**KOL NIDREI - YOM KIPPUR 5779, 2018**

**Guilt is Good – The Potency of Forgiveness**

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A young man tells a Rabbi: “I have a strong desire to live to eternity. What am I supposed to do? “Get married,” replies the Rabbi. “It’s that simple? Would that allow me to live forever?” “No, but the desire will disappear.”

We all have our unrealistic expectations, crazy yearnings for the improbable and the impossible, and if we’re lucky we’ll have a rabbi or spouse to put us in our place, return us to reality, restore us to sanity.

A few weeks ago on 4th September, Reuters reported that Japan is home to the world’s oldest living married couple. They have a combined age of 208. Masao Matsumato is 108 and his wife Mikayo 100. They have been married for 80 years. When they asked Mikayo the secret, she replied slowly, very slowly… “Patience”. When asked “You ever want to divorce?” she replied slowly, very slowly… “Divorce never, but many time want to kill him…”

Yom Kippur, this enchanted and solemn evening is about the power of patience and the depth of forgiveness. Who hasn’t hurt their spouse with a cutting comment, an act of disengagement, a betrayal of love or intimacy… Who hasn’t broken a confidence of a friend, broken or damaged the confidence of their kids?

The rich and famous are no exception: Steve Job’s eldest daughter recalls how she was rejected and treated callously by her brilliant father, but she still continues to long for his love and recognition…

Yom Kippur is so relevant to us today because it recognises one of the most basic things about being human, the most elemental of human realities: that we’re far from perfect. We’re all flawed in one way or another, we’re weak and vulnerable. We hurt and we hurt others. As we will sadly sing tonight:

כי הנה כחומר ביד היוצר

‘We’re like mud, like clay in the potter’s hand’

We’re just a handful of dust or in Hamlet’s phrase ‘quintessence of dust’

All of this accounts for our persistent failures, the fact that we stumble again and again, that we don’t live up to our better selves, that the better angels of our being are defeated  by our dark demons and dangerous desires.

But that’s only part of the story because Yom Kippur carries in its heart a deep and vital secret, the secret of Jewish survival and of human potential. It’s called Teshuvah and it’s as earth shattering as the discovery of gold, the invention of the Internet, the power of the atom, because it changed the very way we see ourselves as Jews, the way we regard ourselves as members of the human race.

The very first recorded moment in history in which one human forgives another is in the Joseph story when he stretches out his hand to his brutal and treacherous brothers and tells them he bears no malice or grudge towards them. It’s a turning point in human history because it challenges the idea that we are condemned endlessly to repeat the past, that you can’t straighten the “crooked timbers of humanity”. That it’s your karma, your destiny; a divinity that shapes your beginnings and your ends ‘rough hew them how you will’. In ancient Greece as in contemporary determinism it’s all about character and fate; in Judaism it’s all about will and choice.

‘Repentance and forgiveness redeem the human condition from tragedy’ (Sacks). God forgives us as He did on that very first Yom Kippur and He wrote forgiveness into our scripts and into our souls. God has faith in us – He’s not only our stern King, He is our forgiving father אבינו מלכנו. Or as Heinerich Heine put it: “God will forgive me, it’s his job!”

That’s why Judaism has been called a guilt culture rather than a shame culture. In a shame culture, you sins, your mistake attaches itself to you, like a dark ugly indelible stain. There’s no way of going back once you’ve committed the shameful deed. But in a guilt culture, the wrong you do doesn’t remain stuck to you forever- you can make amends, the act was wrong but you can say sorry. You must suffer the punishment but you can return, repent and rehabilitate. Your sacred self can remain intact. Of course you don’t have to overdo it –excessive guilt can also be crippling …

We live in a shame and blame culture. Think what we do to our fallen idols, think the shame of Brett Stephens or our fallen footy gods. One of the hardest things to watch on TV during the past year was surely the anguished confession of Brett Stephens when he broke down and apologised for his match-tampering.

We live in a shame society where people are bullied and harassed for real and perceived wrongs and where women are slut-shamed by powerful men.

Monica Lewinsky, the 24-year-old Jewish Whitehouse intern who in 1998 was implicated in the tawdry affair with President Bill Clinton has bravely spoken about the time and her deep regret at what happened. But her own youthful foolishness pales next to the humiliation she was subjected to. In her TED talk in 2015 called the Price of Shame she describes the vitriol she was subjected to: “I lost my reputation and dignity, I lost almost everything and I almost lost my life”. After her talk was posted, the attacks on her appearance, choices and even her right to live were so vicious the comments had to be deleted. Monica Lewinsky highlights not only the toxicity of a shame culture but also some disturbing trends in our society: the singling out and demeaning of women, the power of cyber-bullying and a radical failure of empathy.

