

Slow to Anger, Quick to Forgive

Yom Kippur 5776

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Since it's not every year that Yom Kippur coincides with a papal visit to our city, I figured I would start with Pope Francis: "Good Yontiff, Pontiff!" It is remarkable to me how this pope has done so much to lower barriers. He has worked hard to bridge divides, reaching out to victims of the clergy abuse scandals and trying to direct more of the church's attention to its universal teachings of charity and outreach to those on the margins of society. Beginning in December, Pope Francis is initiating a year of mercy, when it will be easier for divorcees or people who participated in abortions to receive absolution for their violations of church doctrine. He has also taken steps to reach out to the ultra-traditionalist group The Society of St. Pius X, which broke from the Vatican 25 years ago. He is following in the path of Pope John Paul II, who made extraordinary efforts in his outreach to Jews and the State of Israel, in an effort to acknowledge and correct some of the church's errors of the past.

I don't want to get into the weeds here, except to appreciate the notion that the highest figure in the Catholic Church, one who wears the vestments of the High Priest and enjoys the status of a doctrine of infallibility, is working to brand himself as a man of the people, willing to reach out to bridge divides and repair relationships. The details are clearly different, but his efforts sync well with core Jewish values, which are essential to Yom Kippur.

I want to tell a story about a couple preparing to get married; actually the details are combined from a few different experiences. I am sitting with the couple and we are talking about their plans for the day and for the future; and I ask about their relationships with their future in-laws. And the couple gives each other a look. It's a look that says, "How did he know there was conflict between me and my future mother-in-law?" (As if they are the first ones!) After a few seconds of silence, the groom pipes in: "My mother means well. But she doesn't understand that this is not her wedding." To which the bride adds, "And she is completely controlling and discounting of my opinions. Do you know what she did to me?" I can spare you the details, except to say that objectively it wasn't nice.

It turns out that the mother-in-law had come to see me a few weeks earlier, and she was distraught as well. She was so excited when her son became engaged; she looked forward to having a daughter. But the past few months have been anything but what she had expected. She feels like her son has been taken away; she is filled with anxiety every time they call because they always want something. Do you know what she did to me the other day, Rabbi? I'll spare the details, but it wasn't very nice either; she has a right to be upset.

So what do they do? They don't talk. They don't get together. "It is just too difficult." "Maybe after she apologizes. ... How can I respect myself if I talk to her? She'll think she won and it will only encourage her." We have a situation where both parties are right, and because they believe in the right to be right, it is impossible to reconcile. On Yom Kippur, the day of atonement and forgiveness, I want to

explore the possibility of trying to open the door, of reaching out to someone who has wronged us. We need not give up the right to be right, but we cannot allow our insistence on it to seal off the possibility of reconciliation.

When I was in the sixth grade at the Hebrew Academy of Atlanta, our principal, Dr. Frankel, used to end each morning's service with a short lesson on one of Maimonides' 13 Articles of Faith. Maimonides, RaMBam, lived most of his life in 13th century Egypt as a rabbi, philosopher, and physician; and he is recognized as one of the most important scholarly figures in Jewish history. The 13 Articles of the Faith summarize what all Jews "are supposed to believe."

אני מאמין באמונה שלמה, I believe with a complete belief that there is a Creator who alone created all things; He is one; He has no body; He is eternal; He alone is to be worshipped; the words of the prophets are true; Moses was the greatest prophet; the Torah is divine; the Torah is immutable; God knows the deeds and thoughts of humans; God rewards and punishes; the Messiah will come; God will resurrect the dead.

Maimonides describes God as the ultimate Other. We have bodies, God does not. God is all powerful, we are not. We make mistakes, God does not. God is perfect, we are not. In Maimonides's assessment, we might believe in God or pray to God, but God is in no way like us and we could never hope or pretend to be like God.

