

Kol Nidre Devar Torah 2022

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In Jewish tradition Kol Nidrei is the only evening of the year that we wear a Tallit. Why do we dress in white like a bride and groom on a wedding day? The Talmud teaches that both weddings and Yom Kippur are days of atonement. At a Jewish wedding a couple stands under a Chuppah, originally a giant white tallit, to symbolize the new home they are building together, but also the tallis symbolizes a mini yom kippur, a day of atonement, a day of at-one-ment, in which the couple forgives each other of their pasts, and they begin a new life together. The Talmud tells us there is another reason we wear Tallises and white on Kol Nidrei. Although this might sound a bit morbid at first, it is spiritually profound. Yom Kippur, say the sages, is a rehearsal of our death. Jews are buried in white shrouds with no pockets, because we can not take

anything material with us. And many Jews are buried in a Tallis. In this moment we are peering into our future when we will lie in tallises and shrouds. Yom Kippor is a powerful reminder of this. Although life's potential is surely unlimited, our time on earth is short. On Yom Kippor we rehearse our death. How do you want to be remembered?

An insightful lesson can be gleaned from a story about Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite. On the day of his older brother Ludwig's death, a newspaper mistakenly published Alfred's obituary instead. That gave Alfred the pivotal experience of reading his own obituary while still alive. 'Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday,' the obituary began. Alfred threw down the paper. "That's not how I want to be remembered. That's not what's important to me," he said. At that very

moment he committed his entire fortune to rewarding people for bettering this world and bringing it closer to peace.”

For Alfred Nobel, the experience of reading his obituary motivated him to change the arc of his life. Yom Kippor reminds us we can write your own obituary. Yom Kippor comes to empower us to change our lives. We do not need to be trapped in old patterns of holding grudges or anger toward family or friends. Sadly, as a Rabbi, I – all too often -- encounter broken families where a single stray remark or much worse has caused family members to stop speaking for years, sometimes decades. They harbor grudges that can tear at the fabric of family for generations. Yom Kippor’s message is that life does not have to be this way. We can change. We can start writing that better obituary today. In Jewish terms we call this writing yourself into the Book of Life. Rabbi Eliezer, in the Talmud says, Do Teshuva (make amends) the day before

your death. His students asked: But how does a person know on which day he will die? He said to them: In that case, don't wait. Do it today.

The Talmud says: Yom Kippur atones for transgressions between a person and God, but for transgressions between people, atonement comes only through direct personal interactions. In Judaism the path to God is through human beings, by developing ethical relationships with people.

Our actions matter. Reaching out to others can bring healing. This summer Pope Francis travelled to Canada for what he called "A pilgrimage of Repentance." It was breathtaking to watch an elderly pope slowly stand up from his wheel chair to then get down on his knees and say, "I humbly beg forgiveness for the evil committed by so many Christians against the Indigenous peoples."

Francis apologized for the Catholic Church's role in the abuse of Canadian Indigenous children in residential schools. Does this act of contrition bring back to life the indigenous children buried unmarked grave? Of course not. Does this lift the psychological scars from the 80,000 living survivors who suffered abuse in these school? No. But the Pope's leadership by acknowledging the crimes, accepting responsibility, financially compensating the injured and resolving to not allow such abuses to remain concealed help transform a society that had been silent and complicit, to becoming a place where abuse is not tolerated and human life and dignity are respected as holy.

How do we know if someone has atoned for a past crime? According to Maimonides, the only way to know is if given the same opportunity to offend, they do the right thing instead. But what about a nation? Can a people

atone? This year when the invasion of Ukraine began about 3 million women and children fled to Poland. Three million refugees is a staggering number. How can a country find housing and care for 3 million people who arrived in only two weeks? Within 100 miles of the border virtually every Polish home had taken in refugees, sleeping in any spare room, on living room sofas, in attics, even on basement floors. Every home became a safe house protecting people escaping war. The Poles of today showed the world they have changed. This is not the same people who during the Holocaust closed their doors to the hunted and vulnerable on the run. This generation acted with great virtue. Entire nations can change by the collective actions of their citizens.

The Torah tells us, in the verse that is located at the very center of the Torah, "*lo tikom v'lo titor* You shall not take

revenge or bear a grudge, but love your neighbor as yourself.”

But are there not some crimes so heinous, that we cannot help but harbor an eternal grudge?

When I lived in Boston about 20 years ago, I had the privilege of studying with Elie Wiesel at Boston University. For the last 15 minutes of every class, Wiesel opened the floor to questions. “How should we relate to the Germans today?” someone asked. He thought for a while, then said, “The children of murderers are exactly that. They are children, not murderers.” We should evaluate today’s generation by their actions -- not condemn them for the sins of their parents.

The desire to hold grudges is understandable, but to where does it lead? Nelson Mandela, who was in prison for 27 years in South Africa said, “Holding on to a grudge

is like drinking poison and hoping it will kill the other person.”

Are there grudges too painful to let go? Holocaust Survivor Eva Moses Kor wrote these words.

“On January 27 1995, at the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, I stood by the ruins of the gas chambers with my children...while I read my document of forgiveness and signed it. As I did that I felt a burden of pain was lifted from me. I was no longer in the grip of pain and hate; I was finally free.

