

2008-10-12 Forgive or Relive
Mark Belletini and Meg Barnhouse

Opening Words

We are here
to see ourselves in the mirror of this day
that we might know how to turn
toward the days to come with deep honesty.
Today may we remember that we are free
to be who we are, not what we were. Amen.
In gathered community we dare to say:

And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.

Sequence

The leaves are falling.
Let my belief that my worries
are dials with which I control the world also fall.
The leaves are falling.
Let my belief that if I expect nothing good,
then I'll never be disappointed also fall.
The leaves are falling.
Let my pre-emptive self-doubts also fall.
The leaves are falling.
Let my steaming impatience fall away too.
The leaves are falling.
Let my self-lashing about not accomplishing
everything I wanted to do fall away too.
O Silence, you whom I neither create nor erase,
come now, like the autumn breezes.
Shake my branches.
Strip them of what is dry and no longer vital,
no matter how beautiful they appear to be.
And let them fall, fall, fall way.

silence

Silence, you hold all names within your center. The living and the dead,
the old and the young, the troubled and the joyful, the worried and the hopeful.

Bring us too into your center as we name the names important in our hearts...those we love and miss, those who are suffering, those who are struggling. In our quiet hearts, or in this quiet room, we name them...

naming

Song of peace, lead us to peace.
Let your beauty grant us rest and
diminish our faith in worrying.
Let your beauty remind us that,
come day or night,
we are part of the beauty too...
the beauty of the world,
the beauty of storms passing,
the beauty of forgiveness,
the beauty of being stubborn no more
and opening to the possible.

The First Reading *is a cautionary folktale from the Hebrew Scriptures; it's even possible that it's organically related to a very similar story in Greek mythology, called Agamemnon and Iphigenia, since they date from the same era. We don't know its origin, save that it was written down in its present form at the same time as the Torah was finally edited. In the English Bible, the man's name is rendered Jephthah. In Hebrew, it's Yiftakh. The war between the Ammonites and the Israelites was not a war between two different nations, since the word Ammon simply means "compatriot." So we are talking about a civil war here.*

Yiftakh was an able warrior, the son of Gil'ad. But he was born of a sexual affair Gil'ad had, and his mother was not Gil'ad's wife. When his half-brothers, who were the sons of Gil'ad and his wife, grew up, they shunned him, and took away his inheritance. So Yiftakh left the town of Watchtower, and lived in the hills, gathering a rag-tag collection of ruffians around him. They lived by raiding local villages.

When the Ammonite people began a war with the Israelite people, leaders from his clan came to Yiftakh and said: "We want you to come and be our general." Yiftakh said: "You threw me out, and now you want me back!? So you only come to me when you are in trouble, is that it?" The clan elders, his brothers, said "We beg of you...we are asking in all sincerity."

So Yiftach gave in, and came to serve. At first he approached the Ammonite leaders, and tried to make peace with them. But they refused to respond to his pleas. So he prepared for battle. As he laid out the march for his men, he made the following vow to God: "If you give me victory, O Eternal One, then I promise to sacrifice as a burnt offering whatever comes out of the door of my house to greet me when I return home." Yiftach won the battle, a complete rout.

But when Yiftach arrived back home in Watchtower, where he lived, who should come out to greet him and welcome him home but his daughter, dancing, with tambourines rattling in her hand. She was his only child. On seeing her, he rent his garments, and cried out: "How low you have brought me! How depressed I am! For I have opened my mouth to the Eternal and I can't take it back!"

His daughter said, however: "Do to me as you have vowed. Just give me two months to mourn my death as just a teenager who will now never know a romantic relationship." So she did, wandering the hills grieving for her life, weeping with her companions and friends. Then she returned home, and her father did as he had vowed.

The Second Reading *this morning comes from poet Jacqueline Osherow, written in 1999. The Scroll of Ekah or Book of Lamentations which she quotes at the end, is a slim volume in the Hebrew Scriptures.*

Sonnet for Yom Kippur with a line from Lamentations

Can a person atone for pure bewilderment?
For hyperbole? For being wrong
in a thousand categorical opinions?
For never opening her mouth, except too soon?
For ignoring all week long, the waning moon
retreating from its haunt above the local
canyons, signaling her season to repent,
then deflecting her repentance with a song
because the rest is just too difficult to face?
What we are, I mean in all its meagerness,
the way we stint on any modicum of kindness?
What we allow ourselves? What we don't learn?
How each lapsed, unchanging year resigns us?
Return us, Lord, to you, and we'll return.

