

**Fri 4 May 2012**  
**After the Death**  
**Congregation Adat Reyim**  
**Alan Eisenberg**

## **AFTER THE DEATH**

The Torah reading this week is AHAREI MOT, which in Hebrew means AFTER THE DEATH. This is because it takes place right after the Death of Moses's brother Aaron's two sons. The reading is also maybe even more significant, because it is also the origin of the YOM KIPPUR ritual.

Interestingly and possibly even intentionally, this reading takes place about 6 months after and equally six months prior to our YOM KIPPUR. It's as if to say that we should remember that making atonement is not just a once a year event. It has always been a challenge for me to understand the idea of the once a year atonement. I know that some of us believe we have the other 364 days to build up our mistakes so that once a year we can ask for forgiveness, and then even then, we only ask it of god. While in other religions, they go weekly to confess their sins and ask for atonement, but again, only to god. Why to god, as if he is going to tell the people who most need to hear it.

Why do we struggle to say the words ANI MITZTA'ER ... Hebrew for I'm sorry! Why is this so hard for us to do? And what does it mean to others when you say it to them, sincerely, and meaningfully.

David Brin, an American science fiction author, has one of my favorite quotes on the subject. He said: "Why must conversions always come so late? Why do people always apologize to corpses?" The author Harriet Beech Stowe said it as well when she said "The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and for deeds left undone."

How often I have seen this as the truth. How many of us regret the moments we didn't say I'm sorry. I was 21 when my grandmother died. She had lived within driving distance of us my whole life. I had spent summers with her and shared many special moments during my childhood. When I was 21, I was in college and she and I had drifted apart. For many reasons not spoken here, we had argued recently and I didn't apologize. And then she was gone and I could no longer tell her what I wanted to.

ZAY MOYKHL! That's Yiddish for I'm sorry and a language she spoke often to me. Unfortunately it was typically to tell me that I was MESHUGEH (crazy). Being a fan of movies, I often quote them sometimes to the pleasure or dismay of others. I find comfort in the lines from movies, because they help me to understand that others go through what we all do. When it comes to this idea of waiting to say you are sorry, I drift to an unlikely movie, "The Sixth Sense", which is mistaken as a scary movie, when it is really about discovering a power to help others and do good. And no, it's not that the guy is dead at the end. And if I just ruined that for you, you should have seen the movie 10 years ago anyway. At the end of the movie; the boy who has the power to talk to the dead tells his mother that his grandmother, his mother's mother who had passed away years ago, has been talking to him. The boy's mother and his grandmother had a falling out years before and the mother was suffering with guilt from it. He tells his mother that the grandmother wanted to tell her something. It was an answer to a question the mother

asked every time she visited her grave that went unanswered. The answer from the grandmother was "EVERY DAY". The boy asks his mother what question she asked when she visited the grandma's grave. His mother says the question is "DO I MAKE HER PROUD?" At that moment in the movie, the mother is able to release the pain she had carried with her all those years.

But in life, we don't get to talk to the dead and they don't get to answer us. It is ironic that this is the week I have been invited to deliver this D'Vor Torah, because I contemplate this question often when I speak to groups about bullying. Since 2007 I have chosen to take on the cause of helping others cope with the pain and suffering they feel from being bullied. I speak to groups and have a website of stories and information to try to help others. I started this to help myself, because I too had been a victim of bullying as a child and knew the long-term suffering this was bringing to others. I realized that the theme I would share when I spoke was one of trying to teach and promote empathy and find forgiveness. Because it is in heart and head that we carry the burden of the pain of cruelty and also the guilt of what we did. I had no idea in 2007 how this decision would change my life.

I decided my first action would be to write down all of the stories I remembered from those years of bullying. I grew up in Lexington, Massachusetts in the 1970s and this is where it all took place. This is important later. I wrote my stories onto a website. I did it just for me to release these things from me and put them to rest. But it would not be so easy. A few years later, I was invited to speak about my stories. This was also very difficult and the pain of those memories would come back to me. You see, I believe we never really forget the wrongs done to us, we just store them in the back of our minds and put them in a deep place. But they build over time and without the apology, without someone making amends, I believe they make us a harder person. But over the last five years, it seems many have found my site and find hope in the words posted there. What I never expected was that those people I knew in Lexington would find my stories as well and that I would have to confront these words. . .I'm sorry.

The first person to find his story was actually my best friend from those years. I knew he had found them, because he started replying to other posts with his memory. But he hadn't found his story. You see he had hurt me as well. One Halloween, he and my other friends had taunted me from the woods and ran off, leaving me to walk home alone, no candy in my bag. Looking back as an adult, it doesn't seem that bad. But our memories are from the age that things happen. He read his story and then I received his note directly to me...30 years later.

