

Shabbat 12 14 18 Sermon

We, the people in the House of Yisrael, we are familiar altogether with guilt. Not just guilt, but we know how to do guilt well. And I think that in the guilt Olympics, there's a running between the Jews and the Catholics, and I think to some degree we go neck and neck. We know the salutary benefit of guilt. We know that guilt is one of the fundamental building blocks of conscience, that our moral compass, the ability to know right from wrong, and the sense that we have in some way transgressed that sensibility, is part and parcel of guilt. To some degree, being able to say I've made a mistake, or to feel a pang of remorse having transgressed, or having in some way wronged another, is the way synagogues make a living.

People wouldn't come unless we had Yom Kippur, probably. Lots of people come on Yom Kippur. But one of the things that Yom Kippur teaches us over and over again every year is, that in the horizontal relationship between us and human beings, us and our friends, Yom Kippur isn't sufficient. It might be necessary, but it doesn't meet the standard. Something else is required. We have to actually go out and find the person that we have wronged, and we have to say sorry. And the other, to some degree or another, is required, when they are ready, to forgive. There are, of course, many things that are unforgivable, or so we imagine.

There are timelines for forgiveness. Not everyone's timeline is the same as someone else's. And what you forgive now, and what others forgive when they are ready, they're not the same. Each person's forgiveness ripens on their own tree, and falls at its own time.

But there's one thing that's hard to reconcile. It's maybe even more difficult, and it's kind of a subcategory of guilt, and it's not quite guilt. It's remorse. Remorse for something that I should have done differently. Remorse, maybe, when I'm not sure if I did it or not. Living with a sense of guilt, living with a sense of remorse. Not just guilt because I have transgressed, but because I could have done more. Had I had the ability, I wish that I could have, I wish that I should have. I never knew remorse until I became a father, in quite the same way. And I don't mean that in a heavy way. I just mean it like anybody who knows the feelings that come with the responsibility of having someone's future dependent upon the way that you behave to them. The thickness, the heaviness of that burden, that blessing. Wow. You're going to be in therapy in 15 years for what I didn't do. Unbelievable.

And it's not just an interesting conversation. It's not just an interesting moment. It's not just a funny Upper West Side liberal Jewish, oh, hi, everybody has a therapist around the corner from here. It's not just that. It affects us on every level. The things that we carry, the things that we carry with us through the years, the remorse, the regret, the if I could have and I should have and why didn't I and all of that, 100 Yom Kippurim, it can still live there, yearning for some way to be released, to be discovered, to be recovered, to be healed.

Every year at this time of the year, as the angels above watch over us, we are in the journey, in the Torah, that is the journey of Joseph and the brothers, and the journey of the Joseph and the brothers, the story of the Joseph and the brothers, which begins in chapter 37 of the book of Bereshit in Genesis, is a story of forgiveness. Fundamentally, the story is about healing and about unity. It is about missed opportunities, but then a happy ending.

The story of Joseph and the brothers is a meditation on the capacity of the human being to turn to someone who has hurt them and harmed them and say, I forgive you. For those of you who need a quick refresher on Joseph, Joseph is, of course, the product, he's the privileged one, he's the pampered one, he's the one who has the coat of many colors, he's hated by the brothers, oh, they hate him, they throw him into a pit, he rises from rags to riches, he comes out of the pit and becomes Moshele, he becomes the ruler, second only to Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the entire world. A

and Joseph, of course, orchestrates a wonderful scene where the brothers, in this week's Torah portion, will finally be confronted by Joseph, and Joseph will be confronted by his brother Judah, and Joseph will come on out. He'll tell them, I'm your brother, I'm alive, trust me, it's me, I don't look the same, but trust me, I know, the hair do everything, I'm wearing clothing, my name is Tafaponeach, I'm not exactly like I was, but I'm you, you're like, look, hi, I'm speaking to you in Hebrew. And thus far in the story, when the story will kind of appear to us, the obvious characters who need forgiveness will be forgiven. The ones who transgress, the ones who live with the guilt of having knowingly and intentionally harmed another human being.

