

## Holy Tears

It is Erev Kol Nidre, and Shabbat Erev Yom Kippur. This is the Holiest of the Holiest of the Holiest of evenings. This is the moment that we stand before the holy gates, begging for forgiveness, for wholeness, for peace. Suddenly, we may notice a tear, escaping the corners of our eyes. Perhaps it is a tear in memory of a lost loved one, or a lost time, or for all of the changes in our lives that we have promised, but not fulfilled. As the Baal Shem Tov, the great Chassidic storyteller reminds us, “The master key is the broken heart”. Only if we allow the power of this night to break through the barriers of our souls, if we can allow our hearts to break, can we be healed. This is a night beyond the realms of logic and reason; this is a night for holy tears, and holy stories. Let’s listen to a story of the Baal Shem Tov, as it appears in Rabbi Zalman Schachter’s book The Holy Flame.

A fiddler is traveling with his klezmer band when he gets sick, and the band has to leave him with an innkeeper. The innkeeper feeds him, and tries to take good care of him, but the fiddler is dying. And he knows he is going to die, so he says to the innkeeper, “I am sorry that I can’t pay you. I haven’t got anything to pay you with. However, this fiddle of mine is worth something, so would you please sell it to settle my bill with you. The fiddler dies, and the innkeeper leaves the fiddle hanging in his house on the wall and he doesn’t do anything about it.

The innkeeper is also a coachman, and so he has horses. One day, he finds a little horse on the road. And he doesn’t know to whom it belongs, so he takes the horse and puts it in his barn, and gives it some food to eat, but it’s not his horse and it’s pretty small, so he doesn’t want to use it for pulling wagons and such. But one day, one of his horses gets sick, and he has to use the little horse. The little horse turns out to be very powerful; it can easily pull the wagon and even heavy loads. Soon the innkeeper has the little horse doing all of his work for him.

The Baal Shem Tov comes to visit the innkeeper and says to him “I’d like to see your horses, if you don’t mind. So the innkeeper takes his guest to the stables and shows him the horses. And the Ba’al Shem Tov says, “Would you do me a favor? I’d like you to sell me this horse, and points to the little horse. And the innkeeper replies “It’s not mine; I can’t give it to you. Besides, it’s the strongest horse that I have” the innkeeper says. “All right, says the Ba’al Shem Tov. What about this fiddle over here?” And their innkeeper says, “That fiddle used to belong to a musician who died here.” The Baal Shem Tov asks, “Did he owe you something?” “Oh yes, but I never did anything about that. I never tried to sell the fiddle.”

“Aha!” says the Ba’al Shem Tov. “Would you give me a statement to say that the debt of the musician is paid for?” And the innkeeper says, “Sure, I’d be glad to. I’m never going to collect it anyway. I’d rather give you that than the little horse.” And he writes a note saying that the musician’s debt is cancelled. The Baal Shem Tov stays in his house overnight, and the little horse dies that very night.

The next morning, the innkeeper says to the Baal Shem Tov “What was that all about?” The great man replies, “The musician owed you this money, and he couldn’t find any peace in the other world. So he came back as this little horse and was working for you to make up the debt. But once you canceled the debt, he didn’t have to stay here any more, and could go on with his other life, he was released.”

On this Yom Kippur night we begin with the heart rendering chant of the Kol Nidre that begs for our debt to be cancelled. I do not know if there is a tzaddik, a holy person who can arrange to cancel our debt from the other side, For now, the power of our prayers, and our tears, will have to suffice. We allow our hearts to break open with a prayer for release from all unfulfilled vows. *Kol Nidre, v’esarei. Oo-shevuei, v’haramai, v’konamei, v’Kenuei.*

“All solemn vows, and pledges to ourselves assumed on penalty, whatever we have sworn and then forgotten, whatever earnest, well intentioned vows we may have taken up but not upheld, whatever punishment or harm we might have called upon ourselves, from this last day of Atonement to this Day of Atonement. These vows shall not be binding vows, those prohibitions not binding prohibitions, those oaths not binding oaths.”

