

## High Holy Day Morning Sermon 2015

In late August, early September, many Jewish leaders have nightmares. They are awoken in the middle of the night – heads swimming with sermon ideas and topics, items that have been left off the checklist, and genuine stress. I fully expected this for myself as a newly ordained Rabbi at a congregation 3 times the size of the congregation I grew up in. However, instead of joining in with my colleagues in the nightmares before the High Holy Days, I was living one.

Instead of preparing for the High Holy Days, I was preparing for my father's funeral. Instead of thinking about High Holy Day checklists, I was thinking about funeral and *shiva* checklists. My head wasn't swimming with sermon ideas and topics, it was flooded with grief, shock, and anger. I was surrounded by thousands of people – both near and far – who expressed their condolences, bought and prepared food, sent cards, made donations, and called. But still, I felt abandoned. Yes, I lost my father unexpectedly, but I felt as if I lost another father. *Avinu Malkeinu*. I was dreading High Holy Days and saying those words in front of each one of you as we prayed to God, thanked God, and addressed God. How could I lead you in these sentiments when I felt totally abandoned by Adonai? I decided to be honest and let you know that God and I are in a fight. I'm angry. I'm confused. I feel abandoned and kicked to the curb. So, God, we're in a fight. This isn't just a silly fight or one where I can just use "forgive and forget" as a mantra to remind me that it doesn't matter. Because, it does. How do I forgive and forget when it comes to God? How are any of us supposed to do that?

During the High Holy Days, we are to focus on repentance and make amends with anyone whom we've harmed. We look inside ourselves, find the mistakes we've made in the past year, and look to correct them in the coming year. We seek out people whom we need to apologize to and do so.... But it's not that simple. The Rabbis recognize the complexity of forgiveness and explain that there are actually three different kinds.

*Mechila* is an easy form of forgiveness. It is a focus on the fact that the matter is done. The issue is over. It is in the past. When a child grabs a toy out of another's hand, we tell them to go apologize. Most of the time the child goes near the other one and mumbles a "sorry" without looking in their direction. Then they run off and continue playing elsewhere. *Mechila*, however, has more depth than that. The Rabbis express that there needs to be a distinct inclusion of sincerity on the part of the offender in order to gain forgiveness. The second form of forgiveness is *selicha*. This has a focus on empathy, an act of the heart. The offender acknowledges the hurt that they caused and asks for forgiveness. *Selicha* can also allow the offended to grant forgiveness for the sole recognition that the offender is human too. Either way, there is an understanding of human flaws and granting forgiveness from the heart. The third form of forgiveness is *kappara*, atonement, or *t'horah*, purification. This one can only be granted by God. It is a total forgiveness acknowledged only when we truly repent.

The distinctions make sense, but the last category of *kappara* or *t'horah*, irks me. It makes me want to yell: Well, thanks God, for having the ability to forgive me, but do I get the opportunity to forgive You? Do you even care if I forgive You? As I let the immediate anger subside, my mind seeks an answer to my questions. In May, I was in New York with Rabbi Nathan, Cantor Berlin, and dozens of other Cantors and Rabbis learning about our new Machzor, *Mishkan HaNefesh*. I decided to attend a session on the *shofar* service. In that session, one of the facilitators pointed out that in the second section of the Shofar service, *Zichronot*, God comes to us. This was not just us asking God to remember us, our loved ones, and/or our good behavior. Instead, in the *Zichronot* section, God comes to us to remember us. As *Mishkan HaNefesh* states, here is where "we discover God's attentive remembrance of every human being; and here we are encouraged to notice God's immanent and caring presence in our lives." (RH 262)

While this section of the shofar service expresses that God comes to us to remember us, it also seems to let God come to seek forgiveness. God is engaging in dialogue with each one of us. It gives us the opportunity to share some of the events in the past year that we have attributed to God and want God to not only remember, but ask for our forgiveness for. Even if God isn't directly asking for forgiveness, I know I need to engage in a conversation in order for me to grant forgiveness.

God, if You need to come to remember us, does that mean that You have had lapses in Your memory? Did You forget us? Because, sometimes, it sure feels like it.

These questions make it seem as if God forgets and recalls, in the same way we do. But many people do not agree with this. Rabbi Linda Hirschhorn clarifies that "the language of 'remembrance' describes our experience of God's compassion and care." (Hirschhorn, "Forgiveness", 5767) So, then, God can't forget or have lapses in memory, but we can really only comprehend that God remembers us when we feel that love and care. During the High Holy Days, we have a designated section to give God the opportunity to show concern for us. It could be that by just having the *Zichronot* section marked as a time when God comes to us, God is engaging us in dialogue and showing that we are being given consideration. Then I will let God come to me, not *just* during *Zichronot*, to let me share my feelings, doubts, and concerns.

