

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Yizkor

5772

Although we don't have last rites in Judaism, it's not uncommon for rabbis to be present for the last moments before a person leaves this world.

I remember a congregant who asked me to convince her scared-to-death teenage daughters to come into her room so she could share with them her last words.

I also recall how one of my former congregants passed away in my presence, only seconds after her husband had left the room after being with her for more than 12 hours.

I remembered being called by the husband of a dying young Jewish woman, who lived outside Christiansburg, VA. She was so removed from her Jewish heritage that not only was she the only Jewish person living in Christiansburg, but her wish to see a rabbi took her Christian husband of more than 25 years by surprise. I made it a few hours before she passed away and in the few minutes I was with her, she managed to ask to be buried in a Jewish cemetery and to whisper "*Sh'ma Yis'ra'el Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.*"

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I met Rabbi Swerdlow a few weeks ago. I had never met him before, and I am not sure our paths will ever cross again. Although, who knows?

As in previous years, this year I attended the New York Board of Rabbis' High Holy Days Seminar; and in addition, I attended the Long Island Board of Rabbis High Holy Days' Seminar for the first time. My colleagues from Queens and I love these

seminars. First of all you get great tips from the “pros,” and second; you get to meet great people. Last, but not least, you get a free lunch.

Rabbi Swerdlow is a short individual, probably in his late seventies or early eighties. He doesn’t have a pulpit and he is not very well known.

Rabbi Swerdlow is not the typical rabbi you invite to address a rabbinical group before the High Holy Days and, therefore, he was not among those invited to address the Long Island Board of Rabbis.

Rabbi Swerdlow, as I said, was not among the guest rabbis invited to speak, but he was allowed, after requesting it, to share his thoughts with us.

Rabbi Swerdlow, who lost his wife a few years ago, works as a chaplain in a hospice. As a result, Rabbi Swerdlow has the difficult privilege of hearing the last words of many people. When being asked the nature of such words, he replies: “Usually unfinished business, asking and granting forgiveness, and saying ‘I love you,’ many times for the first and last time.”

Rabbi Swerdlow’s unique perspective and experiences, led him to draft a “Spiritual Journey.” As he recounted his experiences, I found his journey so insightful, so meaningful and so powerful, that as soon as he shared it with us, I made it mine, and as I share it with you, I hope you will make it yours as well.

The month of Elul, Rabbi Swerdlow told us, is a time to complete unfinished business.

“Our journey begins a month before Rosh Hashanah. We are about to close the page on another year. Before we do, we may have some unfinished business. Begin by listing everything that you would like to accomplish before the shofar is sounded on Rosh Hashanah. Once you have completed the list, decide what you would like to accomplish that week. At the beginning of each week during Elul, review the list and select what to do in the coming week. Be sure to give particular attention to those items about which we have procrastinated.”

For us the month of Elul is over. However the message is still relevant. We all have unfinished business, we all have words that need to be said, goals to be achieved, matters to be addressed. Don't make grandiose plans, Rabbi Swerdlow advises us. Start small, one week at a time. Are you a procrastinator? You are not the only one, but you can change. The evil inclination often tells us that unless we become a new person overnight, change is worthless. That's simply not true. A big change always starts with a small one.

Rabbi Swerdlow's unique journey then continues with Selichot.

"The ten days of repentance is our opportunity to forgive others and ask others to forgive us. On Yom Kippur, we seek God's forgiveness. Why do we need another service on the Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah for forgiveness? It is because forgiveness must begin with forgiving oneself. We may acknowledge that we have done something wrong but if we stop there, we only have created guilt that punishes. So a second step is required. Let's ask ourselves, what lesson have we learned. This is guilt that teaches. Then, when we face the same situation again, we shall do the right thing."

Again, Selichot is behind us but Rabbi Swerdlow's teaching resonates even more powerfully today. How can we ask God to forgive us when we are not ready to forgive ourselves? How can we focus on becoming better human beings tomorrow when we keep punishing ourselves for what we did wrong 10, 20, 50 years ago?

