

Kol Nidre Sermon 2007
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The Quest for Forgiveness

“You have the same characteristics as your family did, whether you want to or not. What you do with all that.... is really what the difference is between you and who came before you.”

I will not tell you who said this quote, until I reach the middle of this sermon...

But first I must begin with a story from the Holocaust...there are lots of twists and turns and important details, so please pay close attention to the story..

(Note: Much of what follows has been adapted from media reports.)

There was a large department store in the city of Wurzburg owned by a German Jew named Siegmund Ruschkewitz. In 1935, he was forced to sell his store at 10% of its value to Josef Neckermann one of his employees.

As his grandson, Gad Ruschkewitz, 63, who lives in Israel, tells the story, Neckermann brought a Nazi member to the store and together they threw Siegmund Ruschkewitz out.. After he lost the business, Siegmund Ruschkewitz left Wurzburg for Berlin and lived in a hotel until they could get on a ship for Palestine, where one of his sons was already living. En route, Ruschkewitz and his wife died of typhus aboard ship. Their bodies were thrown overboard near the island of Crete. Their other son, Ernst, who stayed behind in Germany, was killed at the Buchenwald concentration camp on March 31, 1945 -- three weeks before the end of the war. Ernst's wife, Ruth, was killed in Auschwitz, date unknown.

But Josef Neckerman was not finished with his crimes...

In 1935 the Joel family from Nuremberg moved to Berlin. They ran a successful mail order business selling fabric all across Germany, but had been driven from their hometown of Nuremberg by a smear campaign launched by Julius Streicher, the infamous editor of the virulently anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Stuermer*.

In the summer of 1938, Joel was forced to sell his life's work at a fraction of its true value. (His lawyers would later estimate the company's value at six times that amount.) The purchaser was none other than the identical Josef Neckermann, the very same 25-year-old Wurzburg native and Nazi-party member who earlier had bought out the Jewish department store king, Siegmund Ruschkewitz.

Fearing for their lives, the Joels fled to Switzerland where they tried to collect the meager amount that Neckermann had agreed to pay them for the business. Neckermann refused and then, after being swindled by a Berlin city official who had promised to help them get more money from Neckermann, they left for England, then Cuba, and finally New York. There, Karl Joel opened a small store, but his life remained a constant economic struggle. In Germany, Neckermann profited greatly on Joel's successful business, turning production over to the Nazi war effort and even using slave labor from Lodz to supply Nazi troops on the eastern front.

After 1945, Neckermann built a vast business network and was transformed into a postwar German celebrity. He mingled with politicians and started up factories. He also became a celebrated equestrian Olympian, winning many gold medals for Germany with his horsemanship. He was also involved in a protracted lawsuit with Karl Joel - who in the post-war years was still trying to collect his debt - a lawsuit which Neckermann fought bitterly for many years....When he died in 1991, his death was broadcast on all German radio stations.

What happened to Karl Joel? Karl Anton Joel and his wife Meta and their 19-year-old son Helmut barely made it out of Hitler's Europe, reaching the United States and New York City — via Switzerland, England, and Cuba — in 1942. Here, Karl Anton Joel started all over again from the Bronx with a very small hair-ribbon business.

Their son Helmut was now known as Howard Joel and was drafted into the U.S. Army.

In the latter part of the war, Howard Joel found himself driving a Jeep in Patton's 7th Army as they advanced in Germany. He drove past the now almost destroyed Joel factory in Nuremberg, with one single surviving smokestack with the word "JOEL" still clearly visible. Howard Joel took part in the liberation of the Dachau Nazi concentration - but by that time it was too late for most of Europe's Jews. Fully two thirds had been murdered, including many of Howard Joel's own family members in Auschwitz.

Howard Joel later married a Jewish girl from Brooklyn named Rosalind Nyman whom he'd met performing Gilbert & Sullivan. Their son Joseph Martin Joel was born May 9, 1949, in the Bronx, New York.

Howard Joel and Rosalind later divorced, and Howard Joel eventually moved back to Eastern Europe. His parents -Karl & Meta - also later moved back to Germany where they both passed away.

