



Kol Nidre Sermon – 5779

by Rabbi Zimbalist

Two Buddhist monks, one older and one younger, were walking in silence. As they arrived in the nearby town they saw a woman yelling at her two servants. They were holding her groceries and packages and could not help her cross over a huge mud puddle. She was wearing beautiful clothes and without their help, her clothes would be ruined. The older monk quickly walked over to the woman and without hesitation picked her up, carried her over the mud puddle and carefully put her down. Not a drop of mud got on her clothes. In return, he received thankless harsh criticism from the woman, and his robe was covered with mud. The two monks didn't say a word to each other and simply continued walking in silence. Hours later the younger monk couldn't take it anymore. He turned to his older companion and said, "That woman was so rude. I am so angry. How can you not be upset?" The older monk looked at his young friend and said, "I put her down hours ago, why are you still carrying her?"

All of us have experienced situations when we have felt like both of these monks. There are times when we feel that injustices have occurred, discourtesies have been displayed and we have undoubtedly been wronged, but like the older monk, we can let it go and simply walk away. But too often, when we find ourselves in such situations, we feel more like the younger monk – frustrated, angry and upset. We need an explanation or an apology. We need someone to reach out to us and help us regain our equilibrium. We need something to relieve our pain and make us feel a little bit better. Sometimes, we find the solace and comfort that we need. But sometimes, we don't. If an explanation is offered, it is not good enough. If it's an apology, we believe it is not sincere. If someone tries to reach out, they are not reaching far enough. And no matter what is done to relieve our pain, the pain gets worse and worse. To complicate these unpleasant situations, our growing frustration and dissatisfaction can lead to anger. We might even find ourselves carrying a grudge – and carrying a grudge does no one any good, and as we know, sometimes people can carry a grudge for a lifetime. Think about how hurtful, destructive and counterproductive that is, not to mention how terribly sad it is for those involved. We deserve better. Perhaps forgiveness could or should be understood from the perspective of "I need to forgive so that I can relieve myself from the burden of anger" rather than from the perspective of "I will only forgive if my offender changes." Maybe we need to think of forgiveness as a fundamental part of personal healing.

The Talmud teaches (Pesachim 66b), "*When a person becomes enraged and angry, even if he is wise, his wisdom deserts him.*" We've all experienced being so angry that we can't think straight. And when this happens, everyone in our lives suffers from our pain, and our pain does not diminish. The Talmud also teaches (Kiddushin 40b-41a), "*When a person loses his temper, he achieves nothing but his anger.*" In other words, when we are consumed by our anger, nothing else matters. Our work is done through an angry lens. Our time with family is overshadowed by our pain. Our thinking is distorted by angry thoughts. All of us have

experienced those sleepless nights and incessant monologues in our minds with our offenders, in which our wrath is unleashed only to yield unproductive results, including a sleepless night. And sometimes, in an attempt to quell our anger and hypersensitive emotions, we withdraw – we remove ourselves from the people, the relationships or the community that has hurt us. In the moment, isolation seems like a viable option because we simply can't take it anymore. But when that happens, we put ourselves at risk for a terribly destructive emotional game - the "out of sight, out of mind" game. I suspect many of us play the "out of sight, out of mind" game from time to time. And when this happens, we convince ourselves that if we no longer see who or what is troubling us, then we certainly will no longer think about who or what is troubling us. If we are no longer thinking about our troubling situation, then we certainly won't be affected by it. And if we believe that we are not affected by it, then of course we are better. We might even believe that we've resolved the situation. Does that sound familiar? Does it make sense? Maybe in the moment, but we know it's not true.

