

A Time to Seek & A Time to Lose -- Yom Kippur 5766 (2005)

I don't know who names hurricanes. But Hurricanes Katrina and Rita were certainly no genteel ladies. They wreaked absolute destruction on our Gulf States. We looked on as floodwaters overtook entire cities, as people clung to rooftops, sometimes for days, awaiting rescue.

I can't imagine that anyone of us was unaffected by what we witnessed. Life, property, and livelihoods were wiped off the face of the earth in a matter of hours.

Along with our recent Southern California wildfires, and the horrifying South Asia earthquake, we have seen in the last several weeks graphic reminders of the fragility of our own lives. In an instant, our world as we know it can be turned upside down. As the liturgy of this day impresses upon us: the Book of Life and Death is open, and it is determined who shall live and who shall die, who by earthquake, who by fire, and who by water.

On our own shores especially, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita brought us face to face with our mortality. We could not help but ask ourselves, what would we have done, had we been in New Orleans or Galveston? Would we have hung on or evacuated? What would we have taken with us, and what would we have left behind?

Again, the images flash before us. People refusing to let go of their possessions, their homes, their lives as they always knew them to be. Disobeying orders to evacuate, only to be leveled by the raging waters. People refusing to heed danger, and then scratching holes in their roofs, as water rose up to choke them from below.

One man was recently featured in the L.A. Times. He is still resident in his New Orleans home. Never having left, he is now alone on his devastated block. So, he fabricated a makeshift spear and a blowgun, and he stands vigil to ward off would be attackers or looters. He has no idea where his wife and children, where his grandchildren are. He weeps for them and loves them more than anything in the world. He says he hopes they are alive and will come home soon.

He, like so many others, made the hardest decision of all – what to hold onto, and what to let go. Rather than holding onto his family – he chose to stay with their house, so they would have something to return to. I don't stand in judgment of his decision; I merely observe, and wonder what choice I would have made.

When disaster comes upon us, these are decisions that we are forced to make in an instant. Do I stay or go? What do I leave behind, and what do I take?

But then, there is the rest of the time – most of our day to day life – when the urgency isn't so great, when disaster is not encroaching. And for this, we Jews have Yom Kippur. For even though we sit here in comfort and serenity, this is our hour of decision, when we are to search our souls and ask, what in our lives should we let go, and what must we cling to even more tightly?

One of the great resources on letting things go, is a book by Judith Viorst called, "Necessary Losses." She writes about the psychology of loss, and how every forward stage of human growth, actually *requires* that we leave something else behind.

Think about a toddler's very first steps. They lead him or her out into an amazing world of adventure – but away from mother's or father's arms. Something is gained, but something is also lost – as the closeness, and nurturance of parents are pushed further away.

Viorst makes the outrageous point that growing up is actually a form of homicide, as we annihilate the role our parents play, and become, as it were, our own parents.

Of course, this makes perfect sense, especially to those of us who are waiting for our children to murder us just a little, and grow up already! It is the natural progression of things. And when adventure is at hand, letting go can be easy, instinctive.

But let's face it, there are also other times in our lives, when letting go doesn't come so naturally, or even at all. We can find ourselves clinging to rooftops that we are too fearful or stubborn to abandon. With makeshift spear in hand, we hold our ground and hunker down in self-preservation.

But, on this day of deepest reflection, we are to ask, what should we be letting go?

We examine our relationships and ask, what has to be jettisoned? Years of pent up anger, rivalry, resentment toward our parents or siblings. Behavior patterns between family members that just keep on repeating and irritating for years without end. What can we do to break out and find another way?

Or, are we in relationships that need to be ended altogether, or perhaps put on hold for awhile? I'm talking about abusive relationships that make partners feel unworthy and ashamed – that stay together in a downward spiral only for the sake of children who, by the way, are not well-served by the hostility anyway. Or aging parents, who emotionally abuse their grown children, yet expect them to serve them in their old age. Or ungrateful post-adolescent children, who demand unconditional love and support from their parents, while feeling no need to personally contribute anything to the relationship.

All of these are unworthy relationships. And you know what? Contrary to what many people think, we are not required to hold on at any cost, to place ourselves in harm's way. We do not have to be swept away by the flood waters. As gut wrenching as it is, sometimes, we have to let go of things in order to survive.

And sometimes, by the same token, we also have to let go of our unrealistic expectations and learn acceptance. We have to accept that our spouse may not be the romantic, or perhaps the compliant mate whom we thought we married. We have to accept that our child is not going to make it into an Ivy League school, or be a strong athlete, even though we love sports. Rather than pushing our loved ones to be someone they're not, we need to push ourselves to let it go, and then focus on whom they really are.

And, by the way, when it comes to ourselves, there's plenty to let go of. Like long held dreams of what we thought our life should be like. But if, in fact, they're more illusions than dreams, it may be time to let them go and get real. Or, like our vain ambition for things that don't really matter – more stuff than we need, more status or recognition that we don't need. Or, like our relentless quest for the perfect body and soft skin. Youth doesn't last forever – at a certain point, we need to let it go and accept that aging has its own kind of perfection.

I know, this is all easier said than done. Looking in the mirror, looking in our hearts, looking in the faces of those we've known for years, how do we find the courage to let go?

I often think of Abraham at Mt. Moriah – slaughtering knife in hand, ready to sacrifice his only son to God. He was so determined to follow through, that the angel had to call out to stop him not once, but two times. It was almost too late before he heard the angel's voice, and spared Isaac.