Howard Joel remarried in Europe and had a second son, Alexander Joel, who went on to becoming an acclaimed classical pianist and conductor in Europe.

The most interesting part of the story is this....One day, Howard Joel's American born son decided to track down his father who he hadn't seen since he was 10 years of age.....

He did so successfully, and for the first time met his half brother Alexander Joel and compared notes. Both loved music, both were excellent pianists, and both were involved professionally in the music field - only Alex Joel was on the classical side... and Joseph Martin Joel on the pop side of the industry.

Oh and I forgot to tell you Joseph Martin Joel's full name...it is William Joseph Martin Joel...and William later became Billy.....Yes, Alex's half brother and the son and grandson of Holocaust refugees was none other than Billy Joel...

When I first came across this story, a few points came to mind:

1. When you personalize a tragedy how telling it is.....As has been so truthfully noted: Six million Jews did not perish in the Holocaust....one Jew was murdered, then another, then another..... When we are confronted with the individual lives of the people who were affected by the Holocaust, only then does it cease to be a statistic, and begin to touch on the deepest, most personal level.

2. This story also teaches us about the enormity of the loss – how many exceptionally talented people like Billy Joel were murdered or were never born, and how many people, just like you and me, equally deserving of life, were murdered or were never born - because of the tragedy of the Holocaust....

But I would now like to move from the Holocaust to the second part of the story, something that touches on an aspect of our lives that each one of us should be grappling with at this time..

A decade after Billy Joel tracked down his father and brother, he came to Nuremberg to give a master class. His father and half-brother went along.

They went to the Jewish cemetery, where Billy Joel read the names of his family members written on the tombstones. He was in his 40's and it was the first time he ever wore a yarmulke in his life.

And here is the most interesting and perhaps saddest part of the story...

A meeting was organized between the son and the grandchildren of Joseph Neckermann and the grandchildren of Karl Joel....but the anticipated apology never happened.

Julia Neckermann simply said of the whole Nazi era: "Everybody just went along and didn't know what they were doing..."

"My father was more famous in Germany than Billy Joel is in this country," said Johannes Neckermann, Joseph's son. "He had six Olympic medals in horseback riding..

"I know the man my father was," he said. "He was honorable in this case. He tried to be helpful to Karl Joel. Not all Germans at that time were bad people."

Alex Joel said afterward: "I was not angry at them. Neither was Billy. They didn't do anything. We don't hold a grudge. But I would have liked them to say that what happened wasn't right."

"We sat and talked, but it was very awkward," Billy Joel said afterward

"I personally didn't hold the Neckermann descendants responsible. Though I do think a certain amount of rationalizing was going on." "I mean, after all — winter clothing [produced by slave labor in the Neckermann factories] for the Nazi armies outside Stalingrad . . .

"I kept thinking, my grandfather lost everything he had to your grandfather. I don't think they really understand what happened. There were certainly no apologies."

And that's when Billy Joel said the quote which I opened the sermon with: **"You have the same characteristics as your family did, whether you want to or not. What you do with all that.....is really what the difference is between you and who came before you."**

All it took was the for the grandchildren to say, "We are sorry for what happened.." and they couldn't find in their hearts to utter those simple words – even though the historical record is perfectly clear – and even though they were obviously not personally to blame...

But, this trait, this inability to apologize, does not only apply to the children and grandchildren of Nazi profiteers, it is all too commonplace in our world.. whether it's the Canadian government apologizing for their treatment of First Nations, or for their treatment of Chinese immigrants at the turn of the century..or for slights we may have committed in our own personal lives....

We find it so difficult to simply come clean and say: "I am sorry for the wrong I have committed or that was committed by my ancestors..."

So, why is it so hard to apologize???? Why are so many apologies half-hearted, and tentative, and full of wording like....."I am sorry *if* you took offense...." Or "I apologize for any offense that *may* have been caused" or similar half-hearted efforts...

Rachel Kadish, an award-winning author writes about these phenomena in a recent column:

"On Erev Rosh Hashanah, a friend once tapped me on the way to his seat in synagogue and whispered mid-stride, with a slight tone of mockery intimating that we were all a bit too sophisticated for this hokey tradition—Hey, if there's anything I've done this year to hurt ya, ya know... Wink.

