

I'm Sorry"
"I'm sorry"

Yom Kippur - Yizkor

September 25, 2004

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On Monday evening, Dan Rather concluded his broadcast on the CBS Evening News by saying to millions of people who were watching: "I'm sorry". He was referring to the recent flap over the authenticity of documents presented in a "60 Minutes" piece on President Bush's participation, or lack thereof, in the Texas Air National Guard. After many questions were raised about the veracity of these documents, CBS News and Rather himself, apologized. They were only two words, out of the millions he had said on air over his long and respected career, but, you could tell, just by watching him, that he was having a very difficult time. This man who had spent an entire career writing and reading words, seemed to find these two words the most difficult he had ever spoken.

Why are the words: "I'm sorry" so difficult to say?

It wasn't always that way. Remember when we were kids?

"I'm sorry." "You are?" "Yeah...wanna make up?" "Okay"

It was easy back when we were kids. But now, as Dan Rather clearly understands, it can be so hard. Doesn't it seem like the more you need to say "I'm sorry," the less likely you are to say it? And the more you need to hear "I'm sorry," the less likely you are to accept it?

A rabbi, ascends the bema on Yom Kippur to deliver his sermon and he held his infant daughter in his arms. The little girl was perhaps a year old and she was adorable. From her father's arms she smiled at the congregation. Every heart melted. Turning toward her daddy, she patted him on the cheek with her tiny hands. He smiled fondly at her and with his customary dignity began a rather traditional Yom Kippur sermon, talking about the meaning of this Day of Judgement.

The baby girl, feeling her fathers attention shift away from her, reached forward and grabbed his nose. Gently he freed himself and continued his sermon. After a few moments, she took his tie and put it in her mouth. The entire congregation chuckled. The rabbi rescued his tie and smiled at his daughter. She put her tiny arms around his neck. Looking at his congregation over the top of her head, the rabbi then said: "Think about it.

Is there anything she can do that you could not forgive her for?" throughout the large sanctuary, people began to nod in recognition thinking perhaps of their own children, of their own grandchildren. Just then, she reached up and grabbed the rabbi's eyeglasses. Everyone laughed out loud. Retrieving his eyeglasses and settling them on his nose, the rabbi laughed as well. Still smiling, he waited for silence. When it came he asked, "And when does that stop? When does it get hard to forgive? At three? At seven? At fourteen? At thirty-five? How old does someone have to be before you forget that everyone is a child of God?"

"I'm sorry." "You are?" "Yeah... wanna make up?" "Okay" It was so easy back then, when we were kids. Where have we gone so wrong since then?

I read a couple of weeks ago in the New York Times about a new e-business called: "www.lastwishes.com". It allows you to have emails sent to your family or friends after you die. Called appropriately "exit emails" thousands have already signed up as their web site enticingly promises: "Wouldn't it be nice to send those final messages, to say those things you couldn't say when you were alive to friends and family when your time in this world has passed?" If they can merely tap a small percentage of all those people who are walking around with the heavy guilt of things that should have been said - I have no doubt they will make a fortune.

Why is it in a world where we are inundated with words - when nothing could be easier than to send an email while we are still alive - why is it that we don't, and that the important things never seem to get said?

"I'm sorry." "You are?" "Yeah...wanna make up?" "Okay"

There are husbands and wives sitting in this synagogue today, whose love for one another once filled their lives with beauty but who now live lives of estrangement and alienation though they live under one roof - and they find it is so very difficult just to say "I'm sorry".

There are parents and children who talk to each other, but have ceased communicating with each other long ago. Parents and children whose harsh judgements about each other covers over the love that lies deeply buried beneath the surface, and they find it terribly difficult to express that love, and to say, "I'm sorry!".

There are members of the same families who sit in different parts of this same sanctuary who bear with them assorted hurts and jealousies and even hatred. They nurture their wounds and find it so very difficult to say the words that need to be said.

Some years ago a woman came to me and shared the story of her family.

The parents in this family had two children, a son and a daughter. The father lived on for many years after his wife's death, and he was ill for many of those years. His daughter would visit him every day, and she did the necessary shopping and chores. She was always a completely devoted and loving daughter. The son lived nearby, but he seldom visited. He would call occasionally, but the calls were perfunctory and he generally showed no great interest in his father. When the father died, his will was read. Somewhere along the way, he had changed it, leaving the bulk of his considerable estate to his daughter and a minuscule sum to the son. The son was outraged and he contested the will in court, but lost. As a result, the brother and sister stopped speaking to each other for many years. And then one day, many years later the brother called his sister and told her he had just become a grandfather. He apologized for the words he had used to her and the actions he had taken against her. He pleaded with her to restore their broken relationship. She agreed to try. But, as she sat in my office she confided to me: "Rabbi, I will try, but I don't think we'll get very far. It just won't be that easy to forgive."

