

“Sign of the Times: A Story of Redemption”

Rosh Hashanah II – 2011
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In early 1995, less than a year after we had moved into our current facility, on a Saturday night when we were holding an art auction, someone plowed into one of our signs at the top of our driveway. A young kid speeding down Norton Road, was so high on drugs or alcohol he didn't realize that the road did not continue. He was oblivious to the sign at the top of our driveway. He continued on a straight path and just barreled right into the sign. Fortunately he wasn't hurt. He panicked, abandoned his car and tried to run away before the police arrived. We reported the loss to our insurance company and eventually the sign was repaired and replaced.

A few months later we were startled and disturbed to see when we arrived at the synagogue one spring Sunday morning to find that once again the sign had been damaged. Only this time it wasn't unintentionally caused by an errant vehicle. It was consciously and maliciously defaced. Discarded spray cans were found lying around that had been used to paint anti-Semitic graffiti and a swastika on the Jewish star of our logo. A number of congregants and others from the community, including Congresswoman Connie Morella helped clean the sign, wiping away the offensive writings.

When I heard that the second sign had been defaced, among other thoughts, my initial reaction was, Oy – there goes our insurance premium.

Imagine my surprise when earlier this year I got a message from my assistant that a young man, who wasn't Jewish, called and wanted to come see me. Because, although only a few here today know this bit of B'nai Tzedek history from our past, and probably even less recall what happened about 16 or 17 years ago, there was at least one person who remembered what had transpired: the person who did it. Sitting in my office, the neatly dressed young man told me, “I am the guy who messed up your sign a number of years ago.” I asked him, “which one?” He looked puzzled and didn't understand what I meant. I explained that the sign was actually damaged on two different occasions, and so I wanted to know which one he was responsible for having done.

He told me that when he was a teenager about 16 years ago, after a night of heavy drinking with some friends they came and did something, in his words, “they should not have done” scrawling graffiti on our sign. His life was significantly different now. He is married and has a child. As a result of his wife's prodding and insistence, he had enrolled in a 12 step program, and had stopped drinking. The 12 step program helped him find faith and God. His religion, Christianity has become an important part of his life and was now what guides his actions. He was remorseful and regretted what he had done. As part of his rehabilitation he felt he needed to come clean, which is why he made that tough call to come and meet with me. He wanted to apologize, to seek forgiveness, and to make amends. He offered to pay for the cost of the damage he had inflicted.

It was one of the most poignant encounters and remarkable meetings I have ever had as a rabbi. I was taken by surprise, and wasn't sure how to respond. But in truth, it is not so unusual to hear that something like this would still plague him, even though it happened so long ago.

I was speaking this summer with a close friend, in his 50's, who told me he was troubled by something he had said about another friend when they were both running against each other for the same student council office. Although this had happened while they were in high school over 40 years ago, it still

bothered him, and he felt the need to do something about it. As a result he reached out and invited his former opponent to lunch and apologized for what he had said and done so long ago, and which had troubled him ever since, even though he did not have to be so tough on himself and could have chalked it up to immaturity or youthful indiscretion.

One of the unique aspects of being human is that we can and do make moral choices. Unlike other creatures we are created *betzelem elohim*, in the image of God, which means we are programmed with memory and a conscience. Surely we all have done things which we regret, especially with the benefit of hindsight. The question is, what do we do with those feelings?

Part of the power of these Yamim haNoraim, these days of Awe is that it motivates us to turn to and to reach out to others, especially those we have wronged, whether intentionally, or unintentionally. When we hear and recite the prayers of Rosh Hashana we are motivated to reflect on the calling of the shofar leading us to seek forgiveness, to seek healing, and to ask those we have wronged to accept our apologies. It is also a time to let go of past grievances and perceived slights. It is as if God and our heritage have given us this wonderful gift, the means to repair and restore frayed relationships, to reach out to those from whom we have become distant and to relieve the guilt that can haunt us, even for years.

I think this explains part of the awesome power of this time of year. Our prayers summon us to make amends, reminding us that the gates of repentance are open, and pointing us in that direction. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains in the introduction to his new High Holiday prayer book that teshuva is the simple act of turning, an abandonment of sin and a change of behavior to embrace the holy and the good.

The Talmud has a seemingly strange passage which says that God created repentance even before he created human beings. God did this because He knew that we would not be perfect and would make mistakes. The rabbis believe that providing us the means to make up for our shortcomings and to repair our errors is a gift God gave us, a way to help us cope with our feelings and pangs of conscience when we know we have disappointed Him and others. When we work to correct our human imperfections, we improve our character and change our nature. It is an affirmation that we have free will and knowing this and acting upon it can be transformational.

Sometimes regrets about things we have said or done, or things we have not said or done, can linger with us for a long time, and take awhile before we seek to rectify them. Other times it need not take years to realize that we have erred.

