

2nd day Rosh Hashanah sermon

2 Tishrei 5760 (Sept. 12, 1999)

Rabbi Robert Scheinberg, United Synagogue of Hoboken

Shanah Tovah!!

Two years ago, just a few weeks after I had arrived in Hoboken, I received a postcard in the mail which was completely unlike any piece of mail I have ever received before or since. And I have thought about this postcard frequently during these past two years, especially at the High Holiday season.

This postcard was written by a woman who lives in a small town near Birmingham, Alabama, and she wrote and sent this card to over 4000 rabbis in the United States and Canada. And this is what the card said. Because this card was addressed to the congregation, I shared it with members of the congregation soon after I received it.

Dear Rabbi and Jewish Congregation,

I am a DESCENDANT OF MARTIN LUTHER, who wrote many anti-Semitic tracts during the 16th century. I hang my head in shame and I have great sorrow in my heart for the tracts he wrote and for the influence that his writings had on those who persecuted the Jewish people...especially Hitler. Hitler used Luther's tracts to justify the atrocities that he directed towards the chosen people of God! The deep wounds of the holocaust remain fresh today in the hearts of many and only the love and mercy of G-d can bring about healing; however, I OFFER MY SINCERE APOLOGY TO YOU for the pain that resulted from Luther's writings. I have gone before the L-rd in intercessory REPENTANCE FOR THE SINS OF MY FAMILY AND I ALSO ASK FOR YOUR FORGIVENESS!

As you prepare to enter into Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I pray that you will open your hearts to FORGIVE MY FAMILY. I thank you for your willingness to read this note of apology and I pray that G-d's gift of healing and restoration will be yours this year.

Shalom,

Dianna Dunken Rowe

It was an extremely moving experience to read this card. obviously this woman's dedication and passion shone through -- I thought about the effort that she must have spent, hand-addressing four thousand cards, attaching four-thousand stamps. I thought of how much pride we might have expected her to manifest for being related to such a great historical figure, and how difficult it must have been to acknowledge that for all his greatness, her ancestor inflicted irreparable harm on our people. And then I contemplated whether I was going to write back to her and what I would say. And then the questions started to arise in my mind. I began to wonder: was it appropriate for her to ask for forgiveness from ME on behalf of an ancestor who had been dead for over 400 years? And would it be appropriate for ME to grant forgiveness on behalf of fellow Jews who suffered directly from Martin Luther's hatred, when I have NOT suffered directly? And this postcard challenged me to come to a greater understanding of Jewish perspectives on granting forgiveness. Every year at the high holiday season, we always spend so much time and energy discussing how and why to ASK FOR forgiveness, from God and from each other. But we tend to spend LESS time and energy on the reverse side of this process -- on how we ought to respond - according to our tradition -- when others ask for forgiveness FROM US.

But Jewish tradition DOES provide some guidance on this issue -- some of which we may find surprising.

For example, listen to the following words from the Mishnah Torah of Moses Maimonides in the 12th century: he writes:

Sins between people are never forgiven until the offending party appeases his colleague. But what should one do if one has approached his colleague to ask for forgiveness and his colleague refuses to forgive him? He should bring a group of three of his friends and approach his colleague with them and request forgiveness. If the wronged party is not appeased, he should bring his friends a second and third time and repeat the process. If the wronged party still does not want to forgive him, the offending party need not pursue the matter further. On the contrary, the person who refused to grant forgiveness is now considered to be the sinner.

There tend to be two elements in this passage that surprise people.

The first, of course, is this notion that you should take along three of your friends when you go to ask someone for forgiveness. It's like an interesting Jewish twist on the idea of "making him an offer he can't refuse." In our tradition, we prefer to strong-arm people SPIRITUALLY!

The other, more serious idea that people often find surprising in this passage is this presumption that if you don't forgive someone after three sincere apology attempts, the sin reverts on to YOU. There's a presumption that when someone honestly requests forgiveness from us, that we ought to be reasonably quick to grant it..

The rabbi known as the Ari -- the great Kabbalistic teacher of the 16th century, Rabbi Isaac Luria of Tzefat, prescribed that every person recite the following words every night before going to sleep: each person should say:

hereby forgive all those who have angered and offended me, or sinned against me, whether against my body, or my property, or my honor, whether accidentally or purposefully, whether in word or deed or thought.

How interesting that the Ari prescribed that this be recited as part of a spiritual discipline EVERY SINGLE NIGHT. It reminds me of that simple bit of marriage advice that millions of couples have been offered on their wedding day and that every culture claims as its own bit of wisdom: Don't go to bed angry at each other. Whatever the issue is, talk it out before you go to sleep. Because when disagreements and resentments are left out overnight, they turn sour and rancid and they become that much more difficult to resolve. It's not an easy thing to forgive everyone every night. It may often mean saying "I accept your apology" even though you're still hurting. But it dramatically reduces the chances that small conflicts will become big ones.