He didn't stick around long enough to hear my reply. In fact there had been something rather large that he'd done, and he knew it. Which was probably what propelled him away from my seat before I'd opened my mouth. **Drive-by t'shuva....** I thought..."

So why are we so reluctant?

A) According to Kadish, some of us are just too "cool" too "hip" too "modern" or even "postmodern" to see any value in a ritual as ancient, and as seemingly simple that requires you to say "I am sorry" to another person... After all this is the 21st century, and isn't all that teshuva stuff a bit, as Kadish calls, "hokey"?

B) We are afraid of lowering our image in front of the other person... If we apologize, the other person will think we are weak, and inferior and lesser than them....

But in fact, the opposite is true...in most cases, you actually raise your image in the eyes of the other person. Whenever someone has apologized to me, my first thought is: What took you so long?? No really, my first thought is: "Well, that took guts, that took character.."

We are afraid we will appear to be weak, but in fact asking forgiveness and apologizing are signs of great strength and moral courage

A third reason for being reluctant to apologize can be... because
C) You are afraid of admitting your wrong even unto yourself... Why?
Because admitting your wrong makes you vulnerable to the harshest judge -
yourself..

Ah, but it's exactly the opposite... Once you recognize the misdeed to
yourself, and apologize for it, you will walk around with a new feeling of
freedom because you will have done deep down what you know is right..

It has been said that, "To ask for forgiveness is to set a prisoner free and
discover that the prisoner was you....."

Or as Joshua Liebman has said:

"We achieve inner health only through forgiveness - the forgiveness not only
of others but also of ourselves."

The second part that sometimes stops us from asking for forgiveness is the
part which is not always in your control, is how the person will respond to
your gesture:

Again Rachel Kadish:

"Forgiveness can be even more difficult to utter than apology. In all my
years of Jewish education and synagogue attendance, I've heard a great deal
about forgiveness without any discussion of exactly how we're to muster it.
The dangers of failure seem obvious—Charles Dickens spun entire novels
out of characters obsessed with some slight they could not forgive. Anger
shapes us. If I don't remember the wrongs done to me, I'm a fool. But if I
can't forgive, I risk twisting myself into a sculpture of anger—a tree
irrevocably bent by persistent winds.

I forgive you. It sounds moralistic, archaic. And worse: the words mean
giving up the right to pique, to martyrdom, to moral high ground. They mean
plain and simple, that I have to get over it—whatever it happens to be."

We think we are being strong when we will fail to forgive, but the opposite is true...

As Gandhi once said.....“The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.”

And forgiveness is not just meant to help the aggressor, it’s also meant to help the victim of the aggression..

Alan Paton echoes the same thought....“When a deep injury is done us, we never recover until we forgive.....”

Or as the famous quote goes, “Forgive or Relive..”

So as we enter the new year of 5768, each of us knows, deep down, to whom we owe apologies to, and who is need of our forgiveness....

And all we need to do is say a few simple words: Either “I apologize to you” or “I forgive you” . And most of us probably have to say both.....

And so my wish for all of us this evening is this: May we have the courage to admit to ourselves and others the wrongs we have committed, to forgive ourselves, and to ask forgiveness from those we have wronged – and may we also have the compassion and the wisdom to grant forgiveness to those who have been brave enough to ask it of ourselves...

It has been said that “Forgiveness may not change the past but it does enlarge the future...”

Let us hope and pray that in the 24 hours to come, the members of this shul will be both forgiving and forgiven – and that we will start the new year feeling healed, joyful and optimistic about the new beginning we have just achieved..

And to somewhat paraphrase Billy Joel, **this will be the difference between the person you were before you came to synagogue this evening and the, hopefully, better person who will leave tomorrow evening after Neila, following the final long sound of the shofar, signaling the end of Yom Kippur.**

I wish you all a gemar hatimah tova.. a sweet, peaceful, and fulfilling year, a year full of love, compassion and good deeds...Shana Tova..