I can share my thoughts with God and maybe even forgive God in time, but am I supposed to forget the things that have happened to me and forget that God had a hand in them? If God doesn't forget us or the things we've done even if we've been granted forgiveness, am I? I'm definitely not going to forget my father or the feelings that his death continue to give me. I really am not sure that I can "forgive and forget." In a sermon given by Rabbi Mark S. Diamond, he explains this concept. "[The High Holy Days are days] of forgiving. As for forgetting, well, that's a different story all together. We would like to think that forgiving and forgetting goes hand in hand. When we apologize to someone for something we've done, we hope to hear that person utter the words: 'Don't worry, I've forgotten all about it.' 'I've forgotten all about it.' An interesting phrase, but one that makes little sense in this context. If you've really forgotten about something, then you would have absolutely no idea why someone is apologizing to you. In reality, you have not forgotten the insult, the injury, the words or actions that hurt you in the first place. 'I've forgotten all about it' really means, 'I haven't forgotten, but I have forgiven.'" (Diamond, "A Tribute to My Teachers")

God isn't going to forget the pain I feel and the anger I have and neither will I. "Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future." These words of Louis B. Smedes, a professor of theology, have helped me. I do feel that by engaging in conversation with God, I can get to a place where our mutual forgiveness can lend itself to a better understanding of one another and fuel our relationship into something more positive. So when I get to the point of being ready for forgiveness, I won't forget, but I will try to move forward.

It may not be at a brisk pace, it definitely won't be at a run, and it might even be a crawl in order for me to get to a place of true forgiveness and a feeling of being able to move forward, but the beauty is that it will happen. Everyone has their own pace, but we are all on a journey – searching for answers, consideration, and love. As much as the *Zichronot* section of the shofar service lends itself to this, the entire shofar service has a role in this process. Rabbi Arthur Green explains that "the shofar sound represents prayer beyond words, an intensity of longing that can be articulated only in a wordless shout. But the order of the sounds, according to one old interpretation, contains the message in quite explicit terms. Each series of shofar blasts begin with *teki'ah*, a whole sound. It is followed by *shevarim*, a tripartite broken sound whose very name means 'breakings.' 'I started off whole,' the shofar speech

says, 'and I became broken.' Then follows *teru'ah*, promising wholeness once more. The shofar cries out...'I was whole, I was broken, even smashed to bits, but I shall be whole again!'" (Green, *Seek My Face*, 169) Eventually, we will move forward. Even when we feel shattered and unfixable, we can be put back together. This is not to say the holes in our hearts will be mended, because they won't. Instead, we will become a new form of wholeness. Just as a shofar blower's *teki'ah* can never be the exact same as another, it still is showing wholeness.

During the High Holy Days we are to strive for that completeness as we cleanse ourselves of the mistakes that cloud our hearts and minds. We understand that there are different types of forgiveness; *mechila*, *selicha*, and *kappara* or *t'horah*. We learn that forgiving doesn't mean forgetting and forgetting doesn't mean forgiving. And, most of all, we uncover these discoveries while in conversation with God. Asking God the tough questions and sharing our deepest thoughts. This is what draws us to God and allows us to have a relationship. Sure, I'm in a fight with God right now, but by sharing my disdain, pain and feelings of abandonment, I am already strengthening my relationship with God.

Be honest with yourself. Look at the words on the page before you and disagree with them. Lose yourself in the meditations, the study texts, and the notes in our *machzor* – you'll catch up to the page we're all on when you are ready. Find meaning in the prayers and blessings, don't just let the words fall out of your mouth solely because "you are supposed to," but because you want to. Love God, despise God. Question God's presence in your life. Through all of that, each of us has the ability to develop our relationship with God, letting it grow in the way that it needs to for us right now. Our prayers give us that opportunity and now we need to seize it.

Open your eyes. Look forward. What do you see? Besides the back of someone's head, my face, the ark, there is something else. There is a tiny glow that brings us back to the center – the *Ner Tamid*; a reminder that God is here. Its dim glow is a beacon of hope and love. It gives us a direction and a place to look towards. The *Ner Tamid* casts its faint light in every direction and allows us to see what has come before us, what is in front of us, and what we are surrounded by. At the same time, that light allows God to see us. To see that we are here today in front of this ark. We are discovering meaning in the words, the music, the *shofar* blasts. We are here as a community that joins in prayer, *Simchas*, and times of sorrow. God is here. God is with us. We may not feel it today or tomorrow. But we may feel it in a week, a month, a year. But that *Ner Tamid* is still glowing even when our own relationship with God may flicker from time to time.

My relationship with God is flickering precariously right now. It seems as if the flame is about to go out. But it won't. I won't let it. God won't let it. My dad won't let it. Even in death, my dad's flame did not go out. Instead, it was passed on to me and to my family giving our own flames a little strength. My father may not have been the strongest person emotionally, mentally, or physically, but I gained strength from him. I learned what undying love is. I learned how maintaining a sense of humor can make the world seem brighter. I learned how to care deeply and fully. I learned to ask questions, even to God. I learned to stand up for what I believe in and to help those in need. So, God, while we are in a fight, I want to thank You for giving me my father for nearly 27 incredible, fulfilling years. I want to thank You for allowing my father to live on in me and my family. I'm not ready to forgive You, but in sharing my feelings, questions, and doubts, I feel that I have found answers that bring me closer to You. And for right now, I call that good.

May each one of us find our own way of developing a relationship with God in a way that brings us a "Shana Tova" – a good year. L'Shana Tova.