

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Yom Kippur before Yizkor

5770

A couple of weeks before Rosh Hashanah I attended the New York Board of Rabbis' High Holy Days Sermon Seminar, which I have made a tradition of attending since last year.

First of all, I am a member of the New York Board of Rabbis and, occasionally, you need to make use of your membership.

Second, I get to meet my NY colleagues. This year, by the way, I met the newly installed director of Pastoral Care at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan who told me, "Manes, count on me for whatever you need" (I am thinking of asking him a free parking spot in the hospital parking but that may be a stretch).

Third, you get to hear great speakers, among them, Rabbi Avi Weiss and Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg. And you never know, but you may find a great idea for one of your divrei Torah (as Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg said, after sharing with us his outstanding 30-minute Rosh Hashanah sermon, "If you already wrote your High Holy Days sermons, feel free to use this one for Sukkot").

Finally, and most important, the New York Board of Rabbis' High Holy Days Sermon Seminar is one of the few places where you can get a free kosher lunch in Manhattan.

So, after registering and exchanging greetings, I found a seat in the small, packed auditorium of the New York Center of Tolerance on 42nd Street where the seminar took place, ready to learn and to be inspired.

Many of the more than sixty rabbis from different denominations attending the seminar had brought writing pads to take notes, and a few of the more

sophisticated rabbis had brought their laptops with them. After all, if a good idea is out there, you don't want to forget it.

I didn't bring a writing pad with me and I didn't have a pen to play with, so having nothing better to do while I was waiting for the seminar to start, I started looking around the room at my colleagues.

One of my colleagues, who was also waiting anxiously for the first speaker to take the podium, had written on the top of his writing pad in big letters the title of his plan for the morning, "Ideas Worth Stealing."

Although I found his words a little too blunt, my colleague was making a statement which I happen to agree with: in life in general, and in particular in our rabbinical vocation, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. This is one of the many blessings of living in New York as opposed to Roanoke, Virginia or the Dominican Republic. I am constantly being exposed to hundreds of colleagues, to their work experience, ideas and thoughts. And even more, without even noticing it, I myself have become part of this reservoir of work experience, ideas and thoughts.

Many times, just by visiting a colleague's office or his or her shul, I get an idea for my shul and I know that the same happens when others visit me as well.

That's how I came to fall in love with Rabbi Alan Lucas' coffee machine and the Lifelights inspirational booklets display in his shul, Beth Shalom in Roslyn.

Lifelights are inspirational, informational booklets about challenges in our emotional and spiritual lives and how to deal with them.

The booklets are usually displayed at the entrance of the sanctuary or outside the rabbi's office and are available for congregants and visitors alike to take home.

Each Lifelight is written by a wise and caring soul, someone you have probably heard of, someone who knows the inner territory of grief, doubt, confusion and longing. Each booklet addresses the reader from a uniquely Jewish spiritual perspective.

So I decided to make a small investment from my discretionary fund and purchased an acrylic display and 25 different packages of booklets (12 booklets per package) to give it a try, and lo and behold, a good idea is not called “good” for nothing; congregants and visitors alike started taking the booklets home. In almost no time the first set of booklets was gone and, through the generosity of dedicated members of Hillcrest Jewish Center, we were able to replenish the booklets, not once, not twice, but three times already.

Among the many Lifelights inspirational booklets available, we find the following:

- ❖ Bringing Your Sadness to God
- ❖ Are You Being Hurt by Someone You Love?
- ❖ Coping with the Death of a Spouse
- ❖ Do Jews Believe in the Soul's Survival?
- ❖ Finding Spiritual Strength in Pain or Illness
- ❖ Jewish Approaches to Parenting Teens
- ❖ Making Sacred Choices at the End of Life
- ❖ Raising a Child with Special Needs

Either because I am in charge of placing the new order when the booklets are gone, or because the display is across from my office, I get to entertain myself by seeing which one is the most popular booklet, or in other words, which one is the first one to go.

If I was not in a rush to go to lunch, I would let you guess which booklet is the most sought after. But for the sake of brevity, I will tell you myself.

The first booklet to go, the one people take the most, is one entitled “Finding a Way to Forgive.”

