

KOL NIDREI SERMON 5775
NO LONG TERM
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Please Note: The subject of this sermon and the sources referenced all come from Rabbi Gordon Tucker who delivered an address about this at the Southern California Board of Rabbis High Holy Day seminar in August 2014.

Enrico was bent on living the American dream – or at least, making the American dream possible for his sons. He spent years working as a janitor, cleaning toilets and mopping floors in a downtown office building. He never complained because he was doing it for his family. After fifteen years, he had saved up enough money to buy a house in the suburbs, a better place for his kids. His wife, Flavia, worked at a dry-cleaners, both parents saving for their sons' college tuition.

They were successful in offering opportunities to their children that they themselves never had. Their son Rico graduated from college with a degree in electrical engineering, and went on to business school. But Rico's work trajectory is radically different from that of his dad. True, Rico has spent the 14 years since graduation gainfully employed. But he has moved four times already for his and his wife's work. Their third move was to Missouri where "the uncertainties of the new economy caught up with [Rico]. While [his wife] was promoted, Rico was downsized--his firm was absorbed by another, larger firm...So the couple made a fourth move, back East to a suburb outside New York...

Prosperous as they are, the very acme of an adaptable, mutually supportive couple, both husband and wife often fear they are on the edge of losing control over their lives. This fear is built into their work histories."¹

Rico's journey, and that of his father Enrico, are documented by sociologist Richard Sennett in *Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. In this book, Sennett examines the impact that the workplace has on our emotional and spiritual health. The father's, Enrico's, generation could achieve their goals by pursuing work in an environment and a time frame that were predictable and dependable. On the other hand, Rico and his wife, Jeannette, operate in a very different work world – our work world -- one that values speed, mobility and risk-taking. Change is the only constant in

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/s/sennett-character.html>

such an environment. One of its major characteristics is: "No long term....An executive for AT&T points out that the motto 'No long term' is altering the very meaning of work." He explains that, "In AT&T we have to promote the whole concept of the work force being [provisional]... 'Jobs' are being replaced by 'projects' ...

Sociologist Sennett notes that: "Today, a young American with at least two years of college can expect to change jobs at least eleven times...and change his or her skill base at least three times during those forty years of labor." Sennett points to the emotional and spiritual consequences of working this way. For one thing, relationships become truncated. Rico tells Sennett that "he and Jeannette have made friends mostly with the people they see at work, and have lost many of these friendships during the moves of the last twelve years...Rico looks to electronic communications for the sense of community [but he] finds communications on-line short and hurried."

More important is the effect on families. Rico explains that "the material changes embodied in the motto 'No long term' have become dysfunctional...as guides to personal character, particularly in relation to his family life. Take the matter of commitment and loyalty," he says. 'No long term' is a principle which corrodes trust, loyalty, and mutual commitment...'No long term' means keep moving, don't commit yourself, and don't sacrifice...'You can't imagine how stupid I feel when I talk to my kids about commitment," he says. It's an abstract virtue to them; they don't see it anywhere." Sennett wonders how "a human being [can] develop a [sense] of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments."

"If I could state Rico's dilemma more largely," he says, "short-term capitalism threatens to corrode his character, particularly those qualities of character which bind human beings to one another and furnishes each with a sense of sustainable self."

I am sure that many of us here have felt this kind of disjunction, a feeling that the center doesn't hold, that our world is too fragmented, that community is transitory, that things in our world are changing so fast, that keeping up is becoming harder, that we are becoming more isolated. Rabbi Gordon Tucker, who heads a Conservative synagogue in Westchester, NY, offers five antidotes to

this brokenness: Relationships; forgiveness; time with oneself; overcoming denial; and recollection. All are really about our connections to one another.

To demonstrate just how important relationships are, the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology conducted a study in 2008. The researchers discovered that the perception of a geographical slant -- a hill -- was influenced not only by physiological resources -- such as one's physical fitness -- but also by one's social support. Participants who came with a friend saw the hill as less steep than those who came alone. Participants who thought of a friend also saw the hill as less steep. Of course, the warmer the friendship, the less forbidding, the hill. Conclusion: We need each other in order to face the challenges of our lives. You need others, and others need you.

Paradoxically, Rabbi Tucker's second antidote to our brokenness, time with oneself, is an essential component of healthy relationships. We need to feel comfortable with ourselves, we need to feel inwardly content in order to be empathetic and in order to be able to reach out to others. In a traditional synagogue, on Yom Kippur afternoon, we read the instructions to the High Priest about entering the Holy of Holies, alone, on the Day of Atonement. There, the High Priest is to offer sacrifices on behalf of himself and on behalf of the people. Rabbi Tucker suggests that this is a model for us -- to be our own High Priest, finding that holiness -- that kedusha -- within ourselves, from which we can draw strength. And it is by spending time alone with ourselves that we are able to make that discovery.

