

*Rabbi Mark Mallach Sermons
Temple Beth Ahm – Springfield, NJ
October 2006*

- [*Kol Nidrei - Sun Oct 1st, 2006*](#)
- [*YOM KIPPUR Mon Oct 2nd*](#)
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Erev tov v`Tzam Kal – An Easy Fast.

Dear friends, this is the holiest night of the year and it is a time for looking inside and for thinking about what we are doing with our lives. And so, let me begin by asking you personal and perhaps painful questions. I won't ask you to raise your hand, but can you think of the name of someone who has deeply hurt you within the last 5 years? Within the last 10 years? And within the last 15 years?

The telephone rings in my study in my former congregation; the voice says: "My father has died." Of course, arrangements for the funeral must be made and I say: "I would like to meet the family."

The voice on the other end hesitates, "It's not going to be that easy Rabbi."

"Why? Are your sons out of town?"

"They are in town all right, but the boys haven't spoken to each for over 10 years. They won't sit in the same room together."

"But it's their father," I reply.

The other voice says, "**I know, I know.**"

We human beings are so made that we do not easily forget those who have hurt us. Whether it was 5, 10 or 15 years ago, their names are quickly recalled, are they not?

Another question: and this, for sure, don't answer out loud. If you had the person who hurt you or your family in your power right now; what would you do to that person?

I don't think that I want to hear the answer to that question. And yet, we have come into this room tonight in order to pray that God will forgive and forget the sins that we have committed, and we have come into this room tonight in order to pray for the ability to reconcile with and to **forgive** each other.

So which is it? Is forgiveness towards those that have hurt us something that is **beyond** human ability to do? Or is forgiveness possible?

I know that these are not easy questions to answer. The fact is we long suffer the **deep scars** of hurt. Forgiveness is so difficult and often seemingly **impossible**.

But, if forgiveness is **impossible**, then Yom Kippur is a **waste** of time, and we would be better off spending the day somewhere else than here in the synagogue. On the other hand, if forgiveness is possible, and within our power, then we ought to set about working to **do it now**. So that we do not have to go through the New Year carrying this burden of unresolved anger, bitterness and pain inside that warps our lives.

What if the person who has hurt us has never admitted it and has never apologized? In such a case, why should we, and how can we, **forgive**? How can a Holocaust survivor **forgive**? How can the victims and families of terrorism **forgive**?

Truth be told, I don't really have the answers to these questions of whether or when or how to forgive, I really don't. I think that these are questions that each person has to work out for him or herself. Do **I** have the right to tell someone who has been betrayed by a friend, or who has been cheated or humiliated or harmed that I think that they should forgive and forget? **I** am not going to presume to tell you what you should do tonight. But I want to share with you a remarkable story and let you draw your own conclusions from it.

I found this story in a book that I read this summer: The Railway Man, by Eric Lomax. The book describes this man's experiences while a prisoner of war during WWII, and his efforts to rebuild his life after the war.

Eric Lomax was captured by the Japanese and was a prisoner of war for 3 years. For several weeks, he was kept in solitary confinement. And, at least once a day he was beaten and tortured. He began to hate his captors, especially the one who was the most brutal of them all, the one who was called 'the Interpreter.'

After the war, Lomax would **dream** of the **revenge** he would exact upon the man who tortured him if he ever got the chance.

And then, in 1989, Lomax read an article about a man named Na—ga--si Ta—ka--shi and he recognized the man in the picture; it was his nemesis, the Interpreter! It turned out that after the war Na—ga--si Ta—ka--shi had repented for what he and his people had done.

When Lomax saw the article, the fact that this man had repented did not matter to him. This was his chance for **revenge**.

Lomax traveled to Japan with the intent to finally carry out his long-dreamed revenge. But when the two men came face to face, and Lomax saw how old and frail his enemy now was and learned how he suffered from the evil he had committed; he found that he could not raise a **hand** against him.

At the end of his book, Lomax writes: “If I had **never** been able to put a name to the face of the man who had harmed me so much, and if I had never discovered that behind that face there was also a damaged life, the nightmares that I endured for so many years and the dreams of revenge that I experienced so many times, would have continued. Now I know that remembering evil in itself is not enough. **It only hardens hatred.**” Thus, Lomax was finally able to let go of the hatred that had **poisoned** his soul for so long.