He wrote: *"For what it's worth, and what I recall of that night, it was just kids being kids... I think we were all just being goofy with the mischief of the night, being Halloween and all...and I will say I am sorry if your feelings were hurt."*

For those young people in the audience, can you imagine getting a note from your friend 30 years later apologizing? I couldn't and was embarrassed I had put him in that position. But you know what, I felt a little better. I called him and we talked for hours after that. We still do today. A little repair. Pra-stEE-te...That's Russian for I'm Sorry.

I had hoped that would be the last. I never really expected anyone to read my site anyway. Who am I? Just someone trying to work his way through life. I then was looking through my old Bar Mitzvah book

one day and saw that there was a boy in it from Lexington who I couldn't recall our times together. I knew his name, but not the times we spent together. He found me through Facebook one day and wrote to me recounting all the good times we had. He particularly reminded me of the time we blew up our toys with firecrackers. Don't tell anyone I did that though. He wrote:

*I must say that you moving away was one of the saddest events to me. We became such good buddies so fast. I have an unbelievable amount of memories hanging out together, doing sleepovers, and just being generally mischievous...*

It bothered me not to remember him, his memories were so vivid of me. Then I discovered why. In his second note his explanation told me when he wrote:

*I remember being incredibly sad when you moved away. I got over it of course, but there's always been something about it in the back of my mind that's bothered me. Specifically, what happened at the end of 7th grade when we had a fist fight at school. As far as fistfights went, it wasn't unusual. Even for friends, because usually they can move on and endure that kind of stuff. But what's bothered me since then (and I was just thinking about it only a couple of weeks ago before you contacted me) was how that injured our friendship, and then you moved away before we could really set it completely right. That was a mean day for me, and one which I really wish I could have back.*

*And since a window of opportunity doesn't always open for long, I have to use our reconnection to tell you now how incredibly sorry I still am for what I did to make that fight happen, for every blow struck against you, and for whatever mean (and I mean in the low-class, uncaring, dirty, and despicable sense) action or words that were used by me, before or after. ut I've always known that my part in that event was a sin, and one which I still hold onto. I have never forgotten about it.*

32 years later. That guilt was still with him every day. And I had blocked him from my memory, because the pain of losing one more friend during those years was too much for me. We talked and shared our feelings. He was able to say sorry in person and I did too. Even though I didn't remember, I was sorry. But to me I thought "what if I hadn't made my site and found him?" Would that still haunt him to the end? Do we all have that inside us. But for me, a little more repair.

Finally, I want to share this more recent story that took place in December. By far, it was the hardest story for me. You see there was a moment in time when I was the bully and the guilt was in me. During Hebrew school class one day we put tacks on one of the kids chairs, not a few, like ten. We thought it would be funny. When he sat down it wasn't. I felt bad about doing it. See he was the one who got picked on then and I was the one participating in it. I shared that as well on my site. Well, it seemed in the five years since I started it, my site and stories had been read by many and at what would have been the 25th reunion of the high school in Lexington, Massachusetts, it seems they were talking about me, the bully expert who writes about the bullying that happened there. It seems to some, I was a local hero to write about what happened to not just me, but I would find out to many. It seems that the boy, now a man, who we did the tack attack to heard as well and found his story on my site. I knew he did, because I heard from his friends, who wrote not too kindly to me. It was my turn to have to reach out and say I was sorry. I was racked with guilt...31 years later. I called him. I said the words...I'm Sorry...I expected

anger. What I got was a wonderful conversation with an old friend who was happy for my call and for sharing our stories. He had it far worse, but he used it for strength. He repaired a bit. I repaired a bit. We talk often now...it is behind us.

I feel lucky to have had these three experiences for saying I'm Sorry. Many of the negative feelings that I started with five years ago have left me. I think in some way, I have helped others do the same. This weekend, I saw the documentary called BULLY that just came out. I wish I could tell you much has changed, but it seems not. In it, an awkward 14-year-old named Alex is beaten daily on the bus and ignored by all. His mother asks him "doesn't it bother you, doesn't it hurt you?" He just says in calm anger, "I really don't think I feel anything at all anymore". So what happens next to him, to others. There are many stories of children, young children, that commit suicide from bullying. It is too late to say I'm sorry after that and many are left with the guilt. I think it interesting that this weekend's reading deals with Aaron and this loss of his children. Is this where the origin of Yom Kippur starts? What does that do to an individual...to society? These are rhetorical questions I ask often as I contemplate the issue of bullying.

What difference would it make if we just said "I'm Sorry" more often and meant it when we said it. As I and some of my elementary school friends have learned, it's never too late to say you are sorry. It changes lives. And I can tell you it feels good just to say it and move on...

Jammer!...Oprostite!...Tevechi...Anteeksi...Desole...Gomen Nasai...Przepraszam!... Samahani...Xin loi... ANI MITZTA'ER...I'm Sorry.