The day I forgave my parents whom I hated all my life for not having saved me from Auschwitz. Children expect their parents to protect them, mine couldn't.

And then I forgave myself for hating my parents.”

She wrote, “Forgiveness is really nothing more than an act of self-healing and self-empowerment. I call it a miracle medicine. It is free, it works and has no side effects.”

Maimonides wrote: It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and to refuse to make amends. When someone requests pardon, one should do so with a whole heart.” But our tradition is honest. Forgiving can be hard.

There is a legend in the Talmud. Only one person, the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, and only on one day of the year, on Yom Kippor. The priests would tie a rope to his ankle lest he should die, they would be able to pull him out without entering. One year the high priest enters the holy of holies and stays inside for a very long time, the Kohanim grow restless and pull on the rope and the high priest tugs back as though saying “Leave me alone, I’m busy.” Time passes and they pull again and the high priest tugs back again. Finally, after hours passed the High Priest comes out, he looks white and says “I saw God.” The

priests ask. What was God doing?” The High Priest says “He was praying.”

This idea that God too prays is uniquely Jewish one. In other religions God is portrayed as the Infallible Almighty. In Judaism God is heimish and almost human.

In the story, the priests ask the Kohan Gadol, “What was God’s praying for?” The High Priest tells them, “God was praying ‘When I judge my children, may my *rachmones*, compassion, be stronger than my *Kas*, anger.” Even for God forgiveness is not easy, but even for God forgiveness is necessary.

So too for us, forgiveness is not easy, but it is the only way out of imprisonment in the past. Unhealthy patterns of behavior, cycles of bad habits, the gravity that accumulates over years of alienation are powerful forces that can drag us down from being the best version of ourselves that we have potential to be.

Our Jewish family history gives us hope. Our ancestor Joseph from the Torah shows us a way forward to a better life. Elliot Friedman, author of a Torah commentary wrote “Deceptions and hurts within a family can leave us trapped within a perpetual cycle,” In order to bring it to an end, one member of the family who is entitled to retribution must stop the cycle and forgive instead.” This is exactly what our ancestor Joseph did as the resolution of the Book of Genesis.

The whole book of Genesis is about generations of brothers who can't get along. The first two brothers in the Bible are Cain and Abel. It doesn't end well. Cain murders Abel. Next are Isaac and Ishmael, they can't live together. Then Esau in a rage of jealousy tries to kill his brother Jacob. In the following generation, Jacob's 11 sons conspire to murder their brother Joseph. Eventually

they threw Joseph in a pit and sell him into slavery.

Midrash tells us the crime of selling Joseph occurred on Yom Kippor, suggesting a connection between Joseph and the power of the day on which forgiveness is sought and offered.

In the concluding paragraph of Genesis, it says “After their father Jacob died, the brothers become anxious and say “if Joseph carries a grudge against us, he will surely pay us back for all the evil we have caused him.” So, they concoct a story. They send a letter to Joseph saying.

“Before his death your father gave these instructions. Tell Joseph this “Please forgive your brothers’ transgression and their sin, though they caused you harm. Please forgive the crime of your brothers.” Joseph reads the letter and weeps. His brothers proceed to fling themselves before him and say “Here we are servants to you.” But Joseph said to them; “Do not be afraid. I will

provide for you and for those who depend on you. And thus, Joseph comforted them and spoke to their hearts.” Joseph who could have turned his back on his brothers when they came begging for food; Joseph shows the power of forgiveness to heal emotional wounds. Joseph is a hero of a tale of forgiveness that cleanses the family of jealousy, resentment and deceit. Only after Joseph and his brothers forgive each other is the book of Genesis complete. Only after the brothers have repaired their relationship, they can become a *kehila Kedosha*, a sacred community. They will be able to overcome any struggle, even slavery in Egypt.

May we be inspired by Joseph’s example to break the cycles of grudges and repair relationships. On this night of wearing Tallises may we be mindful of this: Although the potential of our lives is unlimited, our time is short. May we resolve to rewrite our obituaries to be what we

want to be remembered for. What do you want your legacy to be? Your actions this yom kippor can change the arc of your life, and your legacy. If nations can change, surely individuals can change. In the next 24 hours talk to the one you know you need to talk to. It might be a spouse, a sibling, a child, a parent, a friend or a neighbor. It is not easy, but the reward of a rescued or repaired relationship can heal wounds. Do it before it is too late.

In this spirit, I want to ask you dear congregants for forgiveness. If I have harmed or hurt you by word or deed, inadvertently or advertently I hope you will forgive me. I made mistakes, but I promise I never did so with malicious intent. And, if you have harmed or hurt me by word or deed, inadvertently or advertently, I forgive you, I harbor no grudges. May we move into the new year with a clean beginning.

The Talmud gives a formula to help us in seeking and granting forgiveness. The initiator says "*Slicha*," (forgive me), and the other replies "*Machul, Machul, Machul.*" You are completely and fully forgiven." Yom Kippor gives us the next 24 hours to call on the phone, send a text or email, or speak in-person and say "*Slicha*, and respond *Machul, machul, Machul.*" You are completely forgiven." May we all go forward into a year of health, happiness, and good deeds, and may we all be written and sealed in the Book of Life. *Gemar Hatima Tova. Amen.*