

שנה טובה.

Today we prayed: *Not upon our merit do we rely in supplication, but upon Your boundless compassion. What are we? What is our piety? What is our righteousness?* What is our attainment, our might, our power? *What can we say to You?* All the mighty are as nothing; the famous, as if they didn't exist; the wise, utterly lacking in wisdom. *Most of our actions are utterly meaningless, the days of our lives an emptiness, our superiority over the beasts is an illusion.* Our life is a fleeting breath. ***But we are Your people, Your partners, connected to You by the covenant.***

*Not upon our merit, but upon Your compassion...*

Not so long ago I officiated at a funeral that I found particularly challenging. Because the identity of the deceased person is not crucial to the story, I'll leave that detail unsaid. She died in her early nineties, she had been living in an assisted living facility. A brilliant woman, conversant in over half a dozen languages. She was quite outgoing, a marvelous conversationalist, possessing a dry sense of humor. She made quite a few friends, who had beautiful and tender things to say about her. But her biological family was profoundly estranged from her. So much so, that neither of her children had spoken with her in several years. Her son stayed away from the funeral. *Stayed away from his mother's funeral.* Her daughter, accompanied by her husband and her own daughter, attended. A couple other relatives attended as well.

The night before the funeral I met with this small contingent of family. The faces at the table were etched in pain and anger. ***Do you want me to tell you the truth about my mother?*** Trying my best to brace myself for the arrows unleashed, I replied: ***I want to tell me whatever you need me to hear.*** There was not one thing I could write down on my yellow pad. It was all I could do not to wince or gasp or weep. And when I drove home, I thought about Lennon and McCartney's tragically lonely *Eleanor Rigby* - and the words burned angry and true. So what could I possibly say the next day for the eulogy; what words might open the hearts of the mourners - the loyal friends and the deeply wounded family? ***I told them the truth that we all know.*** We are all imperfect. The stories of warmth and connection - and the stories of betrayal and hurt - can all be true. Some of us hurt others, even our family very deeply. But today, *even today* - it is not too late to forgive. *And how do we forgive those who have wounded us when we are so angry, when we continue to feel the hurt?* How do they deserve our forgiveness? *The truth is - maybe they don't deserve our forgiveness.* But we can open ourselves to compassion. Why should we forgive? ***Because there is no other way forward.***

In 1995, a year after the genocide in Rwanda, when an estimated 800,000 people were massacred within one hundred days, Bishop Desmond Tutu, in his capacity as president of the All Africa Conference of Churches visited that broken and blighted land. In Rwanda he and his fellow officers visited Ntarama, a village about an hour's drive from the capital, Kigali. Five thousand Tutsi souls seeking shelter in this church were butchered here in 1994 by Hutus brandishing machetes and grenades. The new government had not removed the corpses; bodies were lying as they had fallen a year before. The stench was overpowering. Outside the church building was a staggering collection of skulls, some of them still pierced with daggers and machetes. The Bishop tried to pray. Instead he broke down and wept.

What a disturbing recent monument to the vicious anger that human beings are capable of unleashing upon their neighbors. The killers had often lived amicably in the same villages, spoke the same language as their victims. The colonial overlords maintained their power by favoring the dominant Tutsi over the Hutu - planting the poisoned seeds of the bloodbath in 1994.

Just a few miles from the church, some women had begun to build a settlement which they named Nelson Mandela Village. It was to be a home for some of the many orphans and widows created by the genocide. The leaders of this women's movement said, "*We must mourn and weep for the dead. But life must also go on, we can't go on weeping.*" The church screams despair and death, and a few miles away in Mandela Village - hope for new life, new hope.

***Praised are You, Adonai, who brings life to the dead – ברוך אתה ה מחיה המתים.***

Bishop Tutu also attended a rally in Kigali's main stadium, and we was amazed that people who were so recently devastated could sing and dance and laugh. When it was his turn to preach, he began we begin at funerals. He expressed his deepest condolences to so many mourners. And then he spoke about Rwanda's lethal cycle of top dog versus underdog. The brutalized underdog strives to topple the oppressor, and when he succeeds he engages in an explosion of retribution to pay back the new underdog for all horror that had been visited upon the new top dog. The preacher reminded everyone that the Tutsi had waited for 30 years to punish the Hutu for the injustices heaped upon them, and that the extremists among the Hutu were quite capable of waiting 30 years for *their* moment of gory payback. He continued to describe the prevalent talk about tribunals, that people did not to tolerate criminals escaping justice.

But what if retributive justice had the last word? Most Hutu would feel they would be found guilty - *not* because of their misdeeds, but because *they were Hutu*. The devouring blade of the embittered Hutu would await its turn, avenging the horrendous prison conditions. The preacher continued: could Rwanda move beyond retribution toward *restorative* justice, to forgiveness? As he continued his appeal for reconciliation and forgiveness, he drew upon the history of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in which people shared their heart-breaking stories, victims expressed a willingness to forgive, perpetrators confessed aloud the atrocities they had committed. Could this be a viable way forward? What transpired was miraculous - the awful cauldron of repression yielded to a flawed and hopeful beacon of democracy.