And so this is my wish for all of us tonight: Most of us have not been treated nearly as brutally as Eric Lomax was. And yet our scars are **deep**, and it is no comfort to tell us that someone else’s suffering was greater than ours. And most of us will probably not be as fortunate as Eric Lomax was. We will never get to meet those who caused us pain years ago, and if we do, we will not get to see how deeply the pain that they caused us has affected them. Most of us will never get to hear our old enemies apologize and ask us for forgiveness. They likely think that they were right in what they did to us, and they no longer lose a minute’s sleep over what they did to us, if they ever did.

And yet, I am deeply moved by this story of the reconciliation between Lomax and Ta ka shi. If they could come to terms with what one did so savagely, so cruelly, so brutally, to the other, than perhaps there is hope for us as well.

Is there **truly** hope for reconciliation in this world of ours? Robert Dewey, in his book, The Language of Faith, tells the story of a man and a teenager who share a train ride.

The seat next to the teen, he was maybe 17 or 18 years old, was the only empty seat. As this man sat down next to the teen he noticed that his face seemed etched with anxiety.

The train chugs along, when suddenly, the teen turns and asks the man does he know when the train will arrive in Smithville.

The man asks, “Smithville, is that where you live?” “I used to.” is the reply, and then the teen spills out his story: When he was 14, he had done something so wrong, so hurtful to his family that he ran away from home, and now, he has decided to return to his father’s house.

The man asks the teen, “does your father know that you are coming?”

“Yes,” is the reply.

“Then he’ll be there to meet you, I imagine.”

“Maybe, I don’t know, I sent him a letter. I don’t know if he even wants me back. That, after what I did, I am not sure he could ever forgive me. I wrote that I would come home if he wanted me to. I reminded him of the huge oak tree just before the Smithville station, that he should leave me a sign on the tree if he wanted me to get off the train and come home. I told him that I’d look for a **white rag** on one of the branches. If I see the rag, I’ll get off, **if not**, I’ll just keep going.

As the train approaches Smithville, the conductor shouts, “Smithville, next stop!” and the man peers out into the distance. And, then, he shouts so loud that everyone in the train car can here him, “Son, that tree is covered with **white rags!**”

If those who have hurt us do not feel the need to apologize, that is their loss. Let us forgive them anyway, if we can, not because they deserve to be forgiven, but because we deserve to be able to live our lives without wallowing in the past, without living with self-pity, without being burdened by anger and without brooding over revenge.

If you have hurt someone in the past, may you somehow find within yourself the ability to say so and to ask forgiveness for what you did. And if someone has hurt you in the past, may that person find within himself or herself the strength that it takes to admit to it and to ask forgiveness from you. And if they can't or if they don't? May you and I find within ourselves the ability to let the past be past, and to put what they did to us behind us, and to go forward and live, unencumbered by the burden of what they did to us, or whether they apologize to us or not. If I have harmed or hurt any of you either knowingly or unknowingly, "CHATATI - SOLACHTI – I have sinned - please forgive me."

And so let this be the task of the day. Within the next 24 hours, let us count up all the hurts that have been done to us, all the insults and all the humiliations and all the pains, that have been inflicted upon us over the years, and let us wipe them away. And then, after we have done that, let us pray to God and ask God to do the same for us.

And may God answer our prayers with the words that we yearn so much to hear: "CHATATI - SOLACHTI—I have sinned - please forgive me." May we say these two healing words to those that have hurt us, and may God say these two healing words to us, so that we can enter this new year, unencumbered by old memories, unburdened of old resentments, and able to live fresh, new, clean lives once again. Our goal is to build Shalom Bait – House At Peace: Ohsey Shalom beemromav....

[Cantor – Ohsey Shalom]

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Rabbi Mark Mallach Sermon
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YOM KIPPUR - Mon Oct 2nd, 2006

Tzam Kal v`Gamar Hatima tova –a meaningful fast and may we all be sealed for good in the Book of Life.

