



Yom Kippur 2017

“FORGIVENESS”

by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

In the beginning, I toiled in the vineyards of Reform Judaism. This was only natural. My great-grandfather had been president of Temple Emanuel on Fifth Avenue, my father was president of our suburban Reform temple in Scarsdale, and, after dropping out of Sunday School, foregoing a bar mitzvah, and then returning for confirmation, I was the first graduate of that congregation to go into the rabbinate. At the time I had not heard of Humanistic Judaism nor am I sure I would have considered it an option.

That, of course, was not part of the original plan. I was supposed to imbibe the proud stories of my family history and Jewish heritage, I was supposed to embrace and celebrate my Jewish identity and especially commit myself to the value of social justice, and maybe even become president of a congregation myself some day. That, *dayenu*, would have been more than enough. My parents never aspired in their wildest dreams that I'd become a rabbi. It was, to put it mildly, maybe a bit too Jewish for their tastes, and what kind of job is that for a nice Jewish girl or boy, but they eventually came around.

It was particularly challenging for my mother because her mother had died when she was thirteen and attending any kind of temple or synagogue evoked sadness for her, which she did not want to display in public. So she stayed home alone and listened to the Temple Emanuel services on WQXR when my father and I went off to temple. In order to prepare herself to attend my ordination, she needed to get some deconditioning practice so she and my father went to a few Shabbat services locally. It is quite impressive what I put her through! My father, on the other hand, had been an assimilated Jew from Berlin until the rise of Hitler when he and his grandfather started to attend services and my father had a bar mitzvah in 1934. I think he saw my trajectory as a positive statement and he admired my decision. In later years, he became a proud member of the City Congregation and looked forward to attending services with us.

As I began thinking this past spring about these final High Holiday observances that I will lead here, I thought back on the first ones I led as a student rabbi and later as a young ordained rabbi.

I immediately recalled a passage in the old Union Prayer Book, published in 1945, that always gave me pause. I went back to my old alma mater downtown to find the old prayerbook so I could get the correct quote.

The reading is called “The Rabbi’s Prayer” and, looking back, it is hard to imagine that I ever mouthed these words. In fact, it a bit hard to keep a straight face even as I share them with you now:

Father of mercies, in awe and deep humility, I stand before Thee on this Atonement Eve. In the midst of Thy people who look to me to lead them I approach the holy ark. I have erred and sinned. Forgive me, I pray Thee. May my people not be put to shame because of me nor I because of them.

In this solemn moment, O God, I lift up mine eyes unto Thee. Help me in the great task to which I have dedicated my life. Show me Thy way and teach me to lead Thy children closer to thee. Help me to find the way to their hearts that I may win them for Thy service.

Heavenly Father, let me hear Thy voice saying: Be strong and of good courage. Give me strength, give me understanding, give me faith, for Thou alone art my hope, O God, my Rock and my Redeemer.

And the congregation is then cued to say: Amen.

Now where do we begin? Let me make a few observations:

First, it is good that rabbis are forced to confess that they are human and make mistakes. Some, like politicians, don't know how to ask forgiveness. And putting out blanket statements like, "In case I offended anyone, I'm sorry" or "Let me pay back my \$50,000 for airplane tickets" doesn't cut it. It doesn't take responsibility for specific hurts that one causes, acts of omission and commission alike. ["Health Secretary Tom Price Resigns After Drawing Ire for Chartered Flights," by Peter Baker, Glenn Thrush, and Maggie Habermann, The New York Times, Sept. 29, 2017.]

Second, if rabbis are, indeed, regular humans who are flawed, then members must figure out how to accept those imperfections. However, when rabbis are placed high on a pedestal of moral behavior and held to a higher standard than everyone else, then any minor infraction that we might quickly forgive in another, is blown out of proportion and can be crippling. Congregants, in turn, must ask forgiveness of their rabbis for their unrealistic expectations.

Third, what's with all the anticipated shame and embarrassment? "May my people not be put to shame because of me nor I because of them." What a heavy load!

But then again, this mentality seems wired into our DNA. We even have a Yiddish phrase for it. "A shanda for the goyim" literally means "a shame in front of the nations." It refers to a Jew, who dishonors Jews by not only doing something bad, but doing something in broad daylight that confirms the worst fears of others about Jews in general. Examples include white-collar Jewish criminals like Bernie Madoff and Michael Milken and rabbis who are defrocked for money laundering, sexual misconduct, all of whom deserve our disapproval.

On the other hand, it is a good thing that we no longer shame and stigmatize people for getting divorced or condemn people for marrying out, but instead open our doors as wide as possible and welcome families of intermarriage and adoption, single parents of choice, same sex couples, transgender individuals, and families of one.

Fourth, in our community, while the rabbi may be a guide, I have always seen the role as a partnership on a journey that we travel together. And on multiple paths with different needs and goals in mind. As I said at Rosh Hashanah, we are not one homogenous group that marches in lock step. We embrace a range of beliefs and practices and if there is any guiding message it is to foster inclusivity, not party-line thinking and behavior. And my job was never to bring you closer to a deity-on-high, but to explore and support your own beliefs or non-beliefs and to get you in touch with your own personal choices, convictions and moral compass.

And finally, that old prayer had it right when the rabbi says, “Heavenly Father, let me hear Thy voice saying: Be strong and of good courage. Give me strength, give me understanding.” How true, how true.

This is definitely not a job for the weak or faint of heart. It is one that absolutely requires strength and understanding and not a little bit of Solomonian wisdom. And forbearance. And patience. Except what do you do if the watchful and comforting paternalistic old-time god of the heavens is missing in action? Instead we turn to good friends and a supportive family and like-minded colleagues and critically, the good will and partnership of our members. And in our spare time we listen to TED talks on developing self-reliance and all sorts of coping skills. And we especially look for the humor in the moment that has sustained our people for centuries. Basically, all the good things that each one of needs to get through life, to get through the day.

Dear friends, I stand before you this day, not in front of any ark, to offer my profound thanks for the privilege of serving as your rabbi. With deep humility, I thank you for enabling me to pursue my life’s work. Thank you for entrusting me with this bully pulpit and giving me a forum from which to promote our message of Humanistic Judaism. And most important of all, thank you for your friendship, your loyalty, and your shared commitment to our values and ideals.

I just have one parting request. Please continue to work with me and the leadership over the next year to support and continue to grow this vibrant congregation. And then after I hand over the keys of the car to a successor, please give that person the same support you have given me. As the City Congregation has provided a home for all of us and our families, help fortify it so that it can be an even more secure home for the generations to come.

Kol shenevakesh lu yehi. All that we ask for, may it be!