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Yom Kippur Memories: Tears, Silence and Laughter

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One of Elie Wiesel's lesser-known novels is called The Forgotten. It is a haunting story about Elchanan Rosenbaum, a survivor of the Holocaust, and now, psychotherapist, living in New York. Rosenbaum, we are told, is suffering from Alzheimer's. Before his memory disappears, Elchanan, a widower, must finish telling the details of his Holocaust story to his son, Malkiel. But time is running out and Elchanan urges his son to visit the Carpathian village of Feherfalu, where Elachanan was born. There may yet remain in that small town some Jews who also survived, who may have known Elchanan as a child and young man. Perhaps they could help fill in some of the gaps in his father's story. There Malkiel might be able to retrieve remnants of his father's story, the details of which might disappear along with his memory.

When Malkiel arrives in the town, he meets Herschel, the gravedigger and caretaker of the Jewish Cemetery. It is Herschel who becomes the key to the stories of Rosenbaum and his family. In Herschel reside the stories of the lives and deaths of those in his community.

When the city was occupied by the Nazis, Herschel watched from afar. He witnessed the deportations and the murders. He cared for the bodies of those who had been killed. He buried rabbis and elders. "What people throw away", said Herschel, "what history rejects, what memory denies, I keep: the smile of the starving child, the tears of the dying mother , the silent prayers of the condemned and the cries of his friends. I gather them up and preserve them. In this city, I am memory".

Yom Kippur is inextricably connected to memory. But why, one might ask, do we set aside Yom Kippur as a "Memory Day" on the Jewish calendar? Is it not appropriate for everyday to be a *Yom Ha-Zikaron*? Should not recalling the past daily, honoring our history and reflecting on our stories and our heroes be a regular occurrence? In our daily prayers and holiday rituals, after

all, we do recall crucial and seminal moments in history. But Yom Kippur is different. And so, you ask, "*ma nishtana* / What makes Yom Kippur different? I offer two suggestions:

1. *Yom Kippur* is not about our national history or about the collective memory of the Jewish People. Yom Kippur is deeply personal. We use this day to reflect on our own lives, our own, personal triumphs, our successes and our shortcomings, our failures and our regrets. Like Elchanan Rosenbaum, the psychiatrist anxious to recover his story before it disappeared, Yom Kippur is about our stories, and as was the case with Rosenbaum, this process of remembering is exhausting. We are called upon to scrutinize the lives we are living. There is no pretending here. And we must leave nothing out of the mix. Our Sages remind us that on *Rosh HaShana* and *Yom Kippur*, what we remember, what we atone for, God forgets. What we forget or neglect, however, God remembers. Better we should remember than God.
2. Yom Kippur enjoins us to plot a different course, like changing the route on Waze. Today, we confront that which we have chosen to avoid, those things of which we are not proud. Today we resolve to rectify and re-set the course of our lives so that we can do better in the coming year.

To invoke Herschel the gravedigger's language, on this day we are memory.

Perhaps more than ever before, I feel the weight and richness of memory today. Today I have memories of the past 30 years during which I have led High Holiday services. My personal memories of my years as your rabbi, are filled with moments of joy and sorrow, of successes and failures and, mostly, of my interactions with those who are here, in person or virtually, today.

My sermon today, and those I delivered on *Rosh Hashana*, began by revisiting High Holiday sermons I have delivered over the years. Reading them as part of my preparations has directed my thinking to topics and themes I have addressed in the past. Some of those sermons have touched you deeply. This I know because you told me so. Others were personally meaningful for me. Those were more difficult to write, requiring that I lay bare feelings and unearth

memories about which I rarely speak. Those were the sermons which had meaning beyond the words, referencing moments in which words did not, and could not suffice.

As I have been reading some of those sermons, I did not always remember writing the words, but I did recall the process of trying to describe the moments in which words alone seemed woefully insufficient, inadequate or superfluous. Some of those moments and memories were the most meaningful and most impactful. I share three of those memories today: memories of tears, memories of silence and memories of laughter.