Surprised? Yet this is a fact. I did the exercise three times already and all three times “Finding a Way to Forgive” won the contest. Among the different issues we are struggling with, “Finding a Way to Forgive” is number one.

We know that the impossibility of forgiveness dwells within the walls of our own hearts and nevertheless we try to convince ourselves that we can’t forgive because

of the other, the one who hurt us, the one outside us... We tell ourselves that forgiveness is not deserved and that our anger is justified. We say, "You don't know what he did to me!" or "I can't forgive her!" and yet, we pick up the booklet because we have to forgive, not because of the other but because of us.

Those who walk with un-forgiveness walk with a heavy burden. In the beginning we do so, rejoicing in our own justifiable grudge and self-righteousness. We do it for one year, for two years, for ten years... but then the load becomes too heavy and the inability to forgive starts affecting us, in the way we live our lives and in the way deal with our loved ones.

"Forgiveness is not a gift to the one who hurt us in the past, but to ourselves." I heard these words from a mentor of mine, a renowned Argentinean psychologist, whose daughter was kidnapped and killed by the military regime in Argentina in the seventies. The murderers were not interested in seeking forgiveness, but my mentor needed to find a way to forgive...

You may walk through life holding a grudge. You can't forgive your parents, or your children, your spouse or ex-spouse, your friend who betrayed you, or your God who failed you. You may not be able to forgive the living; you may not be able to forgive the dead.

And yet, we all need to find a way to forgive, to let go...

In the words of Rabbi David Wolpe:

"Forgiveness is about letting go. Often our anger melts away when we truly understand the circumstances of the other, but that is not identical with forgiveness. Although it is important to try to understand the motivations of other people, true forgiveness occurs when conduct has been inexcusable, not when it has been understandable. To forgive someone is to believe them to have been wrong and to let go of the moral leverage that our righteousness grants us over another. Forgiveness is renouncing the position of remaining superior. Sometimes we cling to anger not because we have to, but because it gives us something: the feeling of our own righteousness, a reason not to deal with another, a clean line to

draw between good and bad. But our tradition asks us to rise above pettiness, anger, divisiveness; all that sullies the purity and beauty of God's world.”ⁱ

Now you may be listening to my words, you might have read the booklet backward and forward, and yet you say to yourself: “but I can’t ...”

You should know that you are not alone. Forgiveness requires a generosity of spirit which is difficult to come by. You may not be able to let go overnight, but small steps may do the trick. You start with a booklet, then a dvar Torah, and before you know it, you let go and you start living a new life.

I would like to conclude with one more reason for us to forgive, to let go, and it has to do with this sacred day, with Yom Kippur, with the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. Today we ask God to forgive us, we ask God to let go.

“Avinu Malkenu, honeinu v’aneinu, ki ein banu ma’asim” – *“Our Father, Our King, be gracious to us and answer us though we are not worthy.”*

We are not worthy of your forgiveness, yet, God, forgive us!

Isn’t it a fair trade to exchange God’s forgiveness for ours? If we ask Him to let go, shouldn’t we do the same?

And so I pray:

Master of the Universe! God full of compassion and forgiveness, help me to forgive, help me let go. I don’t want to hold a grudge; I don’t want to walk through life with a heavy heart. Help me in this sacred moment to move away from my ego and my self-righteousness, which prevent me from granting others and myself the gift of forgiveness, a gift that you have bestowed so generously since the world was created. How can we ask for your blessings when we are not ready to share ours?

I know that when I forgive I become a better person, I know that “to forgive another is to open up a new pathway in my spirit”ⁱⁱ and so I ask you to teach me the path to forgiveness.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, oh God and as I work even harder this year to find a way to forgive, bless me, my family, our congregation and your people Israel with a good, joyous, healthy and sweet year.

ⁱ Wolpe, David: *Finding a Way to Forgive. Life Lights. Jewish Lights Publishing. Woodstock, VT. 2000, page 6.*

ⁱⁱ Wolpe, David: *Finding a Way to Forgive. Life Lights. Jewish Lights Publishing. Woodstock, VT. 2000, page 9*