But in describing that type of God, Maimonides has to discount the Bible. In the Bible, God has a body – Adam and Eve hear Him walking in the Garden of Eden, He slays the Egyptians with His "right hand", He speaks to Moses "face to face." Maimonides discounts the Bible's description of God. He says; "The Torah is written in the language of human beings" to make it easier to understand but not to be taken seriously. But I want to take that God seriously. Right now, I want to learn not from Maimonides' God of the philosophers who is all powerful, all good, and all Other, but rather from the God of the Bible who has a body and acts a lot like us. I want to learn from the great philosopher Joan Osborne: "What if God was one of us?" What might we learn from Him?

When my daughter Rebecca was in the 2s program in our Schilit Nursery School, I picked her up from school a day or two before Yom Kippur and I was greeted with excitement: "Daddy, we made wills today!" she told me. I thought to myself, "Wow! This is one sophisticated school, but why are they teaching financial planning in advance of Yom Kippur?" And I said, "You made what?" "Wills!" "What?" "You know, Jonah wills!"

Later today in the Mincha service, we will read the book of Jonah. You know the story: God instructs Jonah to travel to Nineveh to encourage the people there to repent; Jonah doesn't want to do it; he jumps a ship to Tarshish; there is a storm; he gets thrown overboard and swallowed by a fish; he prays and gets spit out; he delivers the message to Nineveh; they repent; and Nineveh is saved. "God saw what they did, how they had turned back from their evil ways. **And God regretted** the evil which He had said to

do to them, and did not do it.” Remember that word “regretted” (in Hebrew it is *vayina-hem*). That’s very human. We say God is perfect, but the God of the Bible expresses regret.

We sometimes skip over what happens next, but Jonah is ticked off. God changed His mind and it doesn’t seem fair. If the people of Nineveh have been wicked, they should be punished; that’s how law and order works. How can God give up on being right and allow these sinners another chance? How can a perfect God give such a pass to imperfection?

God responds by citing His enormous investment in humanity. “How can I abandon even the wicked city of Nineveh,” God asks, “When I have dedicated Myself to loving humanity?” God’s love of people wins out over His love of justice.

Now, if we read the Bible carefully, we see that God was not always this forgiving. God learned and grew ... just as we might.

Let’s go back to the very beginning. God created the world in six days, **וירא כי טוב מאוד**, and He saw that it was very good. Unfortunately, though, it wasn’t long before that very good world was filled with lawlessness, “and every plan devised by man’s *yetzer* was nothing but evil all the time. **וינחם**, And the Lord **regretted** that He had made man on earth and His heart was saddened.” There’s that word again; God regretted. But here in the beginning, God doesn’t regret an evil decree. God regrets having created humanity. And God reacts by destroying the entire world.

It turns out that that regret was only the beginning, because what happens right after the flood? God smells the pleasing odor of Noah’s sacrifice. “And the Lord said to himself, ‘Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man’s mind are evil from his youth.’” If you are playing close attention you can see that the reason that God destroys the world and the reason that God decides never to destroy the world again is the same. “The devisings of man are evil from his youth.” Recognizing that perfection is not an option, God decides it is better to have a relationship with imperfect people who will screw up and make Him angry at times than to have nothing.

But God’s transformation is not complete, because in the time of Abraham He sees wickedness in Sodom and Gomorrah. God tells Abraham of His intentions to destroy these wicked cities, and unlike Noah, Abraham protests. “Far be it from You!” Abraham tells God. You said you wouldn’t do this again. Maybe there are 50 who are innocent ... perhaps 45, 40, 30, 20, 10. ... Abraham almost succeeds in saving the wicked city. But God’s judgment stands and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed.

Soon enough, though, God has another encounter with humanity’s evil nature. When Moses is on Mount Sinai, the people construct and worship a golden calf, and God is incensed. “**הניחה לי**, Let Me be,” God says to Moses, “that My anger may blaze forth against them and I may destroy them and make of you a great nation.” Moses is angry too. By right, the people *deserve* to be destroyed. But he urges restraint: “Remember your promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” he tells God. Remember all that you invested in the relationship, freeing them from Egypt, leading them through the wilderness. Can You possibly give up and start again? The relationship is more important even than justice. And God agrees. “**וינחם ה**, **The Lord regretted** the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people.” There’s that word again!