Since this is YK, I must confess, that expression, G`mar Hatima Tova, to be sealed for good in the Book of Life is one that I say with **trepidation**. How incongruous this greeting rings when we recite the High Holiday prayer known as the Una Tahne Tokef: MEE YICHYEH OO`MEE YAMOOT - WHO SHALL LIVE AND WHO SHALL DIE? These words force us to morbidly confront the question of whether or not we will be **sealed** in a Book of Life. This greeting, this prayer, this Day of Atonement demands that we contemplate the possibility of our **deaths!**

Death is inevitable, yet some¹ are more stoic when contemplating their own death. All that lives will die, we can't do **anything** about it. Yom Kippur comes along to force us to think about death, those beloved who we mourn, and those who will, one day, mourn us.

This pervasive sense of **dread** is nothing new, the Talmud records the following debate: “For 2 & ½ years, the school of Shammi and the school of Hillel debated. Would it have been better had humans **not** been created? They concluded: It would have been better for humans **NOT** to have been created. However, now that they have been created, **‘Let them pay attention to their deeds.’**

Yom Kippur comes to **demand** such **attention**. And, as I look around at congregation of members that I have grown to love; I become so aware of the **deep** and **irreparable** pain of separation at death, which many of us now dread: MEE YICHYEH OO`MEE YAMOOT - WHO SHALL LIVE AND WHO SHALL DIE?

A husband and wife begin their marriage as two distinct individuals but over the years often come to be fused as one as they build and create a future together. In some instances the marriage is not as it should have been. Yet for others, it is a daily falling head over heels in love. And then, suddenly, or not so suddenly – it can be after 6 months, 6 years or, God-willing, 60 years of marriage, comes the painful separation of death. The finality of that separation between a husband and wife takes so long for the survivor to absorb and recover!

One wife who had said goodbye to her husband as he left for work in the morning, then suddenly died at his desk, told me a long time afterward that **everyday** she still expects her spouse to **walk** through the door.

A husband once **cried** in my arms that his **last** conversation with his wife was an argument over something **trivial**.

A woman in her fifties reflecting on the loss of her mother said to me, “There goes my **umbrella**; both of my parents are now gone, I’m an orphan.” A parent, no matter how tenuous the relationship, provides the “umbrella” to hold back the harsh elements of life from their child. Even a “frail umbrella” protects from the rugged elements, and when the parent is gone, the umbrella ceases to provide such shelter.

How long does it takes to absorb the finality of a loved one’s death? Months, years, ever? My question on this Yom Kippur, “Is the final painful separation of death too high of a price to have paid even for the best relationship?” In the spirit of the debate of the Talmud: “Would it have been better **not** to have been born at **all**?”

Would it have been better, instead of that terrible separation, that each of us had remained in the anonymous abyss of non birth – **never** to exist, **never** to be born; **never** to love; therefore **never** to **suffer** so deeply at the separation of death of our loved one? The pain which we feel at that separation is a very expensive cost which we pay for the love we have lost. Where there is love, the price is high.

Rabbi Sidney Greenberg, z”l, once wrote: “A bitter truth is that every love story has an unhappy ending, and the greater the love the greater the unhappiness when it ends. What then is our choice? **Never** to permit ourselves to love anyone? **Never** to permit anyone to matter to us? My dear friends, if cost of loving is too expensive, being unloved and unloving can cost even **more**. We are so much richer for having paid the high cost of loving.”

MEE YICHYEH OO`MEE YAMOOT - WHO SHALL LIVE AND WHO SHALL DIE? How does one confront the specter of loss, the possibility of impending death? Is it possible to face death with a greater peace of mind?

Do you recall the Sago Mine Explosion? It was just January of this year, when 13 [miners](#) were trapped for nearly 2 days; only 1 survived. The trapped miners left at least 4 notes, George Junior Hamner's note stated,

"We don't hear any attempts at drilling or rescue....The section is full of smoke and fumes, so we can't escape....Be strong, and I hope no one else has to show you this note. I'm in no pain, but don't know how long the air will last."

In this world, no one knows how long his or her air will last. I am always awed by those who know that they are in the imminent stages of a pending death and how focused their minds become, how reassuring they try to be as they comfort the loved ones gathered around their bedside in a doleful vigil. What do they know that we don't? The Talmud helps provide one answer.

The Talmud describes the death of Rav Nachman. He had no desire for miracles, - and his chest heaved in the last breaths of life. His disciple and friend, Rava mouthed the final recitations - for his teacher, word-by-word, and so Nachman might pass easily, at peace, - to Olam HaBah - The World to Come.

