

**Making Room for Forgiveness – Sermon – Yom Kippur Evening
September 21, 2007 – Rabbi Larry Karol**

It was almost a miracle that they survived. Ted and Dawn Maki were traveling on their weekly run for the United States Postal service between their home in Missoula, Montana and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Ted, who had, in recent years, returned to health from a stroke and a bone marrow transplant, and his wife Dawn, a breast cancer survivor, have been driving a tractor-trailer rig together for the last 10 years. They expected that their trip in late August would be the same as all the others. But it wasn't.

Ted was driving on Interstate 90 just outside Fairmont, Montana, when something smashed the windshield. He knew only later that a 10-pound bowling ball had been dropped from an overpass. The bowling ball hit Ted in the face, knocking him unconscious. The truck rolled across the median into the oncoming lanes, narrowly missing one vehicle, and careened into a cornfield where it finally came to a halt. Dawn, who had been resting in the sleeper compartment, had no idea what had happened until she saw Ted slumped over and bleeding and she noticed the bowling ball on the floor. After the police and ambulances came to the accident scene, Ted was airlifted to the Mayo clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where he was treated for his injuries and began his recovery.

I am sure that many of you have heard stories about similar attacks where someone dropped a heavy object from an overpass to hit random cars passing below. This incident made the national news. NBC's Ann Curry spoke with Ted and Dawn on the Today show, and what captured my attention during the interview was their response. Ted told Ann Curry, "The way I look at life is you just take what comes your way and deal with it the best you can and get to work putting it behind you." Dawn added, "I just feel if someone was stupid enough to do this, then they really have problems, and they're going to have a hard life ahead of them....Or, if they were mean or evil enough to want to hurt somebody, then they are hurt deep inside....it's really sad they have to go through life like that."

**Making Room for Forgiveness – Sermon – Yom Kippur Evening
September 21, 2007 – Rabbi Larry Karol**

Dawn said that she and her husband wouldn't spend their time off their weekly drive feeling sorry for themselves or angry at whoever nearly killed them. She simply said, "Life is too short."

How many of us could respond with such magnanimity in a situation like this? What might we have expected to hear from Ted and Dawn? I would have thought that they would be searching for the perpetrator who caused them pain. They could still be involved in a court case if the offender is ever apprehended, but what impressed me was the compassion they showed the unseen culprit. They didn't absolve him – or her – of guilt. After their unexpected ordeal, they simply wanted to move forward with their lives.

What Ted and Dawn Maki did was to forgive. One perceptive dictionary defines "forgive" as "giving up" resentment. That is just what the Makis did. They realized that ongoing anger at the stranger who hurt them wouldn't enhance their lives. So, they forgave – they gave up the resentment that could have taken up too much space in their minds and souls.

This approach to forgiveness is somewhat different than the perspective presented in some of our High Holy Day prayers. The confession of sin in tomorrow morning's service directs us to offer forgiveness to people who have hurt us and to seek forgiveness from those whom we have hurt in some way. This season of the year calls on us to try to "make peace with each other," to bring about reconciliation. Forgiveness is very much about relations between people. But it is also about "giving up resentment" – letting go of the anger and bitterness that can prevent us from having any hope of eventual reconciliation with someone else, or even from moving forward in our own attitudes and our own personal growth. This internal forgiveness can help us overcome any tendency we may have to bear grudges, to view our relationships through the lens of past disappointments, and to be overwhelmed by lingering hurt that can take on a dark

life of its own.

Rabbi Harold Kushner has explained, “Forgiveness is not a favor we do for the person who offended us. It is a favor we do for ourselves, cleansing our souls of thoughts and memories that lead us to see ourselves as victims and make our lives less enjoyable. When we understand that we have little choice as to what other people do but we can always choose how we will respond to what they do, we can let go of those embittering memories.” After he gave a sermon on forgiveness, a woman approached Rabbi Kushner, telling him about her difficulty in forgiving her ex-husband who had hurt her deeply. He said to her, “Yes, I want you to forgive.....Not to excuse him, not to say that what he did was acceptable, but to forgive...as a way of saying that someone who would” hurt you “has no right to live inside your head any more than he has a right to live inside your house. Why are you giving [him] the power to turn you into a bitter, vengeful woman? He doesn’t deserve that power over you.”