It is taught in the Book of Ecclesiastes (7:8-9), "*Tov acharit davar mayrayshito, tov erech ruach migvah ruach – The end of a matter is better than its beginning; patience is better than pride. Do not be hasty with your anger, for anger dwells in the bosom of fools.*" Our Sages interpret these verses as vital instructions as to how we should conduct ourselves when we feel wronged and anger or resentment begins to build inside of us. They teach us and remind us that, in these times in particular, if we are truly wise, we will be able to foresee the results of our actions. Reacting in haste might cause irreparable damage and many regrets. Therefore, we must be patient and respond appropriately. By exercising patience and controlling our desire to lash out and hurt those who hurt us, we have a greater chance of bringing peace and resolution to our situation. Patience and kindness will always bring about a more acceptable resolution than hateful outbursts, slanderous statements and thoughtless gestures. Even if our offender is unmoved and unchanged by our thoughtful response, we can take pride in ourselves in knowing that we did the right thing. And rest assured that in the long run, doing the right thing will help to relieve our feelings of resentment and anger, and then hopefully result in us feeling a little better. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin writes (*A Code of Jewish Ethics*, p. 266), "*The self-destructive nature of long-term anger is underscored in Ecclesiastes' teaching that 'anger dwells in the bosom of fools.' A fool, in other words, is not one who, when provoked, feels anger (because the feeling – as opposed to expression – of anger is an emotion one cannot always control); rather, a fool is one who holds on to anger, and who doesn't relinquish it.*"

Rabbi Telushkin's words might ring true for many of us here this evening, and I am confident that none of us consider ourselves fools. And certainly, none of us would want to waste our time doing foolish things. So for those of us here tonight who are carrying with ourselves unresolved anger, disappointment or even a grudge, let's take a moment and ask ourselves – why? Why are we doing this to ourselves? Isn't our time better spent doing something else? Do we like being angry? Is forgiveness impossible? Or, are we hanging onto our pain and difficult emotions with the belief that if we do so, maybe our offender won't forget the pain he caused us?

Rabbi Harold Schulweis teaches an important lesson about the commandment to forgive and our ability not to forget – particularly in strained interpersonal relationships. He writes (*God's To-Do List: 103 Ways to be an Angel and Do God's Work on Earth*, p.104), "*What does*

forgiveness have to do with forgetting? Where is it written that when God forgives your sin, God thereby forgets your sin? Judaism is a reality-based faith. To forgive is not to forget; to forgive is to be liberated from inner anger, from the quest for vengeance that consumes your life and embitters the life of your family. To forgive is not to forget. No one expects you to forget. No one believes that forgiveness eliminates the memory of the pain and anguish of the injury...

You cannot turn back the clock. Forgiveness does not reverse the past, but it promises a new and different outcome. When you forgive, when you seek reconciliation, things may never be as there were before the injury. But, you can establish a new relationship, a speaking, civil relationship...

Seize the moment. Break the impasse. Break down the anger. Break through the stubbornness. Overcome the ugliness of past history. Open your heart..."

All of us here tonight bring with us some of the pain, disappointment, anger, frustration and unresolved emotions that we have experienced this past year or even in past years. And it doesn't matter who or what is the source of our pain: whether it is a family member or friend, a co-worker or confidant, or a stranger, or whether your pain was caused by a job, an organization or even your synagogue. The unresolved and painful emotions that we have are real. We have every right to feel them, experience them and be pained by them. But now, right now on the eve of Yom Kippur, we must do everything in our power to let them go. To truly move forward into the New Year we must let go of some of our past. Let's take this opportunity to forgive and reach out to others to ask for forgiveness. And if we find that others are not reaching out to us, or not reaching out to us in a way that we find meaningful, let's relieve ourselves of the burden of our disappointment and dissatisfaction and forgive them anyway. Tonight, we begin the process of imploring God to forgive us. But perhaps among our greatest challenges tonight, is to let go – to let go of our pain, frustration, anger, and disappointment, and then to forgive ourselves and forgive each other.

Al cheit shechatanu lifanecha b'oness u'vi'ratzon – For the sin that we have committed under compulsion or of our own free will. V'al cheit shechatanu lifanecha b'imootz ha'lev – For the sin that we committed by hardening our hearts. For these and all other sins that we have committed, may God forgive us, pardon us and grant us atonement. And may we be sealed in the Book of Life for a happy, healthy and peaceful New Year. Gamar Chatimah Tovah! Gut Yontif.