Please, release us. Let us go, we cry. Cancel our debt. Release us from all unfulfilled vows. Let us start anew.

But how do we know when we have been released? How can we be sure that our debt has been cancelled? Wouldn’t it be wonderful if an email were sent out to each of us from THEHOLYONE.ORG that we could open up tomorrow evening, which reads:

Dear Your Name (God has the names of each one of us on a list and the ministering Angels do mail merge very well)

It has come to our attention that you participated in the Kol Nidre service at Malibu Jewish Center and Synagogue(mail merge again) on Yom Kippur 5765. We have taken note of your request, and hereby declare that all of your vows, all of your debts to God have been released. We do hope that you will do better in the year to come.

Please consider your burdens dissolved, and lifted off, and cancelled. It is time to MOVEON.

You have been inscribed for another year in the book of life.

(signed)

Adonai

Underneath God’s signature is the following in small print:

If you wish to unsubscribe, please just continue to hold on to all of your angers and resentments, making no attempts at “tshuvah” or change in your ways. After an unspecified amount of time, your name will be dropped from our list

## The management

We often carry our burdens much longer than we have to. God forgives us, but we often don't accept that *mechilah* or divine grace. We can't imagine living without our burden. Oy.....we sigh. If only I had..... I am guilty therefore I am Jewish. Or Jewish because I am guilty. I'm not sure which. My teacher, Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man, often spoke of the difference between voluntary and conscious suffering. Conscious suffering is the acceptance that the process of living includes pain, and that along with all human beings, we will suffer, but voluntary suffering means that we choose to carry our burdens long after they should have been put to rest. We often volunteer to worry about situations that are no longer in our control. If only I had been there...If only I had known that she hadn't seen a doctor... This guilt is a cumbersome burden, and has no positive effect on our lives. What would it take to accept the fact that by tomorrow evening, at the close of the Neilah service, our pleas for pardon have been accepted, and our slate is clean? What would it take to know that we are forgiven?

Of course, we know that Yom Kippur, the day itself, only atones for sins between a person and God. As stated in the Talmud, in Mishna Yoma:

***“Those transgressions between God and the individual, the Day of Atonement atones for; but those transgressions between the individual and his/her fellow human being, the Day of Atonement does not forgive, unless one person personally appeases the other and seeks forgiveness”***

Clearly, forgiveness is not only God's affair. How can we ask God to forgive us, if we cannot open our hearts and forgive others? Adonai, we cry out. Slach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu. Forgive us. Pardon us. Grant us atonement. Can we, who are made in God's image, do less? But rabbi, I hear. You don't know what she did to me.

No, I don't. But I have a feeling that it probably wasn't a murder, and that it probably did have something to do with money, or favoritism, or ego. Nothing that can't be forgiven, if only we will bend a little bit. The shofar curves, is bent, the sages tell us, to show that we too need to bend our stubbornness and pride. The sound of the shofar is broken, for in God's eye, there is nothing more whole than a broken heart. It is the master key. But we are a stiff necked people.

Rabbi Harold Schulweis, the Dean of Rabbis in Los Angeles, tells the following story. I could tell this story as well, but it hurts less when it comes from another Rabbi.

The telephone rings in my study. Papa has died. Arrangements for the funeral must be made. “I would like to meet with the entire family”. I say. The voice on the other end is silent.” That's not going to be easy, Rabbi” she says. “Why? Are they not in town?” “They are in town, all right. But the boys haven't spoken to each other for over ten years. And that goes for their children. They won't sit in the same room together”. “But it's their *father* I reply.” The other voice says, “I know”.