Although Armando Galarraga was pitching a perfect game in May of last year for the Detroit Tigers going into the final inning, with one out to go, it won't go into the record books as a perfect game. He had faced 26 batters, and not one of them had reached base.

With two outs in the ninth inning, and with the crowd cheering and standing on their feet in anticipation of being witnesses to history being made, the batter hit a ground ball to the second baseman, who tossed it to the pitcher, Galarraga, who ran to cover first base. As was immediately evident to everyone in the stadium, as well as to those watching on TV and to anyone who has seen the instant replay, the batter was out. But the first base umpire, Jim Joyce called him safe. Listening to the play by play, you hear the announcer exclaim, "He's out!" only to hear him correct himself a split second later when he realized the umpire had called the runner safe. The perfect game was ruined. Had the umpire made the

right call, Galarraga would have earned his place in the record books, as only twenty perfect games have been pitched in the over 100 year history of major league baseball.

But what happened next was especially unusual, fascinating and inspiring, and is what makes the whole affair more memorable than being in the record books. (After all, if it was just a perfect game the story would never have made it into a High Holiday sermon at a major synagogue in suburban Washington D.C.!) The umpire reviewed the play in the umpire room after the game and saw that he was wrong. Once he realized what had happened, without prompting or delay he publicly expressed genuine remorse and said how terrible he felt being the one responsible for denying the pitcher a perfect game. How many times do you recall an ump or referee admitting a mistake? It is even more rare than a perfect game!

Yet as remarkable as the umpire's admission was, the response of the pitcher, the person who was wronged, was equally exemplary and even more extraordinary. Galarraga did not respond with a temper or a display of outburst or anger, as we have grown accustomed to see in professional sports. He didn't yell at the ump or even protest the call. He did not express any blame, or malice or ill will. He just smiled and with an incredulous, "you've got to be kidding me" kind of way, looked as if he was thinking, "I can't believe what just happened."

After Mr. Joyce realized he had made a mistake he asked to speak directly to Galarraga to apologize to him. Visibly shaken when he faced reporters in a press conference the next day he repeatedly confessed, "I was wrong ... I just screwed (up) the perfect game, this kid worked so hard to do it..., and I just cost that kid a perfect game," he said. In one of the classiest moves of major league sports, the next day the Tigers pitcher was the one who presented the lineup card to the umpire, who accepted it, with tears in his eyes.

In an interview on "The Early Show", Galarraga told Harry Smith in broken English how he felt about the umpire. "It was not easy coming and telling the people he had made a mistake. It meant a lot to me. And when this guy go talk to me, he can't even talk, he was crying. And I understand nobody's perfect. It's part of the game."

In a day and age when athletes behave like pampered narcissists with a sense of entitlement, and who call press conferences to inform the world where they "intend to take their talent" this was refreshing and uplifting. It is an example of the positive role sports figures can play as role models and offers lessons for all of us. It is a timely reminder of the power of humility and of the simple, but sometimes painful and difficult words, "I made a mistake. I am sorry." While it may have resulted in messing up a perfect game, it was a perfect apology. It was perfect because it was sincere and entailed genuine remorse. It was also perfect because the aggrieved party was willing to forgive. Both parties were gracious and magnanimous.

Sometimes it doesn't work out as well. People may not be so forgiving, and efforts to make peace are rebuffed. There are those who enjoy wallowing in self pity and cannot let go of a perceived slight or allow themselves to get over hurt feelings. In general and in principle, we should always be open and accept the extended hand of those who reach out and let go of our anger, to let bygones be bygones. It is much healthier, and in fact, if we do not forgive, our tradition says, the sin passes on to us. But are there times when it may be too late, when too much harm has been done and we are justified to maintain our sense of indignation? Probably not. Although when we malign the reputation of another person it is difficult, if not impossible to repair the damage.

The well-known story of the rabbi telling someone who regretted having spoken to so many so negatively and so often about the rabbi comes to mind. When approached privately with a sheepish apology the wise rabbi instructed the person to spread the feathers from a pillow wide and far, and then to try to retrieve them, an obviously impossible task. Upon seeing how difficult it was to gather the feathers, the rabbi explained, so it is when we say something that diminishes or tarnishes the good name of another. Trying to retract the words is as futile as trying to retrieve the scattered feathers which have taken on a life of their own. The point is that we should be extremely mindful and cautious of what we say about others. Jewish sources implore us to resist the temptation to spread rumors and gossip, even when we know it is true, for it can cause irreparable harm, and we may later regret what we have done.

What is true for individuals is true on a larger scale, for countries as well.

