

To Make Peace Where There is Strife -- Yom Kippur 5764 (2003)

Last month, something quite remarkable took place. Invited to participate in a Polish air show, three Israeli fighter jets, piloted by descendants of Holocaust survivors, made an historic flight over Auschwitz. Streaking down from the sky, they slowed to some 300 knots, and then flew as low as they could along the railroad tracks leading into the camp and the crematoria and directly over the platform where hundreds of thousands of Jews were sent to their deaths.

Before his flight, one of the navigators said:

It is hard to tell what I will feel when I will be in the cockpit then. We are returning from a position of strength, to a nation where there was an attempt to vanquish the Jewish nation. . . . We will be flying slow and low, so that everyone on the ground will be able to clearly see the IAF markings and the blue Star of David.

How is it possible that in less than 60 years, things have changed so radically? Many of us here have parents and grandparents who perished in the Holocaust. Jewish communities in Poland, once thriving centers of Jewish life, were decimated by the Nazis. We were persecuted, victimized, and exterminated. And now, in the span of one lifetime, we Jews are flying our F-15's over Auschwitz - performing aerobatics in the air above Warsaw and Lodz and Krakow.

Our relationship has changed. We have not forgotten the past, but we have somehow moved on. It's a lesson – an amazing lesson. People can be locked in mortal conflict, and then they can change their relationship!

Indeed, conflict is abundant today. 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, Korea, Israelis and Palestinians – the world map is filled with conflict. So what else is new?

Perhaps more to the point, is that this very sanctuary is filled with conflict. Not necessarily between us, of course, but with others out there in the world.

Many people wonder what a rabbi does with his day when there aren't services. Well I can tell you that I spend a lot of my days resolving conflicts.

Parents sit in my study in tears, because a bitter divorce has not only broken up their marriage, but it has wreaked havoc on their kids. Who will and will not pay for the Bar Mitzvah party; who will and will not be invited? "My ex-in-laws won't talk to me, and we used to be so close." "My ex-spouse will not be allowed to come up onto that bima – he or she hasn't lifted a finger for this Bat Mitzvah."

Grown adults cry tears that are 40 and 50 and 60 years old over brothers and sisters, who have snubbed them, picked on them, cheated them, or abandoned them. Or, they lament aging parents who could never show them love, but now need nothing but love and physical support from their children.

And, of course, we all have friends who turned out not to be friends. What did we do, or not do, that was wrong?

Who here doesn't have this? I know we all deal with it to some degree or another.

Since we most likely won't bring about world peace today, I thought we could at least try for some inner peace. For Yom Kippur is our day to seek it out, to let go of our anger, our resentment, even our desire for revenge. The major theme of Yom Kippur is repentance and forgiveness. I've often thought that repentance is the easy part, that forgiveness comes far less easily. Yet, today is our day to forgive and move on.

Not by accident, our Torah is filled with conflict. Reading Torah is like holding up a mirror to ourselves. In the very beginning, God was alienated by His creation, and wiped out the whole earth with a flood. Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers all lived in conflict. They taunted, they stole, they manipulated and lied.

The Torah doesn't hold back. It tells us who we really are, how badly we can behave. It is a litany of rivalry and deception and immaturity. But, it also contains one more element – forgiveness.

After the Flood, God places a *keshet*, a rainbow in the sky – an *ot brit*, a sign of reconciliation.

As grown men, Isaac and Ishmael reunite and bury their father Abraham together.

Jacob and Esau, when finally they meet again, their mighty armies in tow, embrace, put their heads on each other's necks, and weep.

And Joseph, second only to Pharaoh in of all Egypt, reveals his face, while his brothers quake in fear of untold retribution. Instead, Joseph asks in tenderness, "is our father yet alive?"

Judaism demands that we forgive. It acknowledges our struggles; it even glorifies them in the Torah. But in the end, they have to take us to a higher place.

And how do we reach that place? Can we devote this 24 hours to prayer, to confession, to beating our breasts with *Al Chets*, and attain forgiveness? I am afraid we cannot. For our prayerbook declares: "For sins against God, the Day of Atonement will atone, but for sins against another human being this day will not atone until we have forgiven each other."

Forgiveness is personal. Your confession can help you see yourself in a truthful light, your prayer can give you the resolve to change, your repentance can give you a spiritual cleansing. But, your relationships remain unchanged until you change them.

In his famous book, "The Sunflower," Simon Wiesenthal tells of being a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. He is summoned to the bedside of a dying SS officer, who then begins to confess to a horrible act he had committed early in the war. The officer is wracked by guilt and would like to die with a clear conscience. So, at random, he chooses a Jew – Wiesenthal – from whom to ask forgiveness. In the end, Wiesenthal refuses to forgive him.

He does so at the peril of his own life, for one simple reason. In Judaism, only the person who is wronged can grant forgiveness, and all the victims of that SS officer had been silenced by murder. There was no one left to forgive.

Forgiveness is direct; it is one person to another. It involves reaching out and expressing a desire to reconcile, to move beyond the past and the pain.