I have been there. This past year, I performed a funeral for a family whose mother was a member of this synagogue. I met with the children, who do not live in Malibu, to arrange the funeral. Everyone told great stories about the mother, and it all seemed a wonderful celebration of the life of this worthy woman. It was only upon returning home that I received a message from a Rabbi in northern California. "There is another daughter", the message said. "She has been excluded from the funeral arrangements, as the family does not speak to her, but she will be showing up tomorrow. It is her *mother*."

I insisted that the family cut "cria", or the black ribbon, together. It was probably the first time in many years that the family had been elbow to elbow. Of course, the missing daughter was not on the list of those designated to give a eulogy. When it came time to lower the casket at the graveside, the daughter stepped forward with her young daughter, and asked to speak. What could I say? The gathered crowd stood by the open grave in the rain, as they haltingly spoke. The other children turned away. The missing daughter was not at the house for shiva.

For a very verbose people, the ultimate curse is I AM NOT SPEAKING TO YOU. Vast sections of families, even my own family, have not spoken to each other for years. Not only that, but it takes a road map to navigate the family sections. A and B do not speak, and so it's a given that their children do not speak to each other either. Even a polite gesture to the other side by one of the children is seen as "consorting with the enemy". After a while, the reasons for these divisions are buried in a murky ancient past. Was it an indiscrete remark at a Bar Mitzvah? A loan not repaid? Or even, God Forbid, a child siding with one parent over another in a contentious divorce? Does this mean that a grandparent should not speak to her grandchild, or even the wounded parent to his son or daughter? And where does the other parent fit at a wedding or a funeral? Exile takes on a life of its own. I am often astounded by reports of huge family reunions, held in some exotic camp ground for Labor Day weekend. Do these people all actually SPEAK to each other? It can't be Jewish.

***For those transgressions between persons, the Day of Atonement does not forgive unless one person personally appeases the other and seeks forgiveness.***

But what if I am right? On Yom Kippur, that is not really the question. Imagine if God only judged us from the Throne of Righteousness, and not the Throne of Mercy. God, we say on Rosh Hashanah, Have mercy on us, for we are only flesh and blood. Isn't the same thing true for our family members? The most useful question at this moment is not "Am I right"- it is possible that I am- but rather "Do I want to be right or do I want to be happy? Right can be very lonely. Right can mean years of not speaking to a son or a daughter, not relating to a brother or a sister for the rest of a lifetime. Right means that you may never know a niece or nephew, or even a grandchild. How many times have we heard the statement "I wish that I had taken the opportunity to clear this up with my Dad before he died." I have officiated at funerals where the non-speaking son just wants to reach out in a eulogy and say "I am sorry for all that tension, we should have cleared this up long ago". But it is too late.

Rabbi Chaim Listfeld on the East Coast tells a story that is a lesson for our times.

He received an email from a congregant that said:

Dear Rabbi;

I have one brother, and we have been estranged for ten years. You gave a sermon about families healing any breaches. I've decided its time for me to heal. I am going to call my brother after all these years of bitterness and separation. He lives on Long Island; he's married now and has two kids. I want us to make up. I'm not asking you to do anything; I just want you to know about this. Maybe you can say a prayer that this will all work out.

Francine

Of course, the rabbi encouraged her, and she met with her brother the next Sunday. They began to take tentative steps at forgiveness, Meanwhile, the kids, who were meeting for the first time, loved being with each other. Francine and Adam, the only two children of the Ruhalter family, befriended each other after years of bitterness.

The first email was sent on August 30, 2001. The families met on September 5, 2001. On Tuesday, September 11, the Rabbi received a call. "Rabbi, there's something terribly wrong. Adam works at the world trade center. He's on a pretty high floor; he works for a firm called Cantor Fitzgerald"

(pause)

God made families so that we can do tshuvah.

