

Yom Kippur
Har Shalom 2022
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Queen Elizabeth II, *aleha haShalom*, in her speech celebrating the 40th year of her reign, called the year 1992, a “annus horribilis”, a horrible year.

While the year 2022 was a challenging year, I wouldn’t go as far as calling it a **horrible** year. I was tempted, however to label it as such only because in 2022 there was no new Star Wars movie released. There were a few mini series but no new feature Star Wars films. (so no sermon today...)

My concern over a lack of “sermon-ble” movies was quickly allayed this summer, when Fran and I had a chance to visit the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. As part of a trip to visit with Jewish troops and Lay leaders in that country, Fran and I had the rare opportunity to spend a shabbat with our military Jewish Lay Leaders in the city of Petra, Jordan.

Even those of you who have not heard of the old Nabatean city of Petra, I’m sure would recognize its iconic Treasury Building which served as the backdrop for the final scene in the third Indiana Jones movie, Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade.

In this film, Indiana Jones played by Harrison Ford and his father played by Sean Connery go in search of the Holy Grail, the kiddush cup used by Jesus during the last supper. Allow me to share with you the climactic scene at the end of the movie:

After a long search around the world end was finally near.

At long last, the search was over.

It had taken two generations to lay the groundwork, plus a few weeks of life-threatening escapades.

But at long last, in the climactic finish of the film our hero, Indiana Jones, is within reach of the legendary Holy Grail.

There he hangs, precariously suspended over a bottomless chasm, as his father, (again portrayed by the venerable Sean Connery) struggles to keep hold of his son's life by the grasp of his bootstrap.

"I think I can reach it," Indiana exclaims, stretching his body to the very edge.

The moment is at hand.

But, if Indiana Jones keeps hold of the Grail-his prize, his obsession-he will surely slip from his father's grasp, and plummet to his death.

Either Indiana lets go of the grail, or he dies!

"Indiana," his father calls gently, "Indiana, let it go."

And so he does, losing the Holy Grail.

I wish we could show movies on YK, I did not do that scene justice...

But I mention that exciting scene, on this, the holiest day of the years, because I realize that today, Yom Kippur, is our day, as Jews, for letting go.

Today is the day of letting go of

Memories of anger, of resentment, of hostility.

A day of letting go of past missteps, failures, and grief.

Like our hero, Indiana Jones,

if we hold on to our guilt or to our anger,

the sheer weight will carry us down to the depths.

Today is our day to begin letting go.

And so, no fewer than ten times during Yom Kippur services, we acknowledge our human failings and declare in hope: "V'al kulam - For all of these sins, eloha slichot, "O God of forgiveness",

s'lach lanu – forgive us

m'chal lanu, pardon us,

kaper lanu - grant us atonement;

or better yet, kaper lanu - grant us absolvment; grant us release."

On this sacred morning,

I want to take a few minutes considering the meaning of these three terms

- s'lichah - forgiveness,

m'chilah - pardon, and

kaparah - absolvment.

Although, in our prayers, we always recite them in succession,

as if their meanings are the same,

in fact, each of the three words reflects

a distinct and unique aspect of that "letting go"

We begin with "s'lach lanu - forgive us."

Selickka, forgiveness, refers to the comparatively minor offenses of daily living.

We ask God to overlook our shortcomings and our failures.

At the same time, we recognize a profound need to forgive those who have wronged us.

Throughout the years, we accumulate, ounce by ounce, feelings of bitterness and resentment toward those around us: invitations never extended or insults received;

When we let go of that weight of pain and anger, fulfilling the mitzvah of s'lichah, forgiveness, often we discover that perhaps the offenses against us were never really intended.

Haven't we all, unconsciously, brought grief to others? That is the reason why the Talmud declares:

"For sins between one person and another,

Yom Kippur does not affect atonement until they have sought forgiveness from each other."

On the other hand, we sometimes do suffer mistreatment and insult inflicted consciously, willfully, perhaps even maliciously. Here, too, on Yom Kippur we pray for the gift of s'lichah, the ability to forgive our hurt, to forget our pain, to let go of our simmering anger.

An ancient Jewish tradition describes a fetus developing within its mother's womb. According to the myth, a light shines above the unborn child's head, a light which reaches to the core of the Universe. While yet unborn, the fetus learns all of Torah, which understands all the mysteries of Creation, and sees each event which will touch its life from the day of birth to the moment of death. When the child is born, so goes the legend, an angel descends from Heaven, and in an instant, reclaims all of the learning at the baby's first breath.

Why learn so much only to forget, our sages ask?

Because, they suggest, the **ability to forget opens the door for creative work and thought, for dreams and goals, for growth and achievement and fulfillment.**

In forgetting, in s'lichah, we look ahead, beyond the hurt, rather than backward in anger and resentment.

And so, on Yom Kippur, when we beseech God to forgive our failings, we pray, "s'lich lanu," grant us the ability to forgive others.

The ideal of forgiveness is beautiful, but

let's be realistic, too!

