

I'm Sorry

We have gathered on this holiest night of the year to contemplate what is most essential. In the immortal words of the Little Prince, “What is essential is invisible to the eye” the fox teaches him, “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly.” It is not easy to see with the heart, we are very visual; our eyes dominate our other senses. We are so busy watching the world that often we miss that which is essential. And so on Yom Kippur we fast and pray, we ignore our physical needs so that we can focus for once on our higher needs, our spiritual needs; that which we manage to ignore, to run from, to be too busy for the rest of the year. Shabbat after Shabbat has come and gone and we have failed to stop and appreciate its beauty, its power; but today, we have stopped, we have put our lives on hold and we are here. Can we overcome the assault on our senses of all the people here today, of all the words in Mahzor, all the distractions? Can we for a moment focus on what is essential and see with our hearts? It’s not about looking around, it’s about looking in. When you truly and honestly take stock are you content with what you see?

We live in a world filled with anger and hostility; much of it caused by hatred and intolerance. If we look at the various conflicts around the globe it

is often the result of two groups that cannot manage to see the validity of the other's position. They see themselves as right and the other as wrong. Look at Iraq – Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds unwilling or unable to peacefully live together; fighting, killing, hating each other. We send American troops there to impose order, to establish democracy, but what we really do is give them a common enemy to hate and attack. Democracy can't be imposed, it must be embraced and you can only do that if you are willing to peacefully coexist. Here in this country we have so many problems, we try to resolve them, we fight it out in the political arena; we talk, we debate, we discuss and we vote. We can even agree to disagree, we can go to court and fight with more words, but when we begin to kill those with whom we disagree, then democracy has lost. We need government leaders who can see with their hearts rather than just with their eyes.

Intolerance can also be devastating for a community. We who pray here today are a part of the Jewish community; a community not at war, but often not harmonious. Why? Because often we are intolerant of other views and perspectives. We criticize those who are less observant for their lack of commitment and involvement; we criticize those who are more observant for their lack of flexibility. We spend too much time criticizing and not enough

appreciating our diversity and our differences. We treat surrounding synagogues as competitors for members, rather than as partners in serving the Jewish community.

We who are here also make up the Shomrei Torah community. We are a community with all of our warts, all of our failings, all of our differences. Too often we fight amongst ourselves, criticize each other and see only the flaws of the others. We need to look with our hearts and realize that we are all working towards the same goal – the goal of any synagogue – to be a place where Jews can come to seek God, to pray together; to be a place to study Torah and seek the wisdom of our tradition and our ancestors and to be a place where we jointly engage in mitzvot. Too often we are caught up in proving that we are right and someone else is wrong, but it's not about right and wrong; it's about accepting our differences and working together to be Jews. We need to stop looking for faults, for they are many; rather we need to look for that which is essential in the other.

The same issue is central to our interpersonal relationships as well. When we interact with others be they family, friends, co-workers, employees or others do we see their faults and shortcomings? Do we try and show them

that we are right and they are wrong? The challenge is to not judge others, but to accept them as they are, to embrace our differences and the vast variety of possibilities inherent in life. Judaism challenges us to look at life cooperatively rather than competitively. It is a change from the perspective of most Americans, but a challenge worth taking. Often we don't mean to be competitive with those that we most care about, but it comes so naturally that we do it without even thinking about it. We are quick to criticize, to offer a "better" solution. And even when we realize what it is that we are doing, it is not so easy to back down and admit that we've made a mistake. There is a famous story told about General George Patton. He was at a dinner party and a waiter brought him a paper cup with wine in it, Patton thought that it was coffee and so put cream and sugar in the cup. The waiter debated with himself, should he say something to the great General? He informed Patton that it was wine in the cup. Rather than admit he'd made a mistake Patton replied that was the way he liked his wine and proceeded to drink it.

It's not easy to admit that we make mistakes and even harder to apologize. I'm sorry are not words that spring to our lips even when we are wrong. In the Avoda service that will be recited at musaf, we recreate the setting of the

Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur as found in the Torah. He would say, “Hatati” “I have sinned” and only after he had confessed his own sins would he then go on to offer expiation for his fellow Kohanim and then finally for all the People Israel. The Kohen Gadol taught the people, by his example that you have to be able to say I was wrong and I am sorry. It is not easy to do.

Rabbi Jack Riemer relates a story that he heard from the famous author Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. He was giving a lecture to some audience somewhere about the need to apologize when you do wrong, and he brought one of his children along with him to the lecture. On the way home from the lecture, his child said: “Dad, whenever we do something wrong, you always make us say we’re sorry. How come when you do something wrong to us, you never apologize?”