Tears

There is a beautiful and poignant midrash which describes the moment of the *'Akeda,* the moment when Abraham, knife in hand, was ready to offer to God his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. According to the Torah reading on *Rosh HaShana*, it was a voice from heaven which calls to Abraham: Abraham, Abraham do not hurt the child (Gen. 22:11-12). The Midrash, however, paints a different picture: The angels in heaven assembled to watch the sacrifice, horrified and astounded that Abraham would sacrifice his own son. And as he prepared for the sacrifice, the angels are crying. According to this midrash, Abraham's knife was on the way down toward the neck of Isaac, when the tears of the angels fell upon the knife, melting the blade as it fell, thus preventing the sacrifice.

This midrash is not so much about *akedat Yitzchak*. This is a midrash about the power of tears, power that was recognized thousands of years ago.

I once gave a sermon in which I referred to the very ancient notion of a lachrymatory bottle and the practice of collecting our tears. In fact, we read in the Psalms (56:8) that God put the tears of King David in a bottle. Tears, you see, are powerful.

Several years ago, I led a congregational trip to Eastern Europe. It was not an easy decision for me to promote and participate on this trip. For many years, I had resisted traveling to Eastern Europe, and to Poland, in particular. I avoided Eastern Europe explaining that I am angry enough about the Shoah. Do I really want to visit a place only to become angrier?! But I reconsidered. I reminded myself that some of my family, shall we say, are now "permanent

residents" of that country and by visiting Auschwitz, therefore, I would be honoring the memory of my relatives and millions of relatives of other people. It turns out that my relatives were killed before making it to any death camp. But that is a different story.

I was numbed by the experience of walking through the gates of Auschwitz. There was something strangely and frighteningly familiar about the place, as if I had been there before. I had been correct about Auschwitz's effect on me, feelings of anger rising within me, even more than feelings of sadness.

At the far end of the Auschwitz / Birkenau Camps there are memorial plaques, written in every language spoken by those who were interred there. Placed there by the government of Poland, those plaques explained in the vaguest and most sanitized language, that in this place, many innocent people died at the hands of the German Nazis. Certainly, the Polish People had nothing to do with it. They have been, it seems, exonerated unilaterally by the current Polish government. This accounts for the lack of reference to the role of the Polish People being erased and unmentioned. But it was the lack of explicit reference to Jews, as the primary focus of Auschwitz, the singular pre-occupation of the Nazi mind, which had been excised from the story and which, to me, was most disturbing. As we left Auschwitz, I felt that anticipated anger rising within me yet again.

I had been prepared for Auschwitz. Not so with Theresienstadt. Theresienstadt was a death camp created in an existing army camp. But this camp, also served as a kind of Nazi theatre of the absurd, which staged musical concerts and plays for visiting dignitaries and, most notably, Red Cross officials, to provide the illusion that the prisoners were well treated.

We saw the barracks and the dining facilities. It was not possible to properly care for the number of people interred, but the Red Cross missed that equation, or overlooked that fact, as they were treated to delicious meals and to musical concerts performed by Jewish prisoners. We toured the "make-believe" clinic which included ovens for prisoners to be incinerated. Perhaps that room was not on the Red Cross' tour of the camp, for the report they issued spoke in glowing terms about the conditions there.

In a way, I found this harder to take than Auschwitz. Auschwitz was a death camp. There was no hiding what it was, and the Nazis made no attempt to pretend that it was not what it was. But Theresienstadt was a death camp paraded as a summer camp. The ultimate sleight of hand. And as we stood there, in the adjacent cemetery, my tears, for the first time, flowed. Mine were tears of anger with the Poles. Mine were tears of frustration with the world, and tears of mourning. During the High Holidays that year, I recalled this story and, once again could not fight back the tears. At first, I tried to stifle them, and then I gave up, because there was no way to express to you what I felt other than through tears.

I recall, as well, the tears we have shed together. Moments of tragedy are always difficult, but what I have learned over time is that tragedies are not always identifiable from the outside. My rabbinic position has given me the opportunity to be with you when your tears have flowed, tears which others have not seen and, had they seen them, may not have understood. But I understood, and have come to understand, as well, that sharing pain and tears with you makes the burden of sorrow more bearable and, in the process, connects us more closely. Like the tears of the angels, our tears have power. More than words spoken, today I remember the tears which, at times could melt the sword, at times, to express times relentless pain.

Silence

The story of silence is the story of Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur our Torah reading outlines the ancient rituals of that day's observances and sacrifices. But it is what occurs in the first few words of the reading, before we read of the day's rituals, that the theme of silence is raised.