Dr. Fred Luskin is the director and cofounder of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project. Luskin, a Ph. D. in counseling and health psychology, wrote in his book FORGIVE FOR GOOD about an approach he developed that could accomplish exactly what Rabbi Kushner suggested to the woman who found herself unable to forgive. Dr. Luskin’s book was born out of his own hurt – a friend of his started dating a woman who didn’t like Dr. Luskin, for some unknown reason. The friendship waned and then disappeared. Luskin didn’t know what happened or why he and his best friend had grown apart. The next thing he knew, his friend and the woman he was dating had gotten married and Luskin hadn’t been invited to the wedding. He recognized that he was harboring pent-up anger, resentment and disappointment for this unexplainable end to a friendship. Luskin realized that if he and his former best friend were ever to become friends again, which eventually did happen, he would have to let go of the

**Making Room for Forgiveness – Sermon – Yom Kippur Evening
September 21, 2007 – Rabbi Larry Karol**

feelings of hurt that had welled up inside of him. Luskin began doing workshops on forgiveness. He even counseled Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland to help them overcome grief and pain they suffered when loved ones died during that long-standing conflict. Based on his own experience, and his forgiveness work, Dr. Luskin asserted that people who have hurt us have no right to “rent space in our minds” and our souls. When he would meet with people individually and in workshops, Luskin would ask if they had a “grievance story” – an intricate tale of a particular person who had done them wrong, in which the speaker was the clear victim and the perpetrator an unmistakable villain. Often, the people Luskin interviewed intimated that they would tell their story to anyone who listened. But some of them realized that as they told their tale of being wronged more and more, fewer and fewer co-workers, family members and friends wanted to listen. Luskin noted that his interviewees had created in their minds a list of rules that they insisted other people should follow – rules that were, in fact, unenforceable, because it’s hard to make another person – even a spouse, a parent, a child, or a best friend – change his or her behavior without such a change coming from within. Luskin suggested that we can’t force other people to act the way we want them to act, but we can wish that they would take on a more accepting or cooperative attitude that might improve a personal or working relationship. Finally, Luskin said that offering forgiveness, giving up anger and resentment, can improve our physical health. We actually might feel better when our souls are no longer bound to the pain of the past. Luskin defined forgiveness as “a feeling of peace that emerges as you take your hurt less personally, take responsibility for how you feel, and become a hero instead of a victim in the story you tell. Forgiveness is the experience of peacefulness in the present moment. Forgiveness does not change the past, but it changes the present. Forgiveness means that even though you are wounded, you choose to hurt and suffer less. Forgiveness means

**Making Room for Forgiveness – Sermon – Yom Kippur Evening
September 21, 2007 – Rabbi Larry Karol**

you become part of the solution. Forgiveness is the understanding that hurt is a normal part of life. Forgiveness is for you and no one else. You can forgive and rejoin a relationship or forgive and never speak to the person again.” Luskin clarified that forgiveness doesn’t mean condoning the unkind, inconsiderate, or selfish behavior of someone who caused us hurt. It means that we turn our tale of being a victim into a chronicle of how we survived the pain of another person’s thoughtlessness, enabling us to help others with our newfound wisdom and, possibly, to face the person or people who hurt us based in the confidence of the present rather than in the resentment of the past.

In her book God Whispers, Rabbi Karyn Kedar echoed this approach to forgiveness. “It is called forgiveness” she wrote, “because you give away anger and resentment. To surrender your anger is not to capitulate, or to lose ground or to give in. You surrender to a softer place, a place of peace, not strife. At this moment of surrender, you realize the beauty of your own path. That it is not only the obvious blessings that help your life emerge, but also the struggles. When anger is replaced by forgiveness, you are free to let love guide your life.”

Offering such forgiveness inside of ourselves takes courage. Forgiving others who have caused us pain so that we can move on with our lives is also an act that takes resolve and, perhaps, even greater courage. Eva Mozes Kor, a survivor of Auschwitz, and her twin sister Miriam were subject to infamous and cruel medical experiments conducted by Dr. Josef Mengele. In recent years, Eva decided that she needed to do something with her pain – not in any way to condone the actions of the Nazis and Mengele in particular, but to move herself from the feeling of being a powerless victim to a sense of emerging as a triumphant survivor who had overcome the dark memories of her captivity. Over a decade ago, Eva Mozes Kor, at an event commemorating the 50th anniversary of liberation, Eva offered a letter of forgiveness to one of the doctors at Auschwitz who had not taken part in the