Sermon Meg Barnhouse (these are *notes* for a sermon, not the actual sermon itself. Please note...the recording of the actual *preached* sermon is still available.)

One of the things you hear over and over again from this pulpit is that church is for proclaiming liberty to the captives and setting the prisoners free. One way we are imprisoned is by not forgiving the wrongs that have been done to us. Our prison is our resentments and our replaying the wrong while waiting for an apology. When there is someone whose actions hurt you and keep hurting you, when your memory of what they did to you is re-lived over and over in your mind, they are living in your head. They are intruding on your life. They are plugged in to your energy grid, sucking life force and soul-force out of you. Booker T Washington, organizer and first president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, had a lifelong motto: "I shall allow no man to belittle my soul by making me hate him."

When I talk about wrongs done, some people will think about a fight they have had with a sibling or a friend, others will think of the boss who is making their lives hell, and still others brace themselves, wondering if I am going to say they have to forgive and forget incest or other abuse. What I want to ask is that you listen this morning as you are able, take what speaks to you, and let the rest go. You are the only one who can say where forgiveness is needed between you and another, between you and yourself, or between you and God. Some people live feeling that God hasn't forgiven them, and some people live as if they have not forgiven God. Why do we need to talk about forgiveness? Forgiveness is related to both emotional and physical healing. Every religion of the world says it's important. Feeling you have been wronged is not good for you. Holding on to impotent anger makes us cramped and closed. What is "impotent anger"? It is anger that is not doing anything for you, anger that has no fruitful power. It may be a collection of small grudges and resentments or it may be rage, but if the anger is not bearing good fruit for you in terms of moving you out of hurtful situations, protecting you from hurtful people, energizing you to do what you can to make things better for yourself. We may talk more about anger another Sunday.

Forgiveness is difficult because when we are wronged, we stiffen into self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is dangerous, the root of almost all wicked behavior. We have a picture in our mind that the one who wronged us should apologize. We start watching the movie of how it should be. We articulately explain our point of view with just the right amount of calm and just the right edge, and the ones who wronged us slap their heads in enlightenment, in realization. They say: "How wrong I was!!! You were right and I was wrong. What can I do to make it up to you?" We exercise our arguments, we polish our grudges. We repeat them to ourselves; we can drop into the groove of recrimination and resentment at a moment's notice; we can do it in our sleep. We lull ourselves with the recitation. The resentment can become part of who we are. Part of our personality's clothing, our identity. It feels good to be a righteous victim. We go to friends and get as many people as we can to hear our story. It is soul-satisfying to hear them say: "Oh NO she did not say that!"

There is nothing wrong with this if we do it in good faith. We are trying to validate our perceptions: "Would this make you mad? Is this person being a jerk, or is it me?" I have to say there is a lot to learn about yourself from watching to whom you go to tell your story. Some people are going to be on your side no matter what. Others will tell you if you are being a jerk. We go to the people we think will tell us what we are ready to hear. Many people are completely justified in feeling like a righteous victim. It's an archetypal role, an ancient one, and it may be appropriate for a time, but we have to watch out for it, as we do all well-defined roles, that we do not start sleep-walking, letting it make our choices for us. Forgiving requires a willingness to look at the harm being done to you by not beginning to forgive, looking at the stiffening righteousness. The harm is that you are stuck. You are also stuck to the person at whom you are angry. You cannot go anywhere without dragging them along with you. The harm is that you feel that other people might hurt you the same way. You become braced. Ready to be hurt, to be left, to be abandoned, to be betrayed. You don't have to look at yourself, if you are a victim of mean parents or two timing lovers. You get to be the right one. Being RIGHT is

a BIG part of not wanting to forgive. You can be right, absolutely. And still be hurt by harboring anger against the person who hurt you. The Course in Miracles, which some of you have studied, says: "You can be right or you can be happy."

One way to let go of someone and get your strength back is the resentment prayer. Ask for/wish for them everything you want for yourself. You don't have to mean it. Try it for fourteen days straight. It's amazingly powerful magic, and I'm not sure exactly how it works. Clarissa Pinkola Estes: "Forgiveness seems unrealistic because we think of it as a one-time act that had to be completed in one sitting. Forgiveness has many layers, many seasons. It is not all or nothing, if you can do a 95% forgiveness, you are a saint. 75% is wonderful. 60% is fine. Keep working/playing with it. The important things are to BEGIN and to CONTINUE.