No, it is not that easy to forgive - and that is why I have taken the time to speak to you about it this morning. It is not easy, it is not easy to say, "I'm sorry" and not easy to accept it, but it is one of the most important things you need to learn how to do.

And not only because it is the right thing to do, the moral thing to do, the Jewish thing to do - but because your inability to do it is making you sick!

That is what all the latest studies in the field of forgiveness are telling us. This week's edition of Newsweek Magazine is devoted to the subject of "The New Science of Mind & Body" and one of the main articles is entitled "Forgiveness and Health" - so if you won't listen to your rabbi, listen to your doctor, for science now seems to be telling us that persistent unforgiveness is part of human nature, and it appears to work to the detriment not just of our spiritual well-being but our physical health as well.

Yes, once relegated to rabbi's sermons on Yom Kippur, it appears that the subject of forgiveness has become one of the hottest fields of research in clinical psychology today. In 1997, there were a few studies published on this subject but this past year saw more than 1,200 studies published on the topic of forgiveness. It even has its own foundation "A Campaign for Forgiveness Research" which sponsored a conference last year with papers on topics like: "Exploring gender differences in forgiveness." It will probably not surprise you to learn that the largest number of papers dealt with forgiveness in marital and romantic relationships. Dr. Dean Ornish, America's all-purpose lifestyle guru, (I

have to be honest - I am reluctant to quote him as I am not a big fan of the self-help industry. I was browsing in Barnes and Noble's the other day - someone came up to me - and obviously mistaking me for a clerk - asked me if I could point out where the self-help section was. "Yes, I replied, "I could - but that would sort of defeat the purpose wouldn't it?") Anyway, Dr. Dean Ornish the champion of self-help, regards forgiveness as "the tofu of the soul, a healthful alternative to the red meat of anger and vengeance. Leave it to those in the self-help industry to package forgiveness in terms of self-interest as Ornish states: "the most selfish thing you can do for yourself is to forgive other people." I hate to find myself agreeing with Dean Ornish - but, you know, he is right! It was clearly demonstrated in one of those 1200 studies, that every single person interviewed agreed on one point: When they forgave someone, when they let go of a grievance they had been carrying for some time, there was, for every single one of them, a physical sense of relief, a feeling of having put down a burden. They actually benefitted from the process. Amazingly, they hadn't realized that they were carrying this load of bitterness until it was taken away from them. They had at some level been enjoying the bittersweet moral posture of being the aggrieved victim, and hadn't wanted to give it up. And now, suddenly they discovered that it felt a whole lot better not to be a victim anymore.

Most of you thought you were coming to the synagogue today to be reconciled with God. That this was a day devoted to prayer and fasting and repairing your relationship with God. But friends, that's only part of the story. Yom Kippur isn't only about sin and apology to God.

I suspect Dan Rather would have found it a lot easier to apologize to God than it was to look into that camera knowing that millions of us were watching - to look at us and to say, "I'm sorry!" Dan Rather reminded us of how difficult it is to say these words and Yom Kippur comes to teach us how important it is to say them. Yes, this day, with its unending prayers is really about two words, two words that should be important to us, two words we don't think about enough, which is why we need a holiday dedicated to them. Two words that are central to our spiritual and our physical health. Just two words: "I'm sorry." From the opening lines of Kol Nidre from last night, to the story of Jonah which we will read this afternoon, to the concluding Neilah davening, this whole day is about forgiving and being forgiven, about learning how to say: "I'm sorry". And when it comes to saying, "I'm sorry" - God is the least of our problems.

During the course of a year, so many of us have permitted our lives to become restricted by feuds, grudges, decisions that we made years ago that we weren't going to speak to someone anymore or let him into our lives. Decisions we've kept more faithfully than most promises we make to ourselves.