Preparing for their induction into the Priesthood, Nadav and Avihu, the sons of the *Kohen Gadol*, Aaron, approach the altar. Aaron, the proud father is confident that, one day, his sons would ascend to the role of High Priest, when he was ready to step down, from the post he held for the past forty years. The plan, though set in Aaron's mind, would never come to pass. As the father watches his sons, a fire descends from the heavens and instantly consumes the two boys. But it is what we are told of Aaron in that moment of horror and violence which is both enigmatic and instructive. For at that moment, the Torah tells us: "*Va'Yidom /* he was silent".

In the face of an unimaginable tragedy, the loss of two of his sons, has not Aaron an expression of grief? An acknowledgement of pain? A cry of "Why?", shouted to the heavens for all to hear. But, no, there is only silence: The silence of pain, too heavy to carry, too difficult to articulate, and a silence, according to Rashi, too dangerous to break. For were he to speak, suggests Rashi, what might emerge from his mouth would be words of blasphemy, words of unfiltered anger.

Aaron knew two things at that moment: 1. No words could express his anger and disbelief.

2. When words fail, for whatever reason, silence can be potent. Yes, silence can be empty, defined as the absence of any sound. But there is also a silence of power. A moment to formulate a thought, a voiceless glance exchanged between lovers, the unspoken reassurance which says to us, "I am right here", when no words will suffice. Silence for me has provided for me moments of reflection, moments of escape and moments of gratitude.

There is a prayer we read silently each time we recite the Amidah. It begins with the words *"Modim anachnu lach*". Although the Hazzan may chant the words, there is always a second paragraph, printed adjacent to the one the Cantor chants, always read silently. Never out loud. The first word of each paragraph is *Modim* / we thank you, in the first -person plural form. Generally, we understand this to mean, "We, those in this congregation, we who are here today, express our gratitude to You, God". But here, a silent prayer can become a deeply personal expression.

Rabbi Jack Bloom, in his study of the American rabbinate, Symbolic Exemplar, comments on this prayer from the point of view of a rabbi. His perspective resonated with me. He suggests that the plural form of the prayer refers "not to 'all of us', but to 'all of me'"(p. 170), to my diverse selves". This prayer invokes those "selves" that are hidden and those that are public and open for scrutiny. Some of our "selves" are private, residing in a domain to which we alone have access. Some of our "selves" express, in silence, our own anger and disappointment and our desires to be fulfilled. Our silence reflects our inability to explain and inspire those we seek to touch. This prayer recalls the unspoken prayers of joy and blessing, the prayers recited in silence and with tears. And, like Aaron the High Priest, this is the silence that exists, in a moment of tragedy, when language fails us.

There is a beautiful midrash (*Shmot Rabbah*)which speaks of the giving of the Torah to Moses and the Children of Israel at Sinai. Says the midrash, "when the Torah was given, there was silence in the world: no cow mooed, no dog barked, no birds tweeted" and in the silence of the world, God's voice could be heard. Perhaps it is simply a matter of creating silence, within and without, removing the distractions of noises, including cellphones and tweet, so that we can here God's voice. Perhaps this midrash is suggesting that the Voice of God is always speaking to us, as it did at Sinai. We are just too distracted by background noises to hear that voice, a voice emerging from silence to silence.

Silence can be difficult to endure. It makes us uncomfortable. We feel pulled to speak, to make a sound, to break the silence. Why is that? Perhaps it is because it is in silence in which truth and integrity reside. There is no pretending, no lying, in silence. That was Aaron's silence.

Silence is its own language. In silence we can express humility. In silence we can express our gratitude for the joy which we have no right to expect. We have been the beneficiaries of more joy and received more blessing than we could or should have hoped for, and we have lived to witness future generations unfolding before us. It is in these moments of joy and of sorrow, moments we have shared, that the silence speaks and expresses what we cannot put into words. It is the silence, our wordless, soundless presence, which has been most meaningful to each other and which I shall always cherish.

Today, I remember silence.

Laughter

And today, I remember laughter. I am glad to say that we have laughed together. When I arrived thirty years ago, I polled my colleagues and scoured my files to find jokes. But jokes are of limited value to rabbis. In fact, sometimes, laughter can distract us, and cause us to miss, the deeper point being made.

