Deborah a break. Imperious and harshly critical, Sam never acknowledged Deborah as a loving wife and mother. He never thanked her for shopping for him, for taking him to the doctor, or for remembering his birthdays. Now 95 and still crusty but worn out, Sam lay dying in the hospital.*

*Deborah and Irv were at Sam's bedside when Rabbi Friedman arrived. She offered Sam an opportunity to say Viddui, the traditional Jewish deathbed confessional prayer. "You know I don't believe in God, Rabbi," Sam replied. Rabbi Friedman said, "Sam, I think this prayer is really an opportunity to talk to one another as much as to God. Maybe there are things that you, Irv, and Deborah would like to say in this last part of your lives together."*

*Deborah went first. "Pop, I love you, I always have." Irv stroked Sam's hair and said, "Pop, I love you. I'm going to really miss you."*

*With tears in his eyes, Sam turned to Deborah: "You know, I've been really hard on you. You have been good to me. I love you." Deborah, crying now, too, replied, "I know you do, Pop. I forgive you."*

*Together, they recited the Shema.*

Rabbi Friedman's story about Sam reminds us that no matter how old we are, we have the capacity to say, "I'm sorry." Even after a lifetime of narrow mindedness, we can change our ways. Even when others fail to live up to our expectations, we are able to truly open our eyes and see another person for who they truly are. If only we would let go of our judgments of others, we would see how much love and acceptance they offer us. God forbid, we should wait until we are on our deathbeds to find out this truth.

There is a second story I want to share with you this morning. It involves a man from Vietnam, Luu Doan Huynh and Robert McNamara. You may recall that McNamara was Secretary of Defense during the 1960's in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

This past summer, Robert McNamara died. After his death, an article appeared in Newsweek magazine written by Luu Doan Huynh. During the Vietnam War, Huynh was an analyst for the North Vietnamese. It was his job to keep track of the actions of the American government and from the start, he was aware that the mastermind of the American effort against the North Vietnamese was Robert McNamara. Huynh writes that "McNamara

believed that if the Viet Cong could see how powerful American technology was, they would not fight...Of course, this was not the case. Much of what he authorized and President Johnson authorized were war crimes, and we were furious.”

In time, Robert McNamara came to realize the futility of the American war effort. He recognized that no amount of military might could surmount the will of the North Vietnamese. Eventually, McNamara resigned his position as Secretary of Defense. The war ended in 1975 with the withdrawal of US troops and the reunification of Vietnam under the north's control.

Twenty years after the war concluded, McNamara traveled to Vietnam. He came to discuss his involvement in the war and to seek reconciliation with his former enemies. Huynh writes that he, along with other Vietnamese officials, met with McNamara. McNamara apologized for some of his actions and together they discussed opportunities that the American side had to end the war sooner.

Reflecting about this meeting with McNamara, Huynh states that he does not hate McNamara for his role in killing tens of thousands of his countryman. He says, “I don't feel much anger toward Mr. McNamara. War is war. It was his job to execute it, and he was faithful to his country.

Evidently, Huynh's fellow Vietnamese felt as he did. They had no malice toward McNamara. In fact, Huynh says that during the visit, McNamara worked out each morning by going for a jog around a lake in Hanoi. Huynh remembers "everyone smiling at McNamara – even though everyone knew exactly who he was."

The image of Vietnamese smiling at their former archenemy is amazing. Even though this man represented someone who had brought horrendous harm to their country, the Vietnamese found a way to forgive him. It was not a matter of forgive and forget, for as Huynh says, the people knew who that man was during his morning jog. But because McNamara was willing to own up to his mistakes in his past, that reconciliation could be achieved. Through honesty, candor, and humility, former enemies could discover their common humanity. Through this process, they were able to fashion for themselves a better future.

There is a third and final story I want to share this morning. It grows out of an exceedingly painful story of a father whose three daughters and niece were killed during a war. It is the true story of Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish, a fifty-three year old physician. Dr. Abuelaish, a Palestinian, was trained as an Obstetrician-Gynecologist here in the United States. He lives in Gaza

yet works at Soroka Hospital in Be'er Sheva. A Palestinian doctor working in a Jewish hospital in Israel? Only a man of Dr. Abuelaish's compassion, humor, and unfailing commitment to peace could pull this off. He is beloved by everyone.

During Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza this past January, Dr. Abuelaish was at home, caring for his eight children as well as other members of his extended family. Two weeks into the war, as Israeli troops moved into his neighborhood, an Israeli tank pulled in front of his house and opened fire. The tank commander would later claim that he was returning sniper fire that was coming from the house, a claim Dr. Abuelaish vehemently disputes. What is not in question, is that tank shells ripped apart the doctor's home, killing three of Dr. Abuelaish's daughters, as well as his niece. We turn now to the words of Dr. Abuelaish:

"The 16th of January, 2009, is the day when my three precious daughters and niece were killed by Israeli shells. I do not want anyone in this world to see what I have seen.

What I have lost will never come back. I need to go forward and be motivated literally by the spirit of what I lost, and to do them justice. I lost three precious daughters, but I am blessed with five other children and the

future. I believe that life is like riding a bicycle. As Einstein says – ‘To keep your balance, you must keep moving.’ I will keep moving.

And what about forgiveness? Is forgiveness necessary? When you forgive someone, you forgive and value yourself. Forgiveness is about letting go, completely and permanently.

Then there is the choice, the crossroads, the path of light or the path of darkness. I chose the first. Most people assume that this path, that of forgiveness, is difficult, but in the long run it is easier to forgive than to live with hatred or be consumed with revenge.

Forgiveness helps you move forward, away from the pain of the past to the brightness of the future. Indeed, forgiveness opens the door to a future that will not repeat the old tragedies. Sometimes the beauty in forgiveness is to forgive when you do not know whom to forgive, when no one asks you for forgiveness.

Whatever the situation, to err is human, but to forgive is truly divine.”

Nine months have passed since Dr. Abuelaish's daughters and niece were killed. He refuses to be mired in anger and hatred of Israelis. Indeed, he is committed more than ever to be a spokesperson for peace. Dr. Abuelaish believes in the transformative power of forgiveness. Only by liberating himself from the pain of his past can he bring himself and others toward a better future.

Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish is an amazing man. His example should inspire all of us to find forgiveness in our hearts, even toward those who have caused us unimaginable pain.

Forgiveness is the power to forge a new future. It is not fashioned out of forgetfulness, nor out of blindness. Forgiveness liberates us from allowing others to control our lives. Hatred controls us. Forgiveness liberates us.

In Judaism, the path of forgiveness is very specific. Our sages declare that forgiveness begins first and foremost with self-awareness. We look into ourselves and search our deeds. In our self-reflection, we see our faults clearly. Our humanity, our imperfection, is exposed. After

acknowledging our wrong doings, the next step is to seek to correct them. It takes courage to ask others to forgive us for the harm we have done. It takes compassion to express forgiveness when another asks you to grant it.

On this day of Yom Kippur, let us be mindful that we live in an imperfect world filled with flawed human beings. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*, teaches that it would benefit us to adjust our expectations about what we can expect out of life. He asks: “Are you capable of forgiving and accepting in love a world which has disappointed you by not being perfect, a world in which there is so much unfairness and cruelty, disease and crime, earthquake and accident? Can you forgive its imperfections and love it because it is capable of containing great beauty and goodness, and because it is the only world we have?”

Rabbi Kushner goes on to ask that we not only find forgiveness for the imperfect world we live in, but we also forgive the imperfect people who inhabit it. He inquires, “Are you capable of forgiving and loving the people around you, even if they have hurt you and let you down by not being perfect? Can you forgive them and love them, because there aren’t any

perfect people around, and because the penalty for not being able to love imperfect people is condemning oneself to loneliness?”

He concludes with this question, “And if you can do these things, will you be able to recognize that the ability to forgive and the ability to love are the weapons God has given us to enable us to live fully, bravely, and meaningfully in this less-than-perfect world?”

It is Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. On this holiest of days we seek forgiveness from God for our sins. Let us seek as well forgiveness from those we have harmed in the past year. The Gates of Repentance are always open – the door never shuts on those who seek teshuvah with sincere and contrite hearts

May Sam’s example remind us that we are capable of achieving reconciliation, no matter how far along in life we may be. May the story of Robert McNamara and Lou Doan Huynh inform us that even former enemies can achieve reconciliation. May the commitment of Dr. Izzeldin Abuelaish inspire us to overcome our heartache and to seek a path of peace.

The High Holy Days are a time of hope and renewal. Let us

seek on this sacred day of Yom Kippur -- Atonement -- at-one-ment with Adonai, for God is one. God is everywhere and can always be found when we seek God with all our heart and soul.

May we have the courage, as well, to seek 'at-one-ment' with our family and friends, especially with those from whom we are distant. In this New Year, may we write new chapters in the Book of Life and inscribe ourselves by deeds of kindness and repentance. May we commit ourselves to reconnection and forgiveness, transformation and renewal. Then our lives shall surely be blessed, and we will be at one with God, and with one another.

*Ken yehi ratzon.* May it be Your will.

Amen.