Israel, for example is much maligned, and has become the world's punching bag. There are a myriad of reasons for this, which I will discuss in more detail on Yom Kippur. But the part that is relevant to what I am discussing today is the harm done to it by the infamous Goldstone Report. Filled with lies and inaccuracies, in typical UN fashion it offered a one-sided condemnation of Israel for its defense of its citizens against the constant shelling from Gaza. It is as if when it comes to protecting Jewish lives, any defense is disproportional. A South African Jew, Richard Goldstone was chosen to head up the United Nations commission investigating the 2009 War in Gaza. The damage the libelous report did to Israel's reputation was considerable.

This past year, Goldstone had a change of heart and said that he wanted to apologize for what he had done. In an Op Ed piece he penned for the "Washington Post" several months ago he wrote: "If I had known then what I know now, the Goldstone Report would have been a different document." Nothing was more damning than his conclusion which he now renounces and states unequivocally that "civilians were not intentionally targeted as a matter of policy." But unfortunately, like the feathers spread to the wind, the words of his initial report had already taken flight and the damage of the widely circulated negative slanderous misrepresentation has been done. In this case, the harm is so widespread, it may be too late. The media that hyped Goldstone's allegations of Israeli war crimes did not devote the same front-page coverage to Goldstone's retraction. NGO's have made their conclusions, public opinion has been shaped by the report, governments have formed policy, and resolutions of condemnation have been passed based on the incorrect conclusions. Despite Goldstone's penitence, Israel will still be regarded by many as a pariah among the community of nations. In reality though, for Goldstone teshuva requires more than a single op ed in the "Washington Post." If he is sincere and truly regrets what he did, he should mount a major effort to meet world leaders and undertake an active campaign to let the media know how he feels.

The lesson here is to think before we speak ill of others about the damage we can do to the reputation of a person, or in the case of Israel, a country.

So back to our story about the young man who marked up our sign who came to see me: what did I tell him? I proceeded to teach him what our tradition teaches about teshuvah and about the process of how we make amends for the errors of our ways. I taught him not just the concepts, but the actual terminology as well.

Teshuvah, I explained, for most Jews is intricately linked to the High Holidays. But the reality is, the gates of repentance are always open. Knowing that we do not know the day of our passing, the Talmud enjoins us to repent the day before we die. We are taught that the way to achieve teshuva is by

admitting first to ourselves that we have done something we should not have done, and then to admit this directly to whomever we have wronged. Compensation should be made if there is monetary loss, and tzedekah can be given to correct the imbalance caused by the sin. I explained to him that while I appreciated his kind offer to make restitution, the sign had been paid for some time ago. Nevertheless, realizing the wisdom of our sages, that it may be important for him to feel that he had made tikun, a correction for what he had done, I told him while it was not something he had to do, he could make a contribution to the synagogue if he wished to do so. I felt I couldn't require it of him, but that it had to come from within his own heart.

I then took him into the empty sanctuary, where I invited him to stand with me before the open ark, and we prayed. It was a deeply moving, religious moment, for both of us. I thought to myself about the transformative power of faith. I couldn't help but think of all the skeptics who question what good religion is, and wanted them to be with me at that moment. Here was someone who had turned his life around, as a result of his belief system, of giving his life, in the terms of AA, over to a "higher power." I found the story of this young man so compelling and share it with you today because it so dramatically shows that we need not be prisoners of our past. It affirms that all we say is true: we can change, and faith can help us achieve it. In a subsequent conversation he told me how moved he was by the experience and how much he appreciated learning what Judaism taught about teshuva. A few weeks later I received a check in the mail made out to "B'nai Tzedek", with the words "for teshuva" on the memo line.

Part of what Rosh Hashana is all about is celebrating decency, and reaffirming the power of kindness, compassion and of the way we should treat loved ones. This is why these stories resonate this time of year. We reflect on how far we have drifted away, and of the need to turn to each other, as well as to return to the basic tenets and teachings of our heritage. It gives us a chance to be renewed and reenergized, with a fresh slate and a new beginning. The question is how can we liberate ourselves from those things we have that we have come to regret, how are we able to move on. The answer is through teshuvah.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "Teshuva tells us that our past does not determine our future. We can change. We can act differently next time than last. If anything, our future determines our past. Our determination to grow as human beings – our commitment to a more faithful, sensitive, decent life in the year to come gives us the courage and honesty to face our past and admit its shortcomings. Our teshuva and God's forgiveness together mean that we are not prisoners of the past, held captive by it. In Judaism sin is what we do, not what we are."

As we say when we conclude the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, "*Teshuva*, (sincere repentance), *u'tefillah* (prayer) *u'tzedekah*, (acts of charity and kindness) *ma'avirin et roa hagezerah*, aver the severity of the decree." The young man who came to see me did all three. He came to me to ask forgiveness, we prayed, and he made a donation to the synagogue. As we face the new year, let us work to bring healing into our lives, to do the important, sometimes difficult, often courageous, but always redemptive work God demands of us.

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