But now you ask, what *about* all the pain? What *about* the terrible memories I have? What *about* what he, or she, or they did to me? Am I just supposed to forget about all that? Is this what forgiveness means?

The answer is, that Judaism asks us only to forgive, but nowhere does it require us to forget. In fact, we are commanded, "*zachor* – to remember." Memory runs deep in the Jewish people and, I would add, in the human psyche, as well.

Rabbi Harold Schulweis once said, "Forgiveness is not amnesia. Forgiveness does not reverse the past, but it promises a new and different outcome."

He brings a rabbinic teaching that says:

Sin is like pounding nails into a wooden coffin, while repentance is like removing those same nails. But, say our rabbis, even when the nail is removed, the hole still remains.

The damage caused to another human being is done, and it can never be undone – the holes, the painful scars will always be there.

But, when we forgive, we remove the nails - the sharp claws of anger, and even personal destruction with which we gouge and tear at each other. Although we may never forget – for the hole remains – we can forgive, we can move on with our lives.

Back in 1950, the Rand Corporation invented what is now a well-known simulation, called, "Prisoner's Dilemma," in which two bank robbers are in the same jail undergoing separate interrogation. The essential challenge of the game, is to play against an opponent upon whom your own survival could very well depend – sort of like the television show, "Survivor," and not at all unlike the relationship that existed between the United States and Soviets during the Cold War.

In 1981, Prisoner's Dilemma was taken to a whole new level, when scientists organized the first computerized tournament. The program that won was called, "Tit-for-Tat," because whatever move one player made, it responded with the exact same action. It was brilliantly simple, in that Tit-for-Tat basically just mirrored our own human instinct – to respond measure for measure.

But, in 1989, a mathematician came along and beat Tit-for-Tat. His program was called, "Generous." At random, "Generous" instructed the computer to ignore the last move of the other side, and just start over. It has since been suggested, that this return to default, is nothing less than the computer equivalent of forgiveness.

So, one way to look at it, is that forgiveness is about resetting a relationship back to square one. In the midst of human conflict, with all the attack and counter-attack, we just start over. We won't forget the past, but we will try to build a new and different relationship – sometimes more than once.

Over the remnants of the Jewish ghettos in Poland, F-15 fighter jets now soar and proclaim a new day. How can we proclaim a new day in our relationships? How can we build on the ruins of divorce? How can feuding ex-spouses learn to get along, to show their children the love they share for them, instead of the anger they bear for each other? How can brothers and sisters, now 40 or 50 or 60 years old, stop living out their childhood conflict and, instead, like Joseph, remove the veil of sorrow and forgive? How can parents forgive their children, and children forgive their parents? How can friends reset, reconcile, and start anew?

It's hard, it's very hard. Our rabbis ask, "Aizey who gibor? Who is mighty?" And they answer, "It is the one who subdues his yetzer, his emotional impulses." We can shut out that voice which urges us to respond in kind to unkind words or actions. We can move beyond "tit-for-tat" and be "generous."

And it is precisely this lesson that the Shofar teaches us. When Yom Kippur comes to a close, we will sound an instrument that is bowed and bent - as if to intone to us that we must bend our own stubbornness and pride. Despite our egos, it is time to forgive. Who in your life, deserves your forgiveness?

The great psychoanalyst, Viktor Frankel, was also a survivor of the Holocaust. And in his book, Man's Search For Meaning, he wrote:

We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

From Viktor Frankel we learn, that no matter how other people treat us, we still have the freedom to choose the person we want to be. The one saving grace we each possess, is the ability to do the right thing, even when everything around us is wrong – to make the generous, forgiving move in the midst of Tit-for-Tat.

So, what kind of people do we want to be? Do we want to live in exile from others and be ruled by our unforgiving passions? Or do we want to place a rainbow in the sky and proclaim an end to personal destruction? It truly is our choice – whether to seal ourselves in the book of emotional life, or death.

A few weeks ago, a very famous tree finally fell to the ground. It, too, had been bowed for many years. The Jeffrey pine stood at 8,000 feet, atop Sentinel Dome in Yosemite National Park. It was some 400 years old.

It is surmised that as the new century dawned in 1600, a bird lifted a seed to a tiny crag in the rock, where it got buried and grew up from this most unlikely spot. Back in 1867, a pioneer photographer by the name of Carleton Watkins, captured it on glass plates. But, it was really the renowned photographer, Ansel Adams, who, in 1940, made this tree something famous. And ever since then, tourists have made the hike just to see this tree for themselves.

High up in the Sierra's, the Jeffrey pine withstood every imaginable condition – rainstorms, snow, wind, ice, and drought. And for 400 years, it stood – humbled from the weight of years, near horizontal at the end – but it stood.

We are that tree. For, just as the Jeffrey pine withstood the storms visited on that craggy rock – we, too, can withstand whatever befalls us. It is the story of nature, to be ravaged over time by adversity. But if in the end, we are the person we choose to be, then we will remain standing – perhaps slightly bowed and humbled by life – but standing, until our day finally comes to return to the earth.

So let this be a year of life for us all. May we inscribe ourselves, and be sealed by God, for forgiveness, for reconciliation, and for peace. Amen.