There is a very perceptive statement in the Talmud about a difficult passage in the Bible. Rabbi Harold Kushner quotes it in his book: How Good Do We Have To Be? The Bible

says that if a person commits a murder, and the murderer was known to be an enemy of the victim, he can't claim that it was inadvertent. Commenting on that law, the Talmud asks: "How do you define an enemy?" And then it provides the answer: "An enemy is someone you haven't gotten along with for three days." I've quoted this before - I think it is a central teaching. And I want you to consider its implications.

What it says to me is this: If somebody hurts or offends you, you're entitled to be upset with him - for a couple of days. These things happen between close friends, casual acquaintances, members of a family. Somebody treats you badly, well, it's perfectly alright to be angry with him - for a day or two, today and tomorrow. The Torah says you can do that. But, by the third day, you ought to be over your anger and be friends with him again. Relationships ought to be able to survive a 24-48 hour frost. Now comes the important part: If you persist in being angry into a third day, it is because you are choosing to prolong the argument. You are deliberately nursing a grudge, performing CPR on a grievance that would have died of natural causes after 48 hours.

Why would anybody do that? Why would anyone deliberately choose to prolong unpleasantness? I think we know the answer. But, it is one of those nasty little secrets we don't like to think about. There is something perversely satisfying about being the injured party. It makes us feel righteous, in some way morally superior. We can look down with scorn on the person who hurt us. We feel nobler being the wounded one rather than being the inflicter of the wound. It gives us the weapon of guilt to use against the other person. We'd rather be the moral one, the one in the right, than the one who took advantage and inflicted the wrong. If we ever stopped hurting or bleeding. If we ever admitted that the incident was over and done with, we would lose that moral advantage. But, whatever the reason, Newsweek seems to be right - our unwillingness to forgive seems to be a very basic part of our human nature.

Simon Weisenthal, the Nazi hunter, in the midst of a fairly grim autobiography, tells a wonderful story. There was a man living near him in one of the DP camps after the war, who borrowed ten dollars from him, and assured him that he had a package coming from a relative any day now and would positively pay him back the next week. At week's end, he had an excuse for not paying, and the next week he had an even better one. And so it went for almost a year. Finally, one day, the man came up to him with a ten dollar bill in his hand, and said, "My visa has just come through. I'm leaving for Canada tomorrow. Here's the ten dollars I owe you." And Weisenthal waved him away and said, "No, keep it. For ten dollars, it's not worth changing my opinion of you."

Truth is, he was wrong. It's a bargain to give away a grudge, a resentment for nothing. To get paid for getting rid of that burden is a double bargain.

Remember the Biblical story of Joseph? How when he was seventeen, his brothers had been jealous of him - dad liked him best. So they sold him into slavery. For twenty years he lived in anticipation of getting even with them. He could see it in his mind's eye - how he would make them grovel and plead for their lives, just as he had been forced to do by them. And in his mind's eye - he enjoyed every minute of it. He endured loneliness and imprisonment always looking forward to that scene, to his day of judgement. And then finally, one day it happened. His dreams of revenge came true. He was Pharaoh's Minister of Agriculture. There was a famine in the entire Middle East, only Egypt had grain. And his brothers came down to Egypt to buy wheat. Now he had them in his power. Before he would sell them wheat, he made them beg and grovel. He played tricks with them, he threatened them with imprisonment. They had to plead with him for their freedom. And then something very strange happened to Joseph. He found he wasn't enjoying it one bit. He who had dreamed of revenge. He who had lived for revenge, found out that now that he was tasting it, it had turned to ashes in his mouth. He couldn't enjoy what was happening. He felt cheap, unworthy. So Joseph breaks down and cries. He reveals his identity to his brothers, hugs and embraces them, and reassures them that he no longer harbors any anger toward them. Joseph discovers that he didn't really want to hurt them as they had hurt him. He discovers that he did not enjoy the revenge he had desired for so long.

My friends, neither will you. If someone has wronged you and you have been nurturing your resentment for a short time, or for a long time, my advice to you, and I offer this for your own health - is to give it up. Forgive them, and rid yourself of the corrosive burden of hating someone and wanting to hurt them.

I want to make myself very clear. I am not telling you to forgive them because it is the noble thing to do. Someone cheats you, or cheats on you - and the rabbi tells you to "forgive them"? After all we all make mistakes, none of us is perfect, we all do selfish, inconsiderate things. We want to be forgiven for the things we do, so we should forgive others. Forgive him and you'll be a better person for it."