But the text tomorrow morning will bring us into something much more insidious that I wanted to bring up tonight, it's something that's on my heart and mind, and I hope that it is for you too. Someone who isn't obviously needing forgiveness in the text, but someone whom the text would never burst out and say, here's someone who made a mistake. Here it is. Someone, so listen here, someone who only in the text, hinting and winking at us, and in the way that the rabbis unpack the text, which we'll do in a minute, invites us into a meditation on the kind of release that many of us, and many of us can offer, and many of us need. The Torah will tell us tomorrow morning that after Joseph has forgiven the brothers, he says, hey, is dad still living? And they'll say, yes! They'll say, great! And then he'll send the brothers back and say, quickly, Maharoo, hurry up and bring my father down. Hurry up.

That's great, hurry up. But the brothers are thinking to themselves, hurry up, how are we going to convince him that he's still living? And the Torah will come to that. The Torah says that the brothers come back to Jacob. Chapter 46, tomorrow morning, they come up from Egypt, they come to Jacob. And they tell him, Joseph is alive. You can only imagine.

I mean, just stop for a moment and think, maybe we should have had a long pause before they said those words. Maybe the whole sentence should have been at the end of a long, empty space. Because they were nervous, or like, is there any run-up? Like, sit down, dad, we have something to tell you. Nothing. Just, they blurted it out. Great. So, what happens? And Jacob has like a mini heart attack. His heart, he faints. His heart misses a beat.

He didn't believe them. And then, listen to this, and then we're going to go deep, and a little bit complicated, but then we're going to come out, I promise. So, sit up. And they tell Jacob everything Joseph had said. So, they tell Joseph's words to Jacob. Jacob gets like the full exposure, the whole transcript of everything that Joseph had said to the brothers. He gives it all. And then the text tells us, And Jacob saw the wagons, this word, say it with me, agalot. One more time, agalot. It means wagons, like a wheel. They saw the wagons that Joseph had sent to take him, to lift him up. And then, the verse tells us, then Jacob was enlivened. Jacob woke up. Jacob was vatechi, became full of life. So, the rabbis who read the Torah say, they

tell Jacob everything that Joseph said. Great. Then Jacob should have said, I'm alive. But the text tells us that he saw these agalot, these chariots, and then he woke up.

What's with the chariots? What did the chariots have that awakened Jacob? And so, the rabbis say this, It's an amazing midrash. Amazing rabbinic gloss. Listen to this. It said, this was a little hint between Joseph and Jacob. It wasn't the simple meaning of the text, which was, Jacob saw these big airplanes that he sent, these big agalot, these big chariots. That's the simple meaning of the text. The rabbis say, no, that's not what was happening. You see, Jacob and Joseph used to learn Torah together. Forget it for a moment that the Torah had not yet been given, but they used to learn Torah together.

And the Torah that they were dealing with in their weekly sessions before Joseph's being sold down the Nile River was a strange parshah, a strange story, a strange set of laws in the book of Deuteronomy that have the word eglah, which means calf. For the rabbis, that's enough to hang their midrashic hats on. They say agalah means a chariot. Eglah means a calf. They're not connected, but they sound alike. The rabbis say that Joseph sent the chariots to trigger the memory of Jacob to say, you know that I'm alive, because who else would have told you about the agalah that we were learning before I was thrown into the pit? But the choice of the rabbis to say what they were learning was a particular part of the book of Deuteronomy is significant for all of us.

And here, if you've slept for the last five minutes, wake up, I'm coming in. They were learning eglah rufah, the specific Deuteronomic text that has to do when someone is killed between two cities. And the two cities, we don't know who is responsible for this murder. And they do this crazy ritual where they take a calf and they have to kill the calf and then the elders of each of the cities have to come over and they have to wash their hands and say, our hands are not responsible for this murder.

Joseph sends his father a message. He says to him, maybe you remember, dad, that you were the one that sent me to meet my brothers back in chapter 37. Maybe you, Jacob, have been holding for 22 years a sense that maybe you could have done more. Maybe it was your fault that I was sent to Egypt. Maybe you think in therapy in the land of Canaan that if only you had treated Joseph the right way and not sent him down there, his whole life would have been different. He sends him the Eglah, the chariot slash Deuteronomic legal section of innocence. Your hands are clean, he says to his dad. It wasn't your fault. You are off the hook. You are off the hook. And Jacob is enlivened.