At what point will we hear the voice? Will we wait till we are trapped in our attics with the rising tide at our heels? Will we not let go until we are literally scratching a hole in the roof with our fingernails? What will it take to finally break loose and let go of things that must be released?

Then, of course, there is the flip side of this same question. For equally difficult to figure out is, what must be kept? What do we have that's worth fighting for, and holding onto, and refusing to let go?

Personally, I've come to the conclusion that the most important thing to keep, to hold onto at all costs, is hope!

I think of Anne Frank, who never gave up hope, even unto her own death at the hands of the Nazis. In her diary she wrote: "I keep my ideals, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."

I think of that anonymous Jew, who carved these words into the wall of a cellar in Cologne, Germany, to be found by the liberating Allied troops:

I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining.

I believe in love, even when feeling it not.

I believe in God, even when God is silent.

Where there is hope, there is possibility. Marriages that are frayed and worn, can so easily unravel altogether. But I say, if there is any hope, even the faintest hope, do not let it go. If there is any inkling that it can be repaired, that a marriage can be healed, then it is worth the effort to make it so. If there is hope, then hold tight and do not let go!

I do believe that severely damaged relationships can be repaired. I have seen it happen. I believe that dormant friendships can be re-awakened. I believe that forgotten ideals can be remembered and pursued again. I believe that stalled careers can be revived. I believe that illness can be fought, and our bodies can be healed. And I believe that wayward children can be saved and brought home again.

Ani ma'amin b'emunah sheleyma – I believe with perfect faith, proclaimed Maimonides centuries ago. As long as we believe that there is hope, that hope is worth holding onto.

In our society of instant everything, we have become so conditioned to expect immediate results. And when we don't get them, we are prone to give up and walk away. My friends, as a general observation about our culture, I would say we are losing our resolve, our commitment to stick things out, to fight hard and keep on fighting for things that matter.

Ani ma'amin - we need to believe. We need to believe that the world can be better. We need to believe that we can be and do better in it. We need to believe that we, and those we love can change. We need to believe that God has a purpose for you and me in this world.

There are some things worth holding onto for dear life and never letting go. No matter how high the tide, nor how stormy the seas – we should never let go. There are ideals worth dying for, causes worth living for, people worth sacrificing for.

I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining.

I believe in love, even when feeling it not.

I believe in God, even when God is silent.

Tomorrow/This afternoon, we will read the story of Jonah. And I have to tell you, I never really got this story. God called on Jonah to be a prophet to Nineveh, and what was his response? He ran away. Then, he's thrown off a ship in stormy seas, he's swallowed by a big whale, and a castor bean plant grows over his head and just as quickly withers. It always struck me like a dark fairy tale.

But, even so, there is one important message that I do get out of it. And that is, that Jonah gets a second chance. Finally, after all his travail, he straightens up, and does what he's supposed to do.

He goes to Nineveh as a prophet. And I think that may be why it's read on Yom Kippur – to help us see that we also get second chances.

We get second chances to live our dreams. We get second chances to have the happiness we each deserve. We get second chances to be good people, good parents, sons, daughters, and friends. We get second chances to contribute something valuable to this world, and leave something of worth behind. It is still not too late for any of us. On this Yom Kippur, we get another chance.

If we realize that we've been holding onto something destructive for too long, we have the chance now to let it go, to save ourselves from disaster, to climb down from our flooding rooftops, in order to seek out something new and better.

And if we realize that we didn't hold on when we should have, we can grab a hold now. Very often, it's not too late. Even in the raging flood of our own failure, we can rescue things that are worth saving – ideals, relationships, our most honorable, most noble selves.

I want to share with you something that was written by a man named Howard Luna, as he sat in church on a Sunday after Katrina. I believe it speaks for itself. It is called, "I Was Once Like You:"

I was once like you.

I had a home, a community, a church.

I was once like you.

I had family and friends close by.

I was once like you.

I said that I would donate money and volunteer time but never did.

I was once like you.

I had a job, financial security, cars, boats, the rest.

But no more, I am not like you.

I am happy that friends and family are not close by because I know that they are safe.

I am not like you.

I cry tears of joy when friends and family leave knowing that they are one step closer to going home.

I am not like you.

I left home, not by choice but by the hand of GOD.

Who am I?

I am a displaced person to some, a refugee to others.

Who am I?

I am a person who has seen more angels in the past two weeks than a thousand people will see in a lifetime.

Who am I?

I am a person who will give more, volunteer more and open my home to anyone in need without reservation.

Who am I?

I know that home is where my wife and kids are.

Who am I?

I'm a person who just wants to go home.

Thank God, we are privileged to sit in this beautiful sanctuary on a glorious day. Our city does not lie in ruins. Our homes are not sunken beneath brackish gulf waters. And we did not have to experience utter calamity, in order to discover who we truly are and what matters most.

But just the same, it is . . . *k'ilu*, as if. As if the Book of Life and Death is open before us. Yom Kippur gives us this time to sift through all that we have, and all that we are, and choose between the real and unrealistic, between the important and insignificant, between what can and must be saved, and what should finally be released.

Some things, God will ultimately decide for us – like whether Earthquake, or Fire, or Water will visit us. But the rest . . . all the rest is up to us!

G'mar Chatima Tova – may we each be inscribed and sealed for blessing in the Book of Life.