In Australia this is evident in the ongoing abuse and treatment of women, the bullying of women politicians as we are now aware of (Julie Bishop calls it appalling behaviour) and the rape and killing of Eurydice Dixen in Melbourne earlier this year. It’s an important conversation we’re having and one that Judaism embraces. Despite some misogynists’ attitudes, the Torah is, in my opinion, more about the power, influence and value of women, it’s more about Eve as an equal individual than a second class congregant. She is an עזר כנגדו a strong, sparring partner. That’s what the irrepressible Israeli winner of Eurovision Netta Barzilai was singing about: “I’m not your toy, not your toy, you stupid boy, stupid boy” ‘*Ani lo buba’* (I am not a doll).

The Me-Too-Movement can be excessive and sometimes target men unfairly but it has brought to our attention just how far we still have to go to counter male rage, male power, machismo and assumptions of authority. Just how easy it is for men to be abusive or exploitative even without malice. Former Prime Minister Turnbull put it well when he said “What we must do is change the hearts of men to respect women. We must start with the youngest men the little boys, and sons and grandsons”. And I would add: Remember it’s easier to build strong children than repair broken men.

Shame cultures are especially hard on women, but we all suffer in them. Guilt cultures, as my mother assures me, are good for you. Guilt is the ultimate gift that keeps on giving! We need to learn how to forgive and grant forgiveness to others and we need to start by forgiving ourselves. It’s the key to freedom and the key to empowerment. Forgiveness is hard work.

It takes time and courage to forgive someone who’s really hurt you. It’s harder when they don’t seem sincere or contrite or worse haven’t even recognised their wrongful behaviour. Forgiveness doesn’t mean you overlook what was done to you. Psychiatrist Thomas Szasz reminds us: “The stupid neither forgive nor forget. The naïve forgive and forget. The wise forgive but don’t forget”.

If remembrance is necessary for forgiveness, empathy is essential for it. Empathy heals those who have been shamed. Shame cuts so deeply into us and its only generous love that frees us from its tentacles. The most heartbreaking moment in that excruciating interview with Brett Stephens is the moment his father puts his hands on his broken son’s shoulder; it’s an exquisitely tender gesture. The most redeeming act that saved Monica Lewinsky from suicide was her mum and dad supporting her throughout the whole ordeal. They simply wouldn’t leave her on her own.

It’s taken me a long time to understand what it means to truly forgive another. I often wondered how the Halacha could demand that before Yom Kippur I have to accept the apology and forgive someone who had lacerated me perhaps spoken so cruelly about me, attacked my character or loshed about me across the community… (loshed - lashon hara)

But I’ve come to realize that forgiveness isn’t about accepting or excusing their behaviour. It’s more about letting it go and not allowing their behaviour destroy my spirit, erode my soul, define who I am. I like the quote which says that forgiveness is the economy of the heart: It saves the expense of anger, the cost of hatred, the waste of spirit (Hanna Mora). So I’m going to strive to let go more…

It’s not an easy journey to get to that place where you can forgive people. But it’s such a powerful place because it liberates you. It actually improves your health and your sleep quality, it reduces depression and anxiety and the need for medication… In one study those who couldn’t forgive compared to those who did were asked to stare at a large mountain. The unforgiving actually thought the mountain was 50 degrees steeper than those who could forgive!

As Jews we need to be at the forefront of promoting a penitential rather than a shame and pain-causing culture. We’ve got to take Teshuvah and Mechilah into the civil discourse of our society. We need to take the Yom Kippur message into our homes and work places, the streets and social media. We need to strongly counter the public shaming. We’ve got to start a חסד movement to counter the compassion deficit and empathy crisis across our world. Who knows-it may even work in Israel if we can start forgiving the Palestinians. If we can ask forgiveness of what we did and  do to them, maybe they’ll ask for forgiveness for their failure to recognise our Jewish state and accept the fact that we’ve been in this land and yes, Jerusalem, for thousands of years.

It worked in South Africa. Nelson Mandela said “If there are dreams about beautiful South Africa, there are also roads that lead to their goal. Two of these roads could be called Goodness and Forgiveness”. Israel’s leaders could do worse than heed his advice. But our two Jewish roads would surely be called Guilt and Forgiveness. And let’s add to the list to ask of the earth forgiveness for the way we have so callously treated it. As in the IDF tweet I received on Sunday: “We have only one earth, it’s up to us to take care of it”.

So I call you on this Yom Kippur to start an International Guilt Movement.

# Guilt is good for you

# Guilt creates forgiveness

# Forgiveness heals you

In conclusion, getting back to the beginning of this speech, I’ve often wondered if as you age it gets easier to forget. After all it’s the young who sow wild oats while the age grow sage… But then on the other hand after you’ve lived six, seven or eight decades you could have a pretty long list of grievances. So I asked this question of one of our ninety-year-olds at Arcare and she said to me, “Dear Rabbi, I don’t have anyone to say sorry to”. When I complimented her on this, she paused, took a long, hard, slow, very slow, look at me and said – “No compliments necessary, I’ve outlived all the mamzers!”

ANNOUNCEMENT

Here at Caulfield Shule, it is important for us to support those who support Israel.