Jacob says, wow. Just to think for a moment for all of us here, just to think for a moment for all of us, the impediments to reconciliation because of excessive guilt. That the rabbis are saying that Jacob potentially might have not wanted to see his son because of his fear that his son would hate him, that his son would blame him, that he would rather in a moment imagine not reconciling with Joseph, not going down to Egypt for a moment until he could hear the words, I don't blame you, dad. I don't blame you. You did the best you could.

And in one reading of a Hasidic rabbi, the Berditchev rabbi, the word Eglah is also Igul, means a circle. The rabbi Berditchev says that Joseph said, life is a circle, Pop. I was down, then I was up. It wasn't your fault. There was a bigger plan going on for me. There was a bigger plan going on for me. And fundamentally the Torah is telling us is that there are those

of us who refuse to accept responsibility, always imagining ourselves innocent even when we're not. And in those moments we play children. But there are those of us, like Jacob here in the story in the rabbi's reading, who take too much responsibility excessively even when they're not guilty and then they act like God. Joseph says to Jacob, really, you're to blame? Not just I want to let you off the hook, I want you to know you can't control everything, dad. I was going to be who I was going to be. I was going to be me. I was going to be the dreamer. I was going to be me. And I forgive you. I don't blame you.

I'll tell you something. Many of you don't know this, but 30 years after the space shuttle Challenger exploded, there was a guy named Robert Eberling. He had concealed a terrible secret. He felt personally responsible for the shuttle's destruction. He and four of his colleagues had warned NASA that leaking jet fuel would cause the shuttle to blow up. They didn't listen. He was burdened by guilt and depression. He retired immediately after the disaster in 1986. And for 25 years, he spent his time tending to a bird refuge near his home in Brigham City, Utah. Robert Eberling. He's 89 years old, and he's won national awards for being a volunteer, but nobody knew the kind of guilt that he carried, the kind of shame that he held, the kind of thickness and the heaviness, the burden not of guilt, but of remorse for something that he needed to be released from, and so NPR kind of did a story about him. He's dying from cancer now, and he believed that he was responsible for this disaster, and as soon as people saw his story, they did something amazing.

They filled his home with letters and cards telling them how much they admired him, and that the magnitude of the response brought an absolution to the final stages of his life. His daughter said he carried a burden for so long he's finally able to let it go. 22 years, Jacob didn't see his son, and every one of those 22 years, each one of those days, 365 times, 22, he woke up in the morning and said to himself, why did I send my son out to see his brothers? And it's so true, right? It's so true that sometimes this kind of scenario doesn't end so nicely.

It is so true that sometimes there isn't such a poochy-moochy ending. It's not so romantic. It's not all kind of Hollywood. But come on. Isn't it true that someone you know might be holding a burden like this that you can release them from? Isn't it true that maybe some of us in this room tonight, maybe me, maybe you, also need to hear you did the best you could? Isn't it true that if someone were to send Agallo chariots to give you a sense of how it was that you were to move forward, maybe one of the things that you would need to hear is, I don't hold it against you. I let you off the hook. I take responsibility for my life. It's a circle. My destiny was my destiny.

One of my favorite, favorite, favorite things is a little book I have at home called Letters to God from Children. Anybody ever see that little book? Letters to God from Children. Go get one. It's so great. Dear God, you know, what does beget mean? Dear God, dear God. The book ends with this last one from Frank, little boy, four years old. This was the great Houston Smith, great theologian, great religious scholar. This was his favorite prayer. He knew all the prayers. He knew, like, the conigraine. He knew the, you name it. And this was his favorite prayer. It goes like this. It says, Frank, dear God, I'm doing the best I can. Love, Frank.

Being human, just human, I'm just human can be an alibi, but it can also be the truth. We can't control all the circumstances now that we can't control what others can do. We can't control. There's so much that we can't control. We need the wisdom, the courage to acknowledge the things we can, the things we can't. But here in this story, this evening and maybe for you tonight and this Shabbat is a meditation. It's an invitation to potentially say, I did the best I could. I did the most I could. The story's bigger than me. The story's bigger than me.

So take a moment now. Close your eyes just for a second. Take like 10 seconds, 15 seconds. Who in your life would you need to call up and say, I let you off the hook. I let you off the hook. You've been holding it for so long. You did the best you could do. And now if you give me just 15 more seconds, who in your life, in your dream, in your fantasy would send you that message? I forgive you. I let you off the hook. And Joseph sent word. And Jacob saw. Jacob saw that it was good. And Jacob lived again.

Please rise.