This time God changes His mind. Moses has taught God a lesson and God has grown enough to realize that even though He is right to end the relationship, He doesn't really want to. How human of God. And how instructive for us, to invest in maintaining relationships even when we might be "right" not to bother. That's the lesson that God learns to teach to Jonah.

Yom Kippur is not the time for politics, but, no matter your political bent, I'm sure you have noticed how our country has been mired in gridlock, with the result that major issues like immigration, the rising costs of healthcare, deteriorating infrastructure, and the like, are never seriously addressed. Legislators today do not value relationships with other legislators, especially those from the other party. Reaching out to the other side is considered a sign of weakness, cavorting with the enemy. Compromise is akin to betrayal. It is generally better for politicians to stick to their guns, maintain their principles, and be right, than to reach out in order to accomplish something good even if they would not consider it perfect.

The New York Times columnist David Brooks argues that the dynamic is exacerbated by the continual election cycle. We tend to believe we are right and that if we hold out long enough, we will be vindicated as such. Maybe in the next election the other side will finally disappear. Of course that never happens, but because we keep holding out, we miss the chance to take even small steps. I think politicians and those who care about our country are faced with God's choice: Hold out and risk destroying the entire project for the sake of pure principles or give in and find imperfect solutions that preserve our ideals in the broadest sense and ensure that the conversation can continue over time.

This is what Pope Francis is trying to do in his church, and I maintain it is what Conservative Judaism seeks to do with our own religion. We want to preserve our traditions, we want to maintain high standards for education and observance, and at the same time we know that we have to meet people where they are. There is a principle in the Talmud that Rabbis cannot make edicts that the community is unable to live by. Relationships are more important than ideals.

A friend passed away recently; he was far too young. This friend was one of those people who believes in all the right things, but believes in them absolutely. Compromise was not a virtue, and the result was that he was perceived by some as a difficult person. I spent some time with him in the days before his death, and he opened up. He expressed regrets for certain mistakes. He attempted to reach out to loved ones, and when others reached out to him, he responded. He welcomed visitors and indicated that the time spent with others was the most valuable part of his day. Relationships that once seemed broken beyond repair were restored. Priorities were realigned. It's not that he gave up any of his most sacred beliefs; there was no reason to do that. But he opened himself up, he reached out, and it was almost magical. It is just so sad that it took so long.

Yizkor, which we will soon recite, is an opportunity to honor our loved ones who are no longer with us through memory. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that not all memories are good; we remember moments of joy and pain, love and loss. Ron Wolfson suggests that in this moment when we remember, we also “re-member”. When we reflect on family or friends, re-remembering means bringing back the members who were lost. Sometimes it means forgiving loved ones for past transgressions that once were great but seem trivial with the passage of time. Memories of togetherness can inspire us to reach out to others who have become distant from our lives. We may be right to bear grievance, but we may be wise to reach out, to restore, to re-member while we still have the opportunity. It is not an accident that we ask forgiveness, grant forgiveness, and re-member all on the same day.

The God of the Machzor is similar to the God of the Bible in that He is portrayed as very much like us. In the Unetaneh Tokef, God is called **קשה לכעוס ונוח לרצות**, slow to anger and quick to forgive. The worshipper of the Middle Ages was expected to recognize these words, because they come directly from a passage in Pirkei Avot, the Teachings of the Rabbis, which describes four types of temperament:

- One who is quick to anger but quick to forgive, the gain is canceled out by the loss.
- One who is slow to anger but slow to forgive, the loss is canceled by the gain.
- One who is quick to anger and slow to forgive – this is a wicked person.
- The *Hasid*, a kind-hearted person, is slow to anger and quick to forgive

So our liturgy portrays God as the ultimate *Hasid*, the one who saved the wicked people of Nineveh and is eager to receive us because He is slow to anger and quick to forgive. Our challenge is to try to be more like God. Not out there. Not Other. Not perfect. Not all powerful. Our challenge is to be like the God of relationships, capable of growth, eager to reach out, willing to cross the aisle or relinquish the right to be right for the sake of a loftier goal of re-remembering, slow to anger and quick to forgive. May this be our mantra for the new year ahead. G'mar Hatimah Tovah – May we be inscribed for good in the Book of Life.