For most of us, the day-to-day act of forgiveness is the art of forgiving ourselves. We make vows we can't keep. We end relationships when we said we would love the person forever. We tell our parents we will take care of them, and then we can't. We say we won't ever yell that way again, then we do. We say we will remember that our partner has our best interests at heart, then we forget and accuse them of treachery. How can we put one foot in front of the other when we fail so often? Forgiveness. We're human beings. We need the grace of forgiveness, from other people and from ourselves. This is a good day to remember that.

Song

Mark Belletini

Yes, today IS a good day, as our children's story made so delightfully clear, to lift our head up from its downward tilt, and look at each other face-to-face, and even to look at the sky...so radiant and blue, but totally invisible to anyone maintaining a resentment, an anger, a grudge, or any other emotional weight that keeps the head bent down, as under a heavy weight. Meg lifted up the point of that story delightfully.

But what of that other story, the one from the Hebrew scriptures, that starts off with a description of a family that sounds like an episode of Jerry Springer, and ends with a horrific Greek tragedy that hurts the heart?

In the first place, this very adult story, in one form or another, is found around the Mediterranean world...just like the story of the Great Flood, just like the story of the doomed greedy city of Gomorrah, and just like the story of the wealthy patriarch Abraham. Call him Croesus or call him Abraham...it makes little difference. Stories, after all, are true in the way they are true. They are not sober history, but they are sober invitations to get real.

That's right. Get real. For this holiday is about the reality of our human responsibility, not about our opinions about theology and God.

As I said once before, when I told the story of Avraham and Yitzak (Abraham and Isaac) which is usually retold on this day, the point is not “Obey God.” The point is not that we should be resigned to any demands made of us. The story says this: Avraham was a terrible father. I assure you, if a great voice were to come out of the sky, and say: “Take your son, whom you love, and offer him to me as a burnt offering,” the answer is not obedience, but “Hell, no!”

The stories attached to this holiday, in other words, tell us that we have to make up our own minds on our own moral understanding, and not follow the dictates of even an all-powerful God should such a being exist in some literal form with a voice and great power. *You must never harm children* is a higher authority than any voice that asks us to hurt or harm.

The Jephthah/Yiftakh story makes this even clearer. In this case, Yiftakh makes a vow to God. God is not asking him to do this. He is just foolishly showing off his piety before his troops. And they all hear him make his rash vow.

Who knows who he thought would greet him when he came home? Clearly not his daughter. The thing is, it makes no difference who he thought would come out to meet him. His dog, his valet, whoever...it was a stupid vow to make, a rash promise, a dramatic gesture to curry favor with his community.

And in this story, unlike the story of Avraham, the child is actually burnt on an altar as a sacrifice. She even encourages him to keep his word, though it means her death. She too is caught up in a system of community shame which is willing to let people suffer and die so that the controlling shame can be maintained.

Now Yom Kippur has to do with forgiveness, yes, but the religious thinkers behind this holiday understood that there were times when defiance was more important than reconciliation.

But when all the power is in the hand of the oppressor, what to do? Say “Hell No!” and be killed? Defy and let your children be killed?

Hard question. But the Kol Nidrei, the beautiful prayer of cancellation associated with this day, offers an amazing solution. The prayer is not biblical, but is from a period of history when the Christians of Spain forced the Jews to convert to Christianity, or leave their homeland and their heartland forever. Loving their land, many made outward conversions to spare themselves and their children. But on Yom Kippur, they would quietly go to hidden meeting place where their vows would be annulled. Why? Because they were not freely made, but in servitude. And human beings are for freedom, not servitude.

But Yiftakh was not being forced by anyone to make his vow. He was the general, the story said. He had power. He could do what he willed. But, he was caught up in a system of shame. He was ashamed to admit he had been a fool to make such a rash vow. He

yielded his great power to his troops to shame him into keeping a vow. In short, he rejected any God worthy of the name, and erected an idol called Shame. “A good general doesn’t go back on his word, on a vow!” he assumed they were saying. “A good leader is consistent!” Well, maybe they were saying it, maybe they weren’t. But Yiftakh lived his life as if their voices had more importance than the deeper truth of Love: “*Do not harm your children...ever. For any reason.*”

Yiftakh was resigned to the power of the culture which valued consistency and shame over any other value.