Today we prayed, we yearned aloud: ויעשו כולם אגודה אחת לעשות רצונך בלבב שלם – *And all people will be bonded together , carrying out Your will with a whole heart*. Somewhere deep inside us we know that we are all destined for something better than strife. Now and again we catch a glimpse of the better thing - for example, when we work together to counter the crippling effects of natural disasters, when we are galvanized by a spirit of generosity and compassion, when we gather together to craft treaties of peace, when we advocate on behalf of children's rights, of women's rights, when we seek to ban the use of land mines, when we fleetingly experience ourselves as part of a living network, of a human family where everyone is on the inside, and no one is branded as an alien, as expendable, as an object of loathing.

– ויעשו כולם אגודה אחת לעשות רצונך בלבב שלם –

*And all people will be bonded together , carrying out Your will with a whole heart.*

Those words ring so impossibly distant, so utopian, and yet - היום הרת עולם - on this day when the world is born, on this day of remembering, these are the words with which Jewish people hope as we pray not only for ourselves but for the world.

On the eve of סליחות, we watched a powerful Israeli documentary called Precious Life. The life of a four year old Palestinian boy hung by a thread as he needed a bone marrow transplant to live - a procedure that could only be performed in an Israeli hospital. His mother found herself caught between the desire to protect her son and the harsh criticism of her community. During the harrowing journey through suicide bombers and rockets, through the bureaucracy of security checkpoints, through soul-crushing bleakness of Gaza - Operation Cast Lead erupts, and the Israeli surgeon who

has been heroically shepherding the little boy toward life finds himself in army fatigues as a reservist in Gaza, checking up on patients at the very same time. The principle players in this drama struggle with the surreal escalation of violence, with the walls of distrust, with the destruction and agony of war - as a backdrop to a Herculean effort to save a child. *And who will this boy grow up to be?* How can we know? When his mother praises Palestinian martyrdom, we feel anger and despair coursing through our veins, and we wonder: all these mountains being moved for one little boy, and what if this precious little boy dons a suicide vest when he's older? Many in his community cheer and pass out candies when the rockets claim lives in Sderot or B'er Sheva, or when a bomb incinerates a busy cafe in Jerusalem. *Why are we saving this boy?*

In yesterday's Torah reading, הַגֵּר and her son יִשְׁמַעֵאל are cast out at the insistence of שָׂרָה into the wilderness. The water is used up and הַגֵּר loses hope. She can't bear to see her son die. And so she leaves him under a bush and cries out. God hears the boy *where he is - in the moment*. God doesn't pause to consider who יִשְׁמַעֵאל will grow up to be someday. יִשְׁמַעֵאל's name reminds us that God remains in the present and listens with compassion to the voice of the boy, to a cry of desperation.

Is there any hope within the story of the little Palestinian boy? I believe there is - after all, the child's surgery itself cost a significant sum - far beyond the resources of the boy's impoverished family, and an anonymous donor stepped forward with the entire sum. *His only condition: that he remain anonymous.* But at a certain point late in the film, a crucial detail about the donor's identity leaks out: he is an Israeli Jew who lost his son in battle. *And how do we forgive those who have wounded us when we are so angry, when we will continue to feel the hurt?*

There was once in Ancient Israel a wicked king named מְנַשֶּׁה who lived a life filled with evil and cruelty. According to a מִדְרָשׁ he did sincere and heartfelt תְּשׁוּבָה on his deathbed. The angels of Heaven, knowing that God would accept מְנַשֶּׁה's תְּשׁוּבָה, were outraged at the injustice of it all, and they sought to lock Heaven's gates, to block out מְנַשֶּׁה's words. But God drilled a hole under the Throne of Glory. God heard the wicked king's words of confession, and granted him forgiveness. The angels were furious: *Amnesty for the wicked מְנַשֶּׁה?! You - the God who remembers, are you suffering from amnesia? How can you forget all of his misdeeds?*

Turning to his heavenly accusers, God patiently explained: *“Look, I’m not just a King. I’m also a Father. That’s why I’m called **אבינו מלכנו**. It’s My business to forgive. This is what I do. This is who I am.”*

ויעשו כולם אגודה אחת לעשות רצונך בלבב שלם

*And all people will be bonded together , carrying out Your will with a whole heart.*

If we say these words, if we take to heart our task in shul today, I pray that we truly mean what we say. *“We must mourn and weep for the dead. But life must also go on, we can’t go on weeping.”* Forgiving others and forgiving ourselves is terribly difficult. Today we call upon God to strengthen our resolve, to heal our wounds, to save us, to immerse us in compassion, to incline our hearts toward kindness. Why must we forgive? ***Because there is no other way forward.***