That is not at all what I am suggesting you do. I am not asking you to say that his or her behavior isn't any worse than what you or I would do. What they did may have been monstrously wrong, cowardly, selfish, immoral. But that's their problem. I'll deal with them in a moment, right now, I am speaking to you - and you need to let it go. That person who hurt you, or wronged you, whoever he or she is, that person does not deserve

the right to loom so large in your mind. He doesn't deserve the power to make you a bitter resentful person, to change your personality for the worse. To make you sick.

You want to get even? Well you certainly don't get even by continuing to hurt. By continuing to seethe with rage so that you can't enjoy the life you have. You don't get even by becoming like him or like her, selfish, mistrustful, vindictive. You don't get even by continuing to throw lumps of guilt at her which she usually dodges and even if you hit him, and hurt him with it, you just feel worse for having done it.

F. Scott Fitzgerald said: "Living well is the best revenge." I would say, "Becoming whole, outgrowing bitterness and vindictiveness, living serenely is the best revenge." As the subtitle of the Newsweek article says: "Revenge is sweet, but letting go of anger at those who wronged you is a smart route to good health." Amen!

My friends, I would like to see you end Yom Kippur significantly lighter than you began it. Not because you will have gone a whole day without eating. That is a very temporary change. I'd like to see you walk out of shul tonight lighter than you began last night because you will have divested yourselves of the burdens of bearing grudges, resentments, stale and outdated feuds based on misunderstandings that happened years ago.

There are four things that we have to do today, and I'm glad we have all day to do them, without worrying about meals, jobs, school or anything else, because these four things will take a lot of effort and concentration on our part.

First, I want you to make a mental list of all those who owe you an apology - and then let it go. You have to give up the anger and resentment you feel toward people who have hurt you or let you down.

You might try to tell them. Some people can handle constructive criticism. Not all can, and not all criticism is constructive. But, you might give it a shot. Maybe they will admit that they were wrong, maybe not, but then it's their problem. Should they have said "I'm sorry" to you? Probably - but if you are going to wait for that - it might be in an email you receive after they are dead! So advice # 1: "Let it go!"

The second thing that you have to do before the conclusion of Yom Kippur is make a mental list of all those who are waiting to hear: "I'm sorry" from you and then go say it. Dan Rather may have reminded us all of how hard it is to say "I'm sorry", but he also reminded us that it can be done. Oh, and by the way - Dan Rather taught us something else important about the apology business. No buts! Any apology that has a "but" in it - is disqualified. "I know I insulted you and acted badly toward you and really said some obnoxious things to you BUT, you know you really offended me when you called me stupid!" "EEH - disqualified. Whenever you put a qualifier like "but" in an apology - what you really mean to say comes after the but - everything before it is just window dressing. If you really want to apologize - no buts - Dan Rather did it, so can you.

If you need help making your list - let the prayers for this Yom Kippur day help. That is what al het, the vidui, the confessional prayer - is really all about:

"For the sin which we have committed before you" it is a laundry list of categories. This prayer speaks in the general - we are supposed to fill in the specifics. No hurry, we have the whole day ahead of us. It is a long list of sins that we confess this day. Forty-four sin topics are listed in the traditional al-het - prayer, arranged in alphabetical order - for otherwise, how would we know where to begin. Interestingly, there isn't a single ritual sin on this list, no mention of Shabbat, or Kashrut, or prayer. Not because these things are not important, they are very important, but because these things are not as important in God's eyes as the sins we commit against each other. It is also interesting to note, how many of the sins listed in the al het prayer refer to sins of speech. For the sin we have committed before You by lying. For the sin that we have committed before you by boasting. For the sin that we have committed before you by gossiping. For the sin that we have committed before you by foul language and so on and so forth. Nearly a third of the Al Hets are sins of speech. Perhaps it is to teach us that before we speak, we are master of our words. After we speak, our words become our master - maybe that is why it is so hard to say, I'm sorry, we are no longer in control. I know someone who had a sign near his phone that said: "Even a fish would not get into trouble if he kept his mouth shut..." But, in the course of a year - it is not possible to "keep our mouth shut..." completely and our study of the traditional al het, makes us realize how living creates so many opportunities for us to screw-up, make mistakes - just plain get it wrong. No, there are no lack of things for which we need to say "I'm sorry",- and as you study this traditional prayer which we recite 10 times during the course of Yom Kippur - here are some contemporary al hets for your consideration:

For the sin of wanting too much and for the sin of buying too much.

For the sin of wasting too much and for the sin of not caring enough.

For the sin of eating too much and for the sin of ignoring the hungry.