I recall, shortly after my first High Holidays season here, I was in the supermarket, picking up some things for dinner at Shoprite. For those who arrived familiar with only Genuardi's or Giant, those markets are newcomers to Wynnewood. In the beginning, Shop and Bag, later

Shoprite, occupied the space we call Old Navy. So, there I was, in front of the milk and cottage cheese, deciding between 1%, 2% and 4%, when a woman approached. She introduced herself as a member and wanted me to know how much she enjoyed services, especially the sermons. I responded, "Thank you so much" and, after a few pleasantries I asked, "By the way, was there a sermon which you liked better than the others". "Oh, yes", she replied, "I loved the one about the talking bird".

That woman was not aware of two important bits of information. First, I did not tell that joke in connection to a sermon. It was a joke that came to me on the spot and seemed to be appropriate at the time to some matter or other that I was explaining. (And, I confess, to this day, I still cannot figure out the context in which the joke about a talking bird was connected, unless it was connected to Noah's Ark). Second, the woman taught me an invaluable lesson about laughter and the rabbinate: People want to laugh. Laughing makes all of us feel better. After all, as a psychologist / friend pointed out to me, one cannot simultaneously laugh and be depressed. Depression and laughter cannot co-exist. And, as you may know, I love to laugh, and I believe that laughter is very Jewish. I take laughter quite seriously.

In the Torah reading on Rosh HaShana, laughter figures prominently. It is Sara, the Matriarch of the Jewish People, who laughs first. When informed by visiting angels that she will bear a son in her old age, she laughs, perhaps mockingly, perhaps in disbelief that a woman, approaching her ninetieth birthday, would be able to get pregnant, she laughed. And, when she gave birth, she named her newborn son, Laughter / Yitzchak. When Yitzchak was a child, he was teased by his older brother, Yishma'el. Yishma'el was "*mitzachek* / playing around", from the root that means laughter, with Isaac.

But the laughter I cherish is neither one of mocking nor of teasing. I try to find reasons to laugh and opportunities for humorous interpretations as ways of looking at the world. I have often said about Judaism that, if you are not having fun being Jewish, you are not doing it correctly.

Life should be lived seriously. But laughter should be a serious component in our lives. If one realizes that they have not been laughing much, I tell them to come to one of our Shabbat services. Not that our services are laughing affairs, not that those who come are interested in

services which are not serious or comedy routines. They are not. A good joke can make us laugh. But jokes do not help us find humor, delight and joy in the world. It is the laughter of joy that I have tried to insert into our services.

In the Talmud (*Makkot* 24b) we read of four rabbis who are ascending to Jerusalem in the wake of the destruction of the Temple, in the year 70 CE. When they arrive at Mt. Scopus, which overlooks the city, they rend their garments as a sign of mourning, viewing their beloved Temple in ruins. As they are approaching the Temple Mount, however, they spy a fox scampering away from the destroyed area of the Holy of Holies. Three of the rabbis begin to weep, but Rabbi Akiba bursts out in laughter. The other three ask Akiba, "Why are you laughing?" Akiba responds by asking, "Why are you crying?". The three explain that they are crying because they see that the prophecy of Micah (Micah 3:12) has come to pass: "Zion shall be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruin". But Akiba chooses a hopeful prophecy, laughing as he quotes the Prophet Zechariah (Zech: 8:4), "There shall yet be old men and women in the squares of Jerusalem, each with a staff in his hand…and the streets of the city shall be crowded with boys and girls playing".

Reviewing my sermons from the last thirty High Holidays, I found a few jokes. Some were funny. Others…not so much. It is always challenging to find jokes that are both funny and appropriate. But what I hope we have found together is not a running series of jokes, but a series of joyful experiences: Holidays celebrated with joy, moments punctuated by laughter and, often in the face of problems and challenges, like Rabbi Akiba, we have been able to find hope.

Yom Kippur is an observance which requires serious introspection and contemplation. To again borrow the words of Herschel the gravedigger, today we are memory. But I end with memories of joy and laughter, because that is the way we must end Yom Kippur and begin a new year and, for me, a new chapter of my life:

> May this new year bring us tears of joy when words do not suffice.
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> May each of us find within ourselves the silence and peace which come with the satisfaction and confidence of a life well-lived.

And at the beginning of this new year, with a clean slate and an open heart, may our year be filled with joy, humor, and laughter as we peer into the future and pray with optimism, hope, and joy.

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