The first time that I said this from the pulpit was four years ago years ago-I remember because the sermon was about two Josephs, the biblical ancestor, and Joseph Leiberman (Remember him?) Surely, the biblical Joseph had every reason to be "right". His brothers had thrown him into a pit, and the only reason that they did not kill him, out of their own jealousy and resentment, was that selling him to the Midianites seemed to be a better business deal. Of course, we know that Joseph becomes the second in command to the Pharaoh, and rules over Egypt in the time of famine. Joseph's brothers come down to Egypt for food, and although Joseph recognizes who they are, they can not see beyond the robes and the glory to recognize the brother that they tossed into the well. Joseph does not forgive easily. He tricks his brothers, arrests Shimon, one of the bigger bullies, and finally takes Benjamin, the youngest brother and the only other son of his mother, Rachel, as a hostage.

Joseph's brothers clearly carry their own burden of guilt. When this unknown Egyptian potentate-who is really Joseph- tortures them through false accusations, they say "Indeed we are guilty concerning our brother, inasmuch as we saw his heartfelt anguish when he pleaded with us, and we paid no heed. This is why this anguish has come upon us". And Joseph, who hears them, turns away and weeps- but he is still unable to forgive. When finally, Joseph can contain himself no longer, his tears burst forth.

*And Joseph said to his brothers. I am Joseph. Does my father still live?*

Joseph's sobs were so loud that the Egyptians in the adjoining rooms could hear, and the news reached to Pharaoh's palace.

*With that he embraced his brother Benjamin around the neck, and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. He kissed all his brothers, and wept upon them; only then were his brothers able to talk to him.*

And so, who do you need to hold in your arms in tears tonight?

Whom do **you** need to forgive? With whom do YOU need to do tshuvah? It is relatively easy to ask for forgiveness from a co-worker, a client or even a business partner. The real proving ground for soul searching and forgiveness is with families. It is so difficult to accept family members as they are, with love and compassion. The curse of "I am not speaking" seems easier, but it is a very lonely road. Our biblical ancestor Joseph reaches out and forgives his brothers, crying holy tears. This is the final story in the book of Genesis, and I believe that Joseph's story is there to teach us that after all of the dysfunctional family stories, the important thing is for families to forgive. God made families so we could learn to do Tshuvah.

I leave you tonight with one final story. It is called the Tears of Repentance.

It seems that one year right before the High Holydays, God gave one of his angels a task. He was to go to earth, and bring back the most precious gift that he could find for the New Year.

The angel appeared at a house where a young woman had just given birth to a beautiful baby. The mother looked into the baby's eyes and then she smiled. The mother smiled with such love and tenderness that the angel thought, "This smile is the most precious thing in the world." With great excitement, the angel brought the smile to God, who smiled in return, but said, "Although this smile is indeed wonderful, it is not the most precious gift in the world"

Just before Shabbat, the angel returned to earth, and found himself at the doorway of a home where family was lighting Shabbos candles, singing Shalom Aleichem, welcome O Sabbath Angels. The angel felt that was definitely the most precious gift of all. God too loves Shabbat, and said to the Angel- You are getting closer, but this is still not quite the most precious gift of all.

The angel was disheartened, but returned to earth one more time. As the angel sat on a rock to rest in a forest, he heard the sound of someone crying. It was not the sound of a child, but of a grown man. He was walking through the woods, with tears rolling down his cheeks. "Tomorrow is Yom Kippur. I have not spoken to my brother for many years, because of a trivial argument, something that seemed really important at the time, but now seems so foolish.." *Ribbono shel olam*, God, help me," he said "Give me strength to ask for his forgiveness". The man wept openly, alone in the woods.

The angel caught one of the tears, and put it in a small glass bottle. He then flew back to the Holy One, who brushed away his own tears as he spoke:

This is the most precious gift that you could bring me, a pure tear of repentance. It is a tear wrested from a broken heart, a heart once closed, but now open to love and healing. This tear will bring will bring peace between families, and peace to the world.

The master key is the broken heart, and its tears are holy tears. Please God, take our tears of repentance. As you forgive us, so may we forgive others.

amen