**Making Room for Forgiveness – Sermon – Yom Kippur Evening
September 21, 2007 – Rabbi Larry Karol**

experiments. During that commemoration, the doctor signed a document attesting to the true nature of what happened at Auschwitz in order to bear witness. After the ceremony, Eva Mozes Kor said, “I felt immediately a burden of pain was lifted from my shoulders. That I was no longer a prisoner of my tragic past. That I was no longer a victim. That I was finally free.” She commented further, “Forgive your worst enemy. It will heal your soul. It will set you free.” Reactions to Eva’s approach have not always been positive. There are many people who vehemently disagree with her choice to forgive. Eva Kor assured other survivors that she took this action only for herself, for her own feelings, and not to absolve any of the perpetrators for their guilt, cruelty and inhumanity. Perhaps we will watch the film about Eva Mozes Kor in the coming months to consider how we feel about her act of forgiveness.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, recently spoke at the convention of the Islamic Society of North America, an organization that includes in its most recent position statement this declaration: “The Islamic Society of North America remains consistent in its rejection of terrorism and violence. ISNA rejects all acts of terrorism, including those perpetrated by Hamas, Hizbullah and any other group that claims Islam as their inspiration. ISNA has encouraged and continues to encourage a just and fair settlement of disputes between Israel, the Palestinians and their neighbors through diplomacy and other peaceful means.” In his talk, the first by a Jewish leader at a conference of that organization, Yoffie attacked those in politics, the media and in religious communities who demonize Muslims. He called for open dialogue between Muslims and Jews and an end to racial profiling. He also emphasized the dangers of religious extremism and asked American Muslims to assist in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There have been mixed reactions on the both the Jewish and Muslim sides to Rabbi Yoffie’s appearance before this group. Some of my rabbinic

**Making Room for Forgiveness – Sermon – Yom Kippur Evening
September 21, 2007 – Rabbi Larry Karol**

colleagues felt that Rabbi Yoffie was condoning the most extreme views of some members of this organization. Evidently, some Muslims at the Conference felt that Yoffie's appearance meant that their organization was condoning actions by the State of Israel which they oppose. On at least one level, this talk was about forgiveness – that is, giving up past resentments and preconceived notions in order to move forward. That is what Dr. Luskin found helpful for the participants in his study with people from Northern Ireland. He called that study the HOPE project – where h.o.p.e stands for Healing Our Past Experience. It is likely that there will be no peace in the Middle East unless people can do just that – heal their past experience in order to be able to face each other and develop fresh perspectives on how to live side by side. Following Rabbi Yoffie's talk at the conference, there will be increased efforts to arrange Jewish-Muslim dialogues throughout the country to create greater understanding and ongoing relationships between members of the American Jewish and Muslim communities.

Dialogue, letting go of resentment, and forgiveness are all necessary for making peace between nations and communities. They are essential when we try to develop positive relationships with other people. They are crucial for maintaining good feelings about ourselves inside. Yes, there are people who have hurt us through committing many of the acts that are mentioned in our confessional prayers on Yom Kippur. But we need not see ourselves only as victims of those acts. We are, in fact, more powerful than that. We can feel a greater sense of self-assurance when we recognize that we have learned lessons and survived the hurt and pain caused by others through gossip, narrow-mindedness, arrogance, hypocrisy, hatred, violence, selfishness and deceit. We don't have to condone those actions, but we do have an opportunity to let go of pain and hurt that might hold us back. Taking Dr. Fred Luskin's lead, we can choose to see ourselves as heroes

**Making Room for Forgiveness – Sermon – Yom Kippur Evening
September 21, 2007 – Rabbi Larry Karol**

who are able to move forward through our own resolve, and through a generosity of spirit towards ourselves that can give us peace of mind and soul.

There is a story of a young first-grader named Patrick who had a run-in with several second grade boys who bullied him almost daily. On one occasion, they ran by him on the way home from school and pushed him face first into a snow bank. Patrick, feeling humiliated and hurt, realized that he was standing by the home of his sister's piano teacher, Mrs. Boutellon. He found a temporary refuge on her front stoop, where he sat and cried tears of anger, outrage and frustration. Mrs. Boutellon had seen what happened to Patrick from inside her home, so she went to the front door and let Patrick in. She brushed away the snow from his face and fixed him some hot cocoa. In a moment, Patrick felt much better. Mrs. Boutellon said to him, "You are angry at these boys for what they did to you, Patrick, and it is natural for you to feel that way. But now you must let it go. This day has other things to give you." Patrick found out years later that Mrs. Boutellon was a survivor of the Holocaust, and that out of her story of survival, she had given him the wisdom that must have sustained her through difficult times.

Our pain, our resentments, and our frustrations with what has happened to us in the distant or recent past may be very real to us. They may accompany us at every moment, causing us to rent space in our minds to past hurts that may take on a life of their own. Forgiveness – letting go - giving away anger in favor of wisdom and personal strength and growth – can enable us to pick ourselves up from the snow, brush off our faces, and see the world anew. This day – every day – has other things to give us. May this Yom Kippur be a Day of Atonement that empowers us to discover a new sense of who we are and who we can be on each new day this year and in the years to come. And let us say Amen.