Of course relationships cannot survive and thrive without our ability to forgive, Tucker's third antidote. Anger and resentment give us the illusion that we are in control. Statements such as: "I will never speak to her again" or "He will never be my friend" make us feel like we are in charge. The truth is that anger and resentment control us. Some time ago, a YouTube video featured a discussion between father and son. The son was angry for an offense committed against him by a friend two years before. Now the friend had written the son, asking for forgiveness. The son asks his father what to do. The father says: "Forgive him." The son replies: "That's the last thing I would do. I absolutely can't." "You mean, you won't," says the father. The son answers: "Don't make this about me." The father says: "We're talking about what you can do. I hope this friend is paying you rent. He is living inside your head. He's obviously taking up a lot of room there." The son responds: "Well living in my head rent-free...I never thought about that.

But I just can't let it go."

Why is it so difficult for us to let go of our anger and our indignation? Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, explains why in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. He tells us that our beliefs are not based on reasoning. Rather, we believe something intuitively and then find evidence to corroborate our beliefs. In this way, we feel justified in our opinions. Having proven the rightness of our point of view, we are unable to even entertain another perspective.

In *The Forgiving Self: The Road from Resentment to Connection* psychologist, Robert Karen suggests that there is a high cost to our inability to forgive. He tells us that, "Our caring switch is turned off by our retreat into our dens of righteousness," so that we are unable to empathize with another. This is not just damaging to our relationships, it is also damaging to ourselves. Karen tells us that forgiveness creates "a bridge back from hatred and alienation as well as a liberation from two kinds of hell: bitterness and victimhood on one side; guilt, shame, and self-recrimination on the other."²

Being able to forgive means being able to recognize someone else's truth, and the ways in which holding onto our own isolates us and separates us from others. As psychologist Karen puts it: "It represents an ability to imagine what life is like on the other side of the fence, where another human being is engaged in his own struggle, to let go of the expectation that people exist to be just what we need them to be. And this sensibility applies to our view of ourselves, too: for forgiving others is nothing but the mirror image of forgiving oneself."

Thus true forgiveness comes as a result of serious inner work, Tucker's fourth antidote to our brokenness. We have to recognize that we too, are capable of disappointment, of hurt, of betrayal. Recognizing our own faults is, of course, terribly difficult. It's always easier to point the finger at someone else for not living up to our expectations. That is why Rabbi Tucker has a problem with the fact that our confessions during these High Holy Days are in the plural: The prayer book says, "We have sinned." The plural certainly suggests that we are a community, not isolated individuals. But Rabbi Tucker says that group confession actually allows us to deny our own culpability by assuming it's the other guy who

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is guilty of engaging in gossip, of being stingy, of being selfish. That is why overcoming denial is so important to our mental health as well as to our relationships with each other. We can only grow once we have recognized where we need to improve. At the same time, we need to have compassion on ourselves before we can have compassion on others.

Rabbi Tucker's final antidote to isolation and fragmentation is recollection. A story from the Talmud will illustrate the point. Our tradition tells us that, in our mother's womb, our navel is open to receive food and drink from our mother, and our mouths are shut. We have full knowledge of everything, particularly our connection to other human beings and the world. However, when we are born, our navels close and our mouths are opened by an angel who smacks us on the mouth – thus the cleft on our upper lip. At once, we forget everything we knew. Rabbi Tucker says that the mouth represents individuation, self-differentiation, our egos, our appetites, our desire for gratification. But the price for being born into our individuality is losing the knowledge of our connectivity. He tells us that our job as human beings is to relearn what we once knew -- that we are all part of a whole. We must "spend our lives using our egos to contribute to connections in the world and not for self-aggrandizement," he says. Rabbi Tucker concludes by saying that "there is a direct proportion between the receding of our egos and the receding of fear and unhappiness."

We recite the Shema to remind us that we are interconnected— that just as God is one, so we too, reflections of God's image, are one. As we go into this New Year, let us pledge to work on developing and strengthening our relationships. Let us not get trapped inside our towers of righteousness, unable to acknowledge the other's story. And let us hear the prayer of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav who pleads for peace among all human beings – remembering that peace in Hebrew, Shalom, is connected to shalem, completeness. We are complete, and at peace when we find our place within the whole. Here is Rabbi Nachman's prayer:

Lord of Peace! King to Whom all Peace belongs!
Maker of Peace and Creator of All!
...You are the Maker of peace even in the heavens
where You bring together two opposites, fire and water, and unite them.
Through Your great miracles You make peace between them.

Draw forth a vast peace upon us and upon the entire world,

for You alone can unite opposites and bring them together, as one, in peace, and in great love. May You encompass us together with one mind and with one heart to draw near to You and to Your teachings in truth.

And may all humanity be joined into one fellowship to do Your will with a complete and perfect heart.

Lord of Peace! Bless us with peace, and through peace, may all blessing, all salvation, and all holiness flow down to us.

As we move to Confession of Sin, let us think about how we need to acknowledge our own failings in order to forgive the failings in others, and let us strive to forgive ourselves as well. Only then will peace be possible.