For the sin of overheating and over air-conditioning.

For the sin of not helping the single parent and for the sin of not noticing the troubled child.

For all these sins O God of Atonement, Forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

Oh yes, and for the sins against our parents, our children and our spouses - for they are the one's we hurt the most - the one's the closest to us - they are the first one's we need to put on our list, the first ones to whom we need to say: "I'm sorry".

We do not give our parents the respect they deserve, we do not give our spouses the love they deserve and we do not give our children the acceptance they deserve. And it is time we said, "I'm sorry."

A rabbi officiated at a funeral, and when the service was over, the mourner would not leave the grave. The rabbi tried to lead the man away but he would not go. The rabbi finally said, "The service is over now, you have to leave." But the man shook him off, and said: "You don't understand. I loved my wife." The rabbi said, "I'm sure you did, but the service is over now. You have to leave." The man shook him off again and said: "You don't understand. I loved my wife." "I'm sure you did, but the service is over now and we really have to leave. "But you don't understand. I loved my wife – and once, I almost told her."

And our children. My God, what are we doing to our children. Our relentless demand for perfection, the perfect child - the one who out performs, out achieves, out scores all the rest - the one who gets accepted to the perfect school, the perfect job, the perfect spouse - and then it starts all over as we demand that they produce for us the perfect grandchildren. Is it any wonder - that we are making them sick - the eating disorders, the depressions, the medications, the tutors to help them score better, the camps to help them achieve more. Enough.

Why is it that we have such a hard time giving to our children what we so desperately hope God will give to us? We ask God to accept us as we are. We ask God to go easy on us - but so many of us, too many of us here on the North Shore of Long Island - are so tough on our children when they seek our understanding, when they ask for our forgiveness, when they desire our acceptance. For the sins we have committed against our children ... forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

Well, that's two lists so far: the one's who owe us an apology- that's the one we're going to dump and the one's who deserve an apology from us - that's the one we are going to try and take to heart. But, there is still more I want you to do this Yom Kippur day.

The third thing I want you to do, is as you are considering all those worthy of your forgiveness, I want you to forgive God for all the unfairness in the world. For the sickness and the accidents and the fact that other people were born luckier, and better looking, and more talented than we are. It's not fair, and I suspect that God knows that. But the whole theme of reconciliation on Yom Kippur is in part our way of saying to God, "You know, I have good reasons to be very upset with You, but I'm not going to let that come between us, because I need You. I need to be able to turn to You, to talk to You, to get strength and hope from You, and if I'm mad at You it would just get in the way."

So let's review: first there is the list of those who should be forgiving us and second there is the list of those we need to forgive. Third, we need to forgive God - and finally, the last thing we need to achieve, on this Yom Kippur day, is to trust that God will forgive us. Have you done things in the past year which disappointed and offended God? I'm sure we all have - we're only human. Can God forgive us? I don't doubt it for a moment. Not because we beg and fast and suffer, but because the God I believe in is a God of forgiveness. God isn't so petty or vindictive as to keep score. God has no vested interest in being angry at us. Every page of the Yom Kippur liturgy tells us that we are much harder on ourselves than God is on us. God wants us to let bygones be bygones and start out fresh. Just as the rabbi who held his baby daughter in his arms was trying to get his congregation to look at everyone around them from a parents-eye-view, I wish we could learn to see ourselves from a God's eye view. We are all God's children. That is why God will forgive us - and it is why others are deserving of our forgiveness.

The story is told of a man sitting on a beach watching two young children, a boy and a girl, building a sand castle on the ocean's edge. Just as they finish, a wave comes and knocks it over. The man expects the children to burst out crying, all their hard work for naught. But they don't. To his total surprise, they burst into laughter, get up, brush themselves off and run together along the beach holding hands. Then they sit down to build another castle.

And so it is with us. All the things we work so hard to build will someday be destroyed; only the love will endure. Sooner or later, a wave will come and knock down what we've labored so hard to build. And when that happens, only those of us who have somebody's hand to hold onto will be able to go on, and to laugh once again.

And when our time on this earth is done, all our possessions will go to others. The only thing which will remain will be the memory of what we meant to those we loved. And as we now prepare to recite the Yizkor service, as we remember those who meant so much

to us when they were among the living, let us strive to renew our love for those who are still here with us. Let's forgive them, and be worthy of their forgiveness.

"I'm sorry." "You are?" "Yeah...wanna make up?" "Okay"