

Yom Kippur Drash - 5774/2013

Judy Barlas - Delivered September 14, 2013

So.

This is what we're told.

For transgressions against God.

For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones.

But against each other, we don't get off that easy.

A day in shul without even a latte just - isn't - enough.

For transgressions of one human being against another

the Day of Atonement does NOT atone

until they - we - have made peace.

Peace - with - one another.

How very reasonable.

Logical.

God won't wave a magic wand,

apply a halakhic bandaid to our wounds

and make the hurt go away.

God requires our participation.

We have to make nice.

Make up.

Beg forgiveness and grant the same.

Right.

We read the passage

and nod

and post to Facebook our blanket apologies

and maybe get a little more personal

and email little mea culpas to friends

for anything we may have done to hurt them

and figure we've done our bit.

Except.

As bluntly noted in three-quarter time by Lyle Lovett, Texas songwriter, singer, and, it seems, sometime theologian:

[...] who says he'll forgive you
And says that he'll miss you
And dream of your sweet memory
Well, God does
But I don't
God will
But I won't
And that's the diffrence
Between God and me

I don't.
I can't.
Sometimes
I just can't.

I am not a very generous person.
I hold grudges.

Maybe because I've been hurt once too often.
Hurt badly twice too often.

So 15 years after the fact, I still can't forgive.
Every year, I sit here
and read the words,
try a new path,
explore a new metaphor,
attempt relaxation exercises of the heart,
and every - single - time - I fail.

Once I thought I'd done it.
Not quite enough to make a phone call
or even send an e-mail.
Not quite enough to grant absolution,
or to say I understand,
there was this and this and this,
and I'm sorry you never loved me
and I left my clutter all over the counter
and I didn't balance the check book
because you kept me in a town without sun
and I forgive you for all of it
and beg your forgiveness as well
and if I never had to see you again it would be a whole lot better.

Right.
Sure.
It's obvious.
I never got anywhere near that far.

And over the course of the year the anger and resentment gnaw at my throat like the
Spartan boy's fox tucked under his shirt and my friends say "Just let it go," and my doctor
says "It doesn't work that way," and I think

"It's eating me alive."

As Nelson Mandela said: "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill
your enemies."

And God says -

Except God doesn't talk to me.

God doesn't often speak directly to third generation Jewish atheists - though sometimes a tree - or a bird - or a cloud from the Word-less Western Union will deliver a message that bypasses my analytical brain and goes straight to what might be termed my soul to hint at acceptance by what might be termed God. And luckily for me, this Ineffable Existence for which "God" seems as good an agreed-upon name as any does not pass judgment on those 2 generations of ancestors whom some might call anti-religious nuts because, it seems, God does forgive - and understands that in their own left-wing radical ways (Communists on one side and Socialists on the other) they too were attempting *tikkun olam*.

Where was I then?

Right.

In pain.

Hating.

Hurting.

Not forgiving.

Failing.

My back scarred after years of self-flagellation of the soul.

[pause]

So yes.

Hineni.

Here I am.

And I would guess I'm not the only one.

This forgiveness business isn't easy, or it wouldn't be such an important part of the process of cleansing our selves and our world before passing into a new year with any hope of making less of a mess of things. It's the struggle which gives it value, and through the struggle that we learn. But when we struggle so hard that all we see is our failure, then we're adding this hurt to the hurt that has already been inflicted, and torn another layer of flesh off our perhaps already fragile egos.

Thinking badly of ourselves just compounds the damage done by others. It saps us of the strength we need to heal the world - and our own lives - and our own hearts. Depriving ourselves of self-respect day after day, week after week, weakens us a lot more than this one day without physical nourishment.

As Sara Sarasohn wrote, and we will later read:

We will love our families
And we will love ourselves.
This is the year. [...]

We will listen to the world's music
And we will bring our own music to life.
This is the year. [...]

You are with us and within us, every minute, every day.
We are Your reflections in all that we do.

If we do not - if we CAN NOT - love ourselves, respect ourselves for our efforts, here - now - and all year, then we don't respect that reflection, those sparks of holy light that reside within us. No one is perfect. God does not expect us to be perfect. What we *are* expected to do is to try.

So maybe that is all **I** can expect of **myself**.
To try.
Perhaps, for now, it is enough that I try.
That I do note the times I refrain
from reiterating the wrong that was done me.
That I don't flagellate myself when my behaviour is less than generous.

[pause]

I think - I hope - that a forgiving God would allow us another project.

We need to learn to forgive ourselves.

We need to forgive ourselves for not yet succeeding in forgiving others.
And we need to forgive ourselves
for allowing someone else
to continue to have so - much - power to hurt us.

We need to forgive ourselves
for the things that can not be undone.
For the missed opportunities.
For not doing our best.
For the sunny days we spent indoors
and for lacking the courage to free ourselves from oppression.

We need to forgive ourselves.
And then - continue to try.
To try.
To struggle.
To try to forgive.
To try to be kind.
To try to do better.

And to always give ourselves credit for that struggle.

To honor the struggle
and honor what is good in ourselves.

For as long as we at least try, I think God will be generous with us. God will not be harsh in passing judgment. Our own faith may be shaky or close to non-existent, but I do believe that whatever in our own spiritual world responds to the name of God does have faith in each of us. In the ability of each of us to try, to struggle, to wrestle with ourselves, and to eventually take that first brave step into the dangerous Sea of Vulnerability in which we are able to forgive, truly forgive, and beg the same for ourselves.

I have to believe that.
It helps me hold my head up.
It helps me keep on trying.

For as the American poet Philip Schultz wrote in his poem *Yom Kippur*:

You are asked [...]
To believe that no matter what
you have done to yourself and others
morning will come and the mountain
of night will fade. To believe,
for these few precious moments,
in the utter sweetness of your life.
You are asked - to bow your head
and remain standing,
and say Amen.

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