

Welcome

Days of Awe - Rosh Hashanah 2019 (5780)

L'Shana Tova, Welcome! To members of our congregation, your families and friends, to our neighbors, to visitors, to the near and the far, welcome! We've come together here in this sanctuary on this night, as a community, a people, a family for 107 years.

These are the **Days of Awe**, *Yamim, Nora'im*, Tonight is **Rosh Hashanah**, the Head of the Year, **Yom Hazikaron**, the Day of Remembrance. But remembrance of what?

The Torah lists exactly 613 Mitzvot, 613 Commandments, 613 Good Deeds, in other words, 613 ways we can officially screw up. Each of us carries around, like pocket change, little sins of omission and commission. We carried them here tonight, into the sanctuary and fill up any empty spaces in our pockets with the grab bag of sins carried by everyone sitting beside us and around us. We stand *together*, we pray *together*, we turn *together*, - teshuva, tefillah, tzedakah - seeking good health, happiness, solace, healing, guidance, grandchildren, loving-kindness; seeking many, many things, but one thing above all - forgiveness.

The question I ask myself, the question that haunts me in the asking: As we seek forgiveness for our sins - as we seek God's grace, loving-kindness and forgiveness, are we, who are made in the image of our Creator - are we also ready to turn and to forgive?

A Rabbi, giving a Yom Kippur sermon about forgiveness, asked her congregation, "how many of you have forgiven your enemies?"

About half held up their hands. She then rephrased her question, "how many of you want to forgive your enemies?" Slowly, every hand in the congregation went up, except for one, Sadie Horowitz.

"Mrs. Horowitz?" inquired the Rabbi, "are you not willing to forgive your enemies, especially on this Day of Atonement when God forgives us all?"

"I don't have any enemies" Mrs. Horowitz replied, smiling sweetly.

"Mrs. Horowitz, that is remarkable. How old are you?"

"I'm Ninety-eight," she replied.

"Oh Mrs. Horowitz, what a blessing and a lesson to us all you are. A 98 year old woman so forgiving she hasn't an enemy in the world!"

Mrs. Horowitz got up slowly, faced the congregation, and said "I didn't forgive them. I outlived them!"

It's widely assumed that Jews don't believe in easy grace; that forgiveness must be earned, through repentance, contrition, remorse, apology. A corollary of this belief is that unconditional forgiveness in the absence of remorse is worth very little; it might work for Christians, but not for Jews, no. But I'm not so sure I agree.

*"Only Heaven knows where glory goes; what each of us is meant to be." **

Genesis recounts the story of two brothers, Jacob and Esau, and how Jacob, with his mother Rebecca's help, cheats Esau out of his birthright by tricking their father Isaac into giving his blessing and his inheritance, meant for Esau, to Jacob. When Esau realizes what's happened, he flies into a rage, and Jacob flees. The brothers do not meet again for twenty years, a moment captured in Genesis 33:

And Esau ran to meet his brother, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him; and they wept... And Esau said: 'I have enough; my brother, let that which you have be yours.'

A generation later, the ten sons of Jacob, jealous that their half-brother Joseph is their father's favorite, sell him into slavery, then tell Jacob he was murdered. Again, many years pass, during which Joseph becomes the most powerful man in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. When famine strikes at home, Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to barter for grain; they come before Joseph, who they do not recognize. After playing an elaborate series of games on his brothers, meant to frighten and test them, Joseph can stand it no longer, as recounted in Genesis 45:

Then Joseph could not refrain himself before all them that stood by him; and he cried.... And Joseph said unto his brethren: 'Come near to me, I pray you.' And they came near. And he said: 'I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt.... And now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me; for God did send me before you to preserve life.... And he fell upon his brother

Benjamin's neck, and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck.... And he kissed all his brothers, and wept with them.

And what of the prophet Jonah, whose story we will read late in the day on Yom Kippur? God commands Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh, and tell the people there to repent or they will be destroyed in three days. The Ninevites are the sworn enemies of the Jews; the last thing Jonah wants to do is save them. So he runs, to Tarshish, away from God; he's swallowed by a big fish, is regurgitated on a beach and finally, like a great reluctant sad sack, completes his mission. As he expected, the people of Nineveh go into high repentance mode, dramatically tearing their garments and sitting on the ground in sackcloth and ashes, a show of remorse that cannot possibly fool the God who separated Light from Darkness. Yet God forgives them. Jonah drags himself out to a hill on the outskirts of the sweltering city, where he is cooled by a vine and falls asleep. When he wakes up, the vine is shriveled, and he is miserable again. God asks 'Are you so grieved, Jonah.' 'Yes, I am. Yes. Yes.' God replies, 'You cared so much for a vine that grew up in a night and died in a night. And how should I care for the great city of Nineveh, where live more than 120,000 people who do not know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?'

There is a phrase in Hebrew: "*Ain devar shalem k'lev shabor*", "there is nothing as whole as a broken heart". As he sat under a withered vine in the blasting heat of the sun, could it be that Jonah's heart, broken at the salvation of his enemy, was made whole understanding why God sent him before the sinners and the sheep and the cattle of Nineveh not to destroy, but to preserve life.

Adonai, Adonai ,El Rachum v'chanun! Tonight, we pray to that God whose capacity to forgive is infinite and Whose mercy is boundless, that God who knows 'what each of us is meant to be.' And we are made in God's image. May that be a comfort to us, and a guide, during these Days of Awe and for all the days to come.

**From 'Where Glory Goes', music and lyrics by Adam Guettell*

– Richard Aroneau