But Yom Kippur is about *not being resigned* to anything malevolent. As in Jacqueline Osherow’s poem: Can a person atone for letting each lapsed year resign us? Yes. Yes. Yes. We don’t atone, she says, just for the small things...for opening our trap when it was inadvisable, for being bewildered instead of understanding right away, like with all this financial nightmare seizing the world. For not noticing how beautiful the moon is because our face is turned to the ground, not the sky. No, this day, says the poet, is even to help us face our resignation, and to turn it around that we might weigh the world in the scales of justice and outrage, not submission and fatalism.

I don’t know about you, but this ancient Mediterranean folk tale still speaks to me today. Oh, I am not going to sacrifice my child, sure, but I often show little reluctance to sacrifice myself. I allow myself to feel pressured to make promises that are rash and foolish. Is anyone really pressuring me? Not that I can tell, any more than Yiftakh could tell. And, I don’t make them publicly, like Yiftakh, but unconsciously before my imagined peers. But I do make them.

My best friend Richard and I always have a talk about such unconscious vows at this time of the year, sometime during these Jewish High Holidays. We usually examine our lives together. This year I found myself saying to him that I too often put perfectionism before necessary bodily exercise, passion for my work before passion for my family (both of the blood kind and the heart kind) and the opinion of others before my own self-evaluation.

My Yom Kippur work this year is to begin to turn that around. What do we allow ourselves? the poet asks? What we don’t learn? How does each lapsed, unchanging year resign us? Can we turn around and go another direction? Yes, says the story of Grudgeville. Yes, says the poetry of Yom Kippur. Yes, says the story of Yiftakh in a most dramatic way. You turn from resignation by facing your child and saying, “I love you and would never harm you.” You turn from resignation by looking at your own face in the mirror of the Kol Nidrei and saying, “I love you and will never harm you by being faithful to foolish things instead of honest, loving ones.” You do it by revoking foolish vows, by refusing to bow to the idol of shame, and by remembering that Love is a deeper truth than anger, than guilt, and than the year’s resignation.

Offertory

Some folks contribute to this community
of life and love

by leadership, decision and vision.
Others, by teaching.
Others, by learning.
Others, by singing or dancing or playing or
engagement with the arts.
Most contribute financially too, via
a pledge that comes in electronically or by
mail. But many prefer to contribute during this
time of worship, celebration and thoughtfulness,
as a way of placing their gift in this context.
The offering will now be given and received.

Kol Nidrei

*All vows we have made
consciously or unconsciously, to live
an unexamined life are now cancelled
Gone are the promises we made because of pressure or praise.
Gone are the promises we made because of shame.
Gone are promises and vows we made because of habit, because of custom, or
because of confusion.
Gone they are, vanished! I see them no longer. They are no more.
Gone the excuses for why I can't live within my own truth, but must orbit some
other truth.
Gone the vows I made to confirm myself by jumping through someone else's
hoops.
Gone my vow to never have dreams, so I wouldn't offend anyone else.
Gone, vanished, just like that!
As magically as sunset,
as wondrously as moonset, it disappears,
this habit of refusing to live on the edge.*

*Cut is the knot of all the choices I did not make, could not make, would not make,
sundered by the sharp knife of this prayer,
just like that, just like that.
The paper is blank, the field is empty, the map has not been made.
The pretend guarantees, like morning dew have evaporated.
And thus now I no longer have to hide
in the shelter of guilt, but I can show up,
and be present to myself and to others.
Now I will no longer define myself
by my failings and the strains of my life.*

*Nishmat hayay tevarykh v'kherev libi yahshir: Kol od neshamah bekirbi.
The breath of my life will bless; the cells of my Being sing in gratitude,
awakening!*

Sung Portion with Litany

We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For remaining silent because of fear instead of yielding to our courage and speaking up out of our deep care and mindfulness:

We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For all the times when a sense of guilt or an unnamed fear kept us rigid, righteous, raw and resentful, and ready for rumors:

We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For each time we have moved toward anger and defensiveness instead of slowly welcoming the saving intrusion of the truth:

We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For each time we have moved toward the familiar and the comfortable alone, without taking the time to learn how to open to uniqueness and distinction:

We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For the times we have confused our feelings of loneliness with other things, such as our self-worth, or need to be approved:

We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For trying to be perfect when no measure of perfection is even possible in this life:

We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For trying to earn love, instead of living lovingly; for trying to control life rather than accepting it as a wondrous gift.

We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.

For these and for so many attitudes and actions, both obvious and not so obvious, which have fostered the illusion that we are truly separate from each other and completely self-derived...

We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.