It's interesting that in addition to reciting these words of forgiveness every night, our liturgy prescribes two additional occasions when they should be recited.

One time is at the beginning of Yom Kippur - and we will recite these words together next Sunday night. As if our tradition is telling us, If you can't take care of it before you go to sleep, at the very least, take care of it before next Yom Kippur.

And also, this same declaration is traditionally made during the Vidui, the deathbed confession. Signifying that even the very worst interpersonal conflict deserves not to be passed from one generation to another.

A few nights ago, Naomi and I realized that in both of our extended families, there are family conflicts that have lasted for forty years or more. In each case, the principal parties to the conflict are now deceased. And no one alive can really remember how the conflict got started. Maybe some of you have these conflicts in your families as well. So-and-so didn't invite so-and-so to such-and-such a wedding, or maybe it was a bar mitzvah. Come to think of it, he actually WAS invited, but I think he didn't come. Or maybe he did come, but he made some critical comments about the food.

Yeah -- that's it -- unless it had something to do with the family business. Then again, I think it had to do with Zaydie's estate.. But who cares why -- all we know is it was a big enough deal at the time that they promised each other they would never forgive each other. And that's why, in each case, the conflict continues to this day with cousins from this side who still won't speak to cousins from that side, with people in a small family choosing to make that family even smaller. And it challenges us to make sure: that we will not bequeath to our children a legacy of conflict. It challenges us to make sure that we never let a painful issue fester. It challenges us to use the High Holiday season each year as a genuine opportunity to initiate a reconciliation with our loved ones and to realize that -- while there may be some affronts and slights that are worth being remembered for forty years, there probably aren't many.

But in some ways, these examples of interpersonal forgiveness are easier to deal with than the content of the request of Ms. Rowe from Alabama, which deals with forgiveness in the political realm. In the interpersonal realm, the issue of forgiveness is primarily about resolving indignities and slights, and financial disputes, and coping with dishonesty. All these are very serious issues but they differ in scale from the persecution, oppression, and murder that tend to accompany discussions of forgiveness in the political realm.

One of the most relevant texts in the Bible about this Jewish imperative of offering forgiveness on a national scale is the book that we read on Yom Kippur afternoon - the book of Jonah.

It's a fascinating story -- we hope you'll join us next Monday afternoon to hear it -- or, if you get bored during the rest of today's service, feel free to check it out beginning on page 632.

Jonah is a prophet in the land of Israel -- And God commands Jonah: Go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and get the people there to repent their evil ways. Now by the way, historians identify Jonah as a court prophet to King Jeroboam the Second of the kingdom of Israel. And King Jeroboam's arch enemy was Assyria.

So just imagine: the way Jonah feels about the Assyrians and the people of Nineveh is probably very similar to how many Jews feel about contemporary enemies of the Jewish people. So it's understandable when Jonah says, No! Why should I go to my ENEMY to encourage him to change? My enemy will NEVER change! He's pledged to march my people into the sea! So Jonah defies God's word and heads in the opposite direction. He books a ticket on a ship heading West, towards Europe. But it's not so easy to run away from God. God sends a storm -- Jonah gets thrown overboard, and then he gets swallowed by a giant fish - (unfortunately that's the only part of the story that a lot of people remember-) and three days later the fish spits Jonah out onto the dry land. And then God says again: Jonah! Maybe you didn't hear me the first time. I said, go to the city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria and get the people there to repent their evil ways!

And Jonah still doesn't want to go. It's pointless! Those people are my sworn enemies! Think of everything they've done to my people -- using hateful rhetoric -

killing us on the battlefield -- slaughtering us in the streets -- They'll never change! And anyway, why should I go to THEM? Let them come to ME! But it's not a good idea to argue with God. God seems to want Jonah to make peace with his enemies. God seems to want Jonah to get all the Assyrian's offenses against his people out of the forefront of his mind. So Jonah goes -- and in a half-hearted way, he transmits the message God had assigned him:: And then a strange thing

happens: exactly what Jonah was afraid of for so long: the people of Nineveh change. They repent. They put their history of evil behind them. And for Jonah, this is the biggest challenge of all. "How could they change? They must not REALLY have changed. It's all empty promises. They're still the enemy. After all, they've been the enemy for so many years! Their soldiers killed my brothers..... how could they be forgiven? how can we trust them? And then Jonah is so furious at God for having accepted their repentance. He actually says,

"You know, that's the problem with You, God. Because I KNEW that you would be merciful and forgiving and compassionate! You're such a softie! Where's your historical perspective? How can you trust that they've really changed? How do you know that this isn't just some opportunistic ploy?"

And at the end of the book of Jonah, God responds: You wonder why I care about the Assyrians. They're my children too. I've nurtured them from infancy, just as I've nurtured your people. And they've made terrible mistakes -- just as your people has. They've inflicted terrible pain on innocent people. And no one's asking you to forget that, or pretend it never happened. But Jonah, you have a choice. Either you can dismiss their gestures of repentance out-of-hand, and keep your resentment alive, or you can evaluate the facts and take a calculated risk that, in fact, they have grown up and are really ready to change their ways. But it's only the latter approach that carries any prospects of peace between their children and your children. And it's also only the latter approach that will permit you and your people to escape your mentality as victims and permit you to reach your fullest potential as individuals and as a nation."

