

Shabbat Shalom

I typically ask who is a member of B'nai Torah Congregation. This week I won't ask that question. I assume that you will all be members by the end of the week!

I am going to ask a different question. The question I am going to ask is who is from New York? Those of you from New York, who has heard of Crazy Eddie? Of course, all of you know of Crazy Eddie. Eddie owned an appliance store and had an advertising campaign that none of us will ever forget. The advertising campaign referred to Christmas in July. In order to his sales, he would refer to Christmas at the wrong time of the year to attract our attention.

Last week I spoke about Hanukkah. It was no longer Hanukkah. This week I would like to speak about Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur...AH – the High Holy Days in January! Well, not really. But something happened last week that made me think about the themes of those days of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. The theme that I would like to speak about today is the theme of forgiveness.

This week something happened. This week we read a news story. Former President Jimmy Carter sent a letter to the JTA and formally apologized to the Jewish people and the people of Israel for the hurt he caused.

He said a public "al cheit" in his words. Owning that the title of his book: Israel and apartheid was very damaging and misleading. And other acts and words, in spite of his best intentions may have been misdirected to have hurt the Jews.

What do we do with such an apology? Or perhaps the question should be "what should we do with such an apology?" Can we forgive? Do human beings have the capacity either emotionally or theologically to truly forgive? Or do we get secondary benefit out of holding on to resentment?

Is Carter's apology perhaps politically motivated?

Is his apology self serving? Do we believe it?

Can we forgive?

This morning we read the final parashah of the Book of Genesis, Parshat Vayehi. And in this parshah we find the role of apology and forgiveness looms large. Very large. It enables us to move from a family to a nation.

It's interesting to note that although we have holy days and a whole period of time devoted to self reflection and apologies and forgiveness. It's not biblically determined. And it's not reflected in the Bible. And as we complete this entire Book of Genesis which deals with so much about essential human behavior, there is next to nothing about remorse, apology and forgiveness...UNTIL NOW! We learn about resentments and murder and violence. We learn about jealousy, estrangement, hatred. But there is no message about forgiveness until now...Until the end of the narratives of the Avot. And once we learn about forgiveness it's not repeated again.

So, here's the scene. We remember that Joseph was a brash kid, resented by his brothers. He was sold into slavery by his brothers and presumed dead by his father. He ends up in Egypt and after a series of dramatic events becomes a very important man. In fact, second to none other than Pharaoh himself. And through his insight, cunning and God given talent he actually saves the entire nation from disaster. And that brings him to a very important post. The brothers return looking for something to eat. And they are eventually brought face to face with the brother they nearly killed. There is a magnificent reconciliation that takes place. And Jacob, the father comes to live with his long lost and beloved son. But, Jacob is old and he dies. Now, we can assume a panic overtakes the brothers, particularly Judah, the mastermind of the plot. They are deathly afraid that now, Joseph will take out much needed resentment. He now has the opportunity to gain revenge against his brothers.

But Joseph sees their fear and he reassures them that he will exact no punishment, no revenge. He understands that what happened happened for a purpose. He shows his true humility and he forgives them...He forgives his brother...Could you do that?

"Am I a substitute for God?" he asks...He shows himself to be the prototype of the religious soul. And a family has finally found peace.

It's hard to be truly forgiving. All of us carry around little hurts and misdeeds done to us. And when the party that hurts us approaches we shy away. I venture to guess, that sometimes we don't even want to hear words of apology because then we are forced to make a decision about forgiveness.

Joseph does not bring up the wrongdoings his brothers committed. He doesn't speak about the pain and shame he experienced. Rather, we find a moment of true spiritual generosity. But forgiveness not only releases he one who has done wrong, forgiveness liberates the victim.

Have you ever heard that humans can't really forgive? Forgiveness is Divine, God forgives, people do not!