"It is then the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah and we find ourselves at the water; casting our bread upon the water. Traditionally this represents the casting out of our sins. But it is much more. It is letting go of that which holds us back. This could be many things. It could be a bad habit that affects our health. It could be a grudge that eats away at us. It could be a guilt that we have allowed to fester rather than to learn from it. It could be a fear that prevents us from doing what we want to do. What is holding us back from being the best we can be?"

Once more, Rosh Hashanah is over. The message, however, is still with us: How can we ask God to let go when we are still holding to the past with a firm grip? What is holding you back? Who is being hurt by your grudge? Who are you punishing? Only you! It is time to let go.

"We are taught that before we can approach God to ask forgiveness, we must approach those we have wronged and seek their forgiveness. And when others approach us for forgiveness, we need to forgive."

We use the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to forgive and be forgiven. This seems simple enough, tells us Rabbi Swerdlow, but questions arise. What if I ask for forgiveness but the person whom I have asked refuses to give me that forgiveness? In the Book of Samuel (I Samuel 16:7), it says that "man sees only the outward appearance but God sees into the heart." If our request for forgiveness is sincere and if we have learned from our mistakes, we have fulfilled our obligation even if the wronged person refuses to grant forgiveness.

The Ten Days of Repentance just finished but our journey has just started.

Do I have to be asked for forgiveness before granting it? Absolutely not! Do not let these feelings that we have been wronged fester in us. Acknowledge our feelings and address them. There are a number of ways to do this, explains Rabbi Swerdlow: "We may accept this as an imperfection in someone whom we like. We may ask ourselves: what is it about me that makes the other person's action bother me so much? We may choose to share our feelings with the one whose action upsets us."

Just as it is with people, so it is with God. If you feel you have been hurt by God, so now is the time to forgive Him. The same way we must rebuild our relationships with our loved ones, we must rebuild our relationship with God. The same way we must try to bring those who have wronged us back into our lives, we must try to bring God back into our lives.

Finally, our spiritual journey with Rabbi Swerdlow brings us to Yom Kippur.

"On Yom Kippur, we forego our physical needs and focus on our spiritual needs and there is no greater spiritual need than love. Today we remember those whom we loved and as we recall the beautiful memories we once shared, we know that love can never be conquered by death. When two people love each other when they are together, the love is there when they are apart."

At every service, we speak of our love for God and God's love for us. Sitting beside us at the service is someone whom we love. Have we said to him or to her "I love you"? The truth is that you cannot say it enough in words and especially in deeds. Say it again, and again, and again and never take it for granted."

Now we all understand love when it comes to our spouses, our children, our parents, our closest friends, but, can we extend the circle of love? Is our love so limited that cannot be shared any further? Is it so exclusive that cannot reach to those in need, to the lonely and the forsaken? What better way to honor the memory of our loved ones than extending our love to someone else? What better way to remember those who loved us than by reaching out to someone in need of love?

Rabbi Swerdlow spoke for about ten minutes or less –he was not given too much time. In his spiritual journey, he took us all the way to Sukkot and Simchat Torah but I should leave that part of the journey for another day.

As soon as Rabbi Swerdlow finished his short presentation he disappeared. We all stayed for lunch but old little Rabbi Swerdlow was nowhere to be found. I looked for him, to thank him for his insights; I even called him a couple of times and left messages, but I haven't heard back from him.

Maybe Rabbi Swerdlow is none other than Elijah the Prophet, who just came for a few minutes to invite me, as I am inviting you, to be part of a sacred journey, one in which the right words are being said and the right things are being done before it is too late.

And so I pray:

Master of the Universe! God full of compassion and forgiveness, hold tight my hand as I walk through the sacred journey of life. Help me to forgive myself and to forgive others. You, God, are the source of infinite love. Help me to let go of my grudges and to extend myself to those in need.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O God, and as I strive even harder this year to become closer to You, bless me, my family, our congregation and your entire people Israel with a good, joyous, healthy and sweet year. Amen.