There are times when s'lichah, forgiving and forgetting cannot be our goal.

At times, trying to forget only intensifies the pain, rather

than helping us to **let it go**.

That is why, after saying "s'lach lanu," we then pray "m'chal lanu

- grant us pardon."

"M'chila means "pardon," which is quite different from mere forgiveness. To grant pardon is NOT to forget.

In our Biblical tradition, we are commanded "Thou

shalt not hate the Edomites, for they are your

brethren."

Likewise we read, "Thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian, for you

were a sojourner in his nation

Of Amalek, the epitome and personification of evil, we are

commanded:

"Zachor et asher asah l'cha Amalek.

Remember the evil which the descendants of Amalek did against you." Zachor destruction over and over again.

In each of our lives, there are times when to forgive and forget would only prolong the suffering, So rather than s'lichah, forgiveness, we pray for m'lichah, pardon, and declare that although we simply cannot forget the hurt, nonetheless, **we will separate ourselves from the anger,**

The story is told of a woman who moved to a cave high in the mountains to study with a guru. She wanted to learn everything there was to know. The guru supplied her with stacks of books, and left her alone so she could study. Every morning, the guru returned to the cave to monitor the woman's progress. In his hand, he carried a heavy wooden cane. Each morning, he asked her the same question: "Have you learned everything there is to know yet?" Her answer was always the same. "No," she said, "I haven't." The guru would then strike her over the head with his cane.

This pattern repeated itself for months. One day, the guru entered the cave, asked the same question, heard the same answer, and raised his cane to hit her in the same way. Suddenly, the woman grabbed the cane from his hand, stopping the guru's assault in midair.

Relieved to end the daily battering but fearing reprisal, the woman looked up at the guru.

To her surprise, the guru smiled.

"Congratulations," he said, "you have graduated. You now know everything you need to know."

"What do you mean?" the woman asked.

The guru replied, **"You have learned that you will never comprehend everything there is to know. And now you have learned how to stop the pain."**

Each of us owns some deep and secret pain.

For some, relief can take place
immediately, once the decision to let go has
been made.

For others, the recovery process takes many
years. But when we pray the words m'chal lanu,
we link our strength to our
faith. We affirm that
healing is possible,
that wholeness is not simply a dream,

that the punishment has gone on long enough,
and that the process of letting go can begin today.

On a different level,
in addition to forgiving or pardoning those who have harmed us,
likewise we each need to grant to ourselves a measure of forgiveness
and pardon.

We may punish ourselves for all of our
failures Unlike the fabled "Little Engine
Who Could,"
by repeating the phrase "I think I can, I think I can,"
the weight of our most intimate failures drags us down.

Herein lies the gift and the beauty,
and the miracle of the third aspect of our Yom Kippur prayer: "Kaper
lanu, grant us absolvment."

Kapparah is that sense of freedom and release and cleansing which comes as the result
of, and as the reward for, our decisions to forgive or to pardon.

One of my most vivid memories from the year I spent living in Jerusalem was the ancient ceremony of kapparah, still observed by Orthodox Jews today. The ceremony has its origin in the superstitious belief that the transgressions which we have accumulated can be transferred to a substitute animal. So in the Jewish market, on the afternoon prior to Yom Kippur, I watched as men, women and children purchased live chickens, and swung them in circles above their heads, reciting the words: "This is my substitute, this is my exchange, this is my atonement." The scene was almost too wild to describe: a whirlwind of commotion, of shouting, of calling and laughing; the squawks of the chickens--feathers flying everywhere! Finally, with the transfer of sin complete, each one took his chicken home, and served it for the holy meal .

My own religious style, would never permit me to observe this ritual.

Yet I acknowledge that the custom portrays

the fundamental concept of kapparah, of absolvment.

On this sacred day, if we find the courage to grant forgiveness and pardon to others as well as to ourselves,

we can experience a true Yom Kippur, a day

of liberation, a day of cleansing, a day of

letting go,

One more story:

Once upon a time, two hunters hired a pilot and a light airplane to carry them deep into the forest, where they could seek out their big game with the greatest possibility of success. As he landed, the pilot warned the hunters, "I will return tomorrow, but remember, my plane only has the power to carry the three of us plus one, medium-sized animal." But the hunt was successful beyond their expectations, and when the pilot returned the next day, the hunters crammed two large, prize moose into the passenger seats, stretching the carcasses across their laps.

The plane took off, and became airborne, but the weight of

the animals proved too great. Try as he might, the pilot was unable to guide his craft over the top of a nearby mountain, and the plane fell crashing to the earth. Fortunately for the three men, the two moose cushioned their fall, and amid the destruction and the carnage, they somehow remained alive.

"Where are we?" asked the first hunter.

The second hunter looked around, surveying the crash site, and then he answered, "I think we're about a mile further than last year."

My friends, my hope and prayer is that this Yom Kippur be for us a time of
a year of forgiveness and a year of letting go and a year, where we get, but a little further than last year.