I cannot help but read this story in light of events that have taken place around the world this year.

Who could have imagined just a few years ago that election results in Israel would indicate broad national consensus in favor of pursuing the peace process with the Palestinian people under the leadership of Yassir Arafat?

Who could have imagined, several decades ago, seeing all the leaders of Arab nations gathered together at the funeral of a long-standing Arab monarch - and that the leaders of Israel would also be present?! This year, sadly, this is exactly what happened -- twice -- both at the funerals of King Hussein of Jordan and King Hassan of Morocco. but amidst the sadness... The guest lists at the funerals made it clear that a New middle east was dawning.

When future generations look back at our decade certainly they will notice its bloodiness and tragedy. but I think they also may note that a sub-theme of our decade has been forgiveness and reconciliation between groups among which we never would have thought it possible. The growing reconciliation between Jews and Palestinians is just one example.

Just a few weeks ago, the president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, stepped down from his position after a number of years as South Africa's first democratically elected leader. And for many of us who remember the years of his imprisonment under apartheid, and the nervousness that greeted his ascendancy to power. we will always remember the image of his inauguration and how he set the tone for the new South Africa in part by inviting two men who had been his jail guards for so many years, to be special guests at his inauguration. Mandela's gesture made a profound statement: "Never for a moment could I say that what you did to me for nearly thirty years was right or understandable. You have wounded my body and my spirit. But despite the fact that I would be within my rights to demand your punishment for what you did to me, our children and grandchildren will benefit much more from a reconciliation between us."

And did you know : one of the most extraordinary Jewish news stories of the year took place just a couple of weeks ago. Zubin Mehta, who was for many years the conductor of the Israel Philharmonic conducted a joint performance together with the Bavarian State Orchestra in the city of Weimar, just a few kilometers from the concentration camp of Buchenwald. And the most

extraordinary thing was, how little press coverage it got. Who knows how many children and grandchildren of Nazis there are in the Bavarian State Orchestra and how many children and grandchildren of survivors there are in the Israel Philharmonic and how natural it seems that just fifty-five years after the Shoah, that the music of Gustav Mahler could bring them together - Because, as Elie Wiesel has written, while we Jews believe in collective memory - and we believe in collective responsibility, collective guilt we DON'T believe in.

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Now let me make it clear that there are times when Judaism does NOT recommend that we forgive those who offend us.

First, we have no obligation to forgive those who never swallow their pride and approach us to request forgiveness. The Christian idea that we ought to forgive all trespasses of our enemies is considered in Jewish tradition to be a recipe for this-worldly disaster and the collapse of moral standards. Sometimes, righteous indignation is our most appropriate response. Our minimum standard is an admission of guilt and a commitment to change.

Second, the decision about when to forgive and when not to forgive is a decision that only the wounded party is entitled to make. Not even God is willing to forgive us for the trespasses we commit against other people until those other people have been placated. It is for this reason that the letter that I finally sent to Ms. Rowe in Alabama conveyed how touched I was at her note and what a credit she is to her family. And that I have no need to forgive her or her family because they are not guilty. But that only those who suffered directly through Martin Luther's actions

are entitled to forgive him. But the love that she projected in her apology goes a long way towards cleansing the world of the hatred that he promoted and for this we are so grateful.

And third, the decision to forgive is not a decision to forget. It doesn't mean the sin never happened. the Hebrew word 'kapparah' -- from which Yom Kippur gets its name - is usually translated as "atonement." but a more literal translation would be "covering" The best we can do is "cover over" the sins that have been committed against us. We don't ignore them, we just permit them to occupy the second or third layer in our consciousness rather than remaining a primary obsession and a source of overwhelming resentment.

And the best argument in favor of granting forgiveness is often that it's in our OWN self interest to forgive other people. Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a member of his congregation whose husband had walked out on the family -- a wife and three young children. When Rabbi Kushner raised the issue of forgiveness, the woman responded, "Every month is a struggle to pay our bills. I have to tell my kids we have no money to go to the movies, while he's living it up with his new wife in another state. How can you tell me to forgive him?"

And Rabbi Kushner responded: "I'm not asking you to forgive him because what he did was acceptable. It wasn't -- it was mean and selfish. I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter, angry woman. You're no longer hurting HIM by holding on to that resentment; you're hurting yourself.

Granting forgiveness when it is appropriate is one of our most effective tools for filling our world with peace between individuals and nations, and filling our lives with inner peace.

During the coming year, may we each do all we can to embody the words of wisdom from our tradition. Who is the true hero -- who is the truest redeemer of the world? the one who knows how to turn an enemy into a friend.

Shanah Tovah!