According to the Rambam this isn't true. He said: It is forbidden to be obdurate and not be appeased. On the contrary one should allow oneself to be easily pacified...When asked by an offender for forgiveness; one should forgive with a sincere mind and willing spirit.

Maimonides goes even further to indicate that one can be forgiving even when the offender is incapable of apology...It's referred to as "*middat hassidut*"...a quality of the pious.

So it's not that only God forgives, human beings can forgive also. God forgives sins against God. We forgive wrong doings against each other...

But it seems from the Joseph story that true forgiveness can only be given when there is the realization of real change.

A number of years ago Nelson Mandela established a truth and reconciliation process in South Africa. And that was an extraordinary event in modern human history. It led to a form of forgiveness that could only occur after the admission of wrong doing and guilt. And that is an incredible story. We all believed that apartheid would only die with a blood bath of the white population. In spite of all South Africa's problems the transformation occurred. Apartheid is being dismantled. It is an amazing story in the annals of human history. It is contained in the spirit of a man and his followers who pursue forgiveness.

Yet, we believe there are crimes so heinous that forgiveness is not possible. That's the experience of post Holocaust Jewry, our experience. And we all know it and feel it. And it has created a terrible burden for us. Because it creates so much mistrust and fear and resentment and hostility...Maybe that's why the words we use as a community are "*al tishkach*" DO NOT FORGET rather than do not forgive. For that's truly a case where it is only in the hands of God. But that's how true evil continues to pollute even after it's long gone.

Politically, the divisions we have seen amongst our people have lead to our own destruction. And personally, the divisions we see in families also lead to destruction. I see it weekly, accessing, truly accessing the capacity to forgive...changes the course of the world...

So let's get back to Jimmy Carter? You know many in Israel and around the world believe that the work Carter did with Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat at Camp David was the greatest single contribution by an American President to Israel's life, security and peace...Our community has forgotten that. In light of all his naïve misspoken works, perhaps anti-Semitism, perhaps stupidity. And for some reason decided to ask for forgiveness...

I know there are communal leaders who say it is only self serving. I'm know there are rabbis and leaders who say "he did it to get his grandson elected to Congress!" And there are leaders who say "it's not a real apology...he didn't list his transgressions..." And will have meetings about this and conferences about this...But in the end what do you say? Can you forgive? It is our attitude. "I'll never forgive that son of a b...."

After reading the story of Joseph this week I've changed my own opinion. I don't know his motivation. I don't even know whether or not the apology is ultimately meaningful. But, I realize this man, this world leader said to the Jewish people: "I AM SORRY." It is like Pope John XXII in the early sixties. I can't say "NO YOU'RE NOT." I wouldn't dare call for an inquiry into sincerity...I'd prefer to say...Mr. President: I humbly accept your apology. It takes a man to apologize.

And as for the future...Well, I don't know.

Without the ability to forgive there is no hope to the resolution of conflict. The result is ongoing division, factionalism and competing groups. That's what keeps tribes from advancement. Like the Hatfield's and the McCoy's they will resent each other till the

time. They have no idea as to why they resent each other, and they will remain red necks.

Joseph's forgiveness forms the bridge between Genesis and Exodus. He was freed from slavery; it was the result of family life that was tortured with resentment.

Those who truly want to be free need to learn to truly forgive and have to forgive each other...we have to forgive ourselves. When we do that, we are free. Imagine if in the Palestinian psyche there was the capacity to say in spite of their narrative of being tossed from their land – I forgive you. Imagine if in the Israeli psyche there was the capacity to look at the past – violence and death and say, I forgive you. Perhaps it's too hard to imagine, but it will be the key to peace and freedom.

Forgiveness is that quality that allows us to transcend our present situation and improve the world. If we listen to the voices of Joseph, the directions Maimonides, we may want to try.

It's not easy. Not at all. But, at least considering the struggle of forgiveness. And so I say to you...be a little more forgiving.

Shabbat Shalom. And yes...have a good and Happy New Year.