Rabbi Telushkin said that those words really hit home with him. They shook him and shocked him and shamed him, because he realized that they were true. Whenever his children did something bad in public, he always made them apologize---even if it was embarrassing for them to do so. But when he did something wrong to them, he never apologized---perhaps because he thought that apologizing was a sign of weakness. The truth is that apologizing is a sign of strength, because only a big person has the moral character that it takes to apologize. If I were to ask my children they would give the same response as Rabbi Telushkin’s, that I don’t apologize to them when I do something wrong. It is not easy to apologize, especially to those

closest to us, who most deserve to hear those words from us. I know that it is an area where I need to improve, but I suspect that I am not alone.

One of the most troubling passages in the Torah is when God tells Moshe that he will not be permitted to enter the Promised Land. Every commentator asks what is it that Moshe did to deserve this punishment. Rashi points that by striking the rock rather than speaking to it the greatness of the miracle was diminished, but I have to say that water from a struck rock still seem miraculous. Ramban reads the verse prior to the striking of the rock where Moshe says, “Shall we get water for you out of this rock” making it seem that he did the miracle rather than God. But again, this is a stretch after 40 years in the desert everyone knew that Moshe was God’s man not an independent contractor. Ibn Ezra criticizes Moshe for needing to be told to work a miracle rather than having faith that God would provide.

There is a midrash that says Moshe was sitting shiva for Miriam when the people came to complain about the lack of water. As you may recall Miriam was always associated with water – she was the one who stayed with Moshe at the river Nile; she was the one who led the women in song and dance at the splitting of the sea. There was a tradition that well of spring water followed her in the desert and the reason the people are complaining is that after her death, the well dried up. So the people interrupted his shiva to complain. Maimonides argues that Moshe was punished for loosing his temper that he called the people “rebels” and he struck the rock in anger. True the people exasperated him, but if you had to deal with them you might loose it from time to time as well, still not a punishable offence in my book.

There is a modern explanation I heard from Rabbi Riemer who was sharing the insight of another rabbi that says the sin of Moshe was not disobeying the command to speak to the rock instead of hitting it, and the sin was not losing his temper and berating the people, and the sin was not lashing out at them because he was hurting inside. The sin of Moshe was not apologizing!

A person is allowed to lose his temper. Everyone does at some time in his life. Moshe was only human. And a person is allowed to misunderstand instructions. Everyone does. And Moshe was only human. He hit the rock instead of speaking to it; that's understandable. It is easy to slip up and not get instructions exactly right. Don't we all do that sometimes? The sin of Moshe was not doing something wrong. The sin of Moshe was in not apologizing for what he did wrong. It was for this that he was fired.

He points out that there have been many political leaders who have strayed down this path. One of the most famous examples is Richard Nixon. There is no question that he was dishonest and dishonorable, but if he had said to the country, "I was wrong. I'm terribly sorry. It'll never happen again." He might not have been impeached. He might have been forgiven and the country would have gone on with its business. Post 9/11 President Bush had very high approval ratings, following the war in Iraq, his popularity plummeted. You may be one who thought that the war was justified or you may be one who thinks that we have no business in Iraq either way, it is clear that many mistakes have been made in the way that we have conducted the war in Iraq. Never once has President Bush said, "I made a mistake. I was wrong. I'm sorry." Perhaps, if he had his approval ratings would be

higher than they are now. We could list many more examples, but suffice it to say that if Moshe was the first political leader to fail to apologize, he certainly was not the last. However, we don't have political leaders here with us today and this is not about them, it is about us.

There is a midrash about Cain and Adam. If you recall after the episode with the serpent Adam & Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden and after Cain kills his brother Abel, God condemns him to be a ceaseless wanderer. When they meet Adam asks Cain how it is that his sin was worse, but his punishment less severe. Cain replies to his father that he did teshuva for his wrong and said he was sorry. Adam says, "If only I had known how powerful apologies are..."

On this holiest of days, we need to remember the importance of admitting our mistakes, of saying I'm sorry to the people we hurt. We need to do our best to see the good in people and not just their faults. We need to be less critical and more forgiving. For that is what Yom Kippur is all about – forgiveness. We want God to forgive us our sins, so we had better be ready to forgive others their sins, their errors, their mistakes. For after all, we are all human and therefore fallible and we will make mistakes, it is part of being human. Our challenge is to learn from our mistakes.

I will do my part to forgive and not hold a grudge against anyone who has hurt or wronged me. I know that I have made mistakes and that I have hurt, upset and angered people sitting in this room. I am sorry and I hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me.