These, then, were the last events: - The Shema was recited, and Rava chanced a request. - "Come back from beyond; show yourself to me in a **dream**, Rabbi." Then no breath.

That night Rava saw his Master in a dream. "Rebbi," he asked, - "Did you **suffer** much pain? Just how is Death, my master?"

"Rava, my friend, "there was no pain."

"What was it like?"

"It was gentle, like **plucking a hair from a cup of milk**. So **easy**. So **smooth**. - I am dead, but not **bruised**. I no longer **suffer**. - And yet, were God to say to me, - 'You may go back to life as you once **were**,' - I would **refuse, for the Fear of Death is crushing to the soul.**" -- **for the Fear of Death is crushing to the soul.**"

However, this sense of peace at the very end is not just a story found in the Talmud. I want to share with you some excerpts from a eulogy, with permission from the family, given by Adam Shai for his grandfather, Stanley Lustabader, may his memory be for a blessing. Adam wrote these words:

"After grandpa's death, my father told me, 'you know, you can fake it during your life, but you cannot fake it as you are dying.' The day grandpa died was by far the most awe-inspiring display of character I have ever seen. [We] were all with him ...Grandpa found it hard to keep his eyes open for more than a few seconds, but still he told jokes. The most character defining moment...came when he [saw] my sister crying [and] he lifted his arm

and held her hand. For each of us there he allowed us the opportunity to hold his hand and say **goodbye**. He then looked at each one of us and asked us individually, ‘**Ready?**’ After asking everybody he looked up and said, ‘Let’s go, let’s do this,’ and put his fist in the air, showing us that everything would be **all right**. I cannot express exactly how intense his peace and contentment at that moment [was.]

Yes, just as the Talmud states, “Like plucking a hair from a cup of milk;” what a powerful image as we prepare to confront the agonizing pain and separation from a spouse, parent, child, which Yizkor asks us to focus upon. From where will come the consolation to heal that hurt, and to make worthwhile the price we must pay? I want to suggest that there are words from our tradition that we are asked to recite after a death, from which we can draw comfort, even as we pay the high price of loving.

The best example is the prayer we ask the mourner to recite, Mourner’s Kaddish. It is not a prayer that speaks of death nor of dying but rather asks the mourner to praise God. But, pay attention to when it is said. The kaddish is recited as part of a **minyan**, a quorum of at least 10, it is recited **immersed** with others as part of a **sacred community**. The peace of mind will come when the grief of separation is softened by the **solace of a caring community**.

In addition, there is another phrase that offers consolation for separation. It is recited as we bury our loved one: “Adonai notan, Ahdonai Lakahh, Yehi Shem m`vorach - God gave, God took. May God’s name be blessed.” What does that mean? In the profoundest sense, it means that the years of life on earth are but a loan. The time we spend with loved ones, is not something to which we are entitled. From the very beginning, life is inherently temporary. If we understand that and feel it, then the pain of separation will be lessened by the appreciation for the loan, which has been ours and is now re-paid.

That leads me to the conclusion of the debate between our ancient Rabbi’s Hillel and Shammai. They conclude that “it is better for man **not** to have been born, but now that he has been born, **let us give attention to our deeds**.”

There is a man who died in 1992, but who lived his life according to that Talmudic conclusion of the Hillel/Shammai debate. He was an individual who gave attention to his deeds almost better than anybody I ever

heard of. His name was Dr. Salvator Altchek. He was known for 67 years as the \$5 doctor to the melting pot of Brooklyn, especially to the poor residents of Brooklyn Heights. He died at 92 and worked until two months before his death and attended to the health needs of anyone who showed up at his basement office, charging five or ten dollars when he charged at all. He treated the poorest people, angering his wife by sending one away with his own winter coat. For more than half a century he began his workday at 8:00 AM and closed the door at 8:00 PM. Then he made house calls often until midnight.

Would it have been better for Salvator Altcheck **not** to have been born? Perhaps – because **he too**, when his **wife died, suffered** the painful separation of death. But once he was born, **he paid attention to his deeds**. And his reward for such attention to his deeds is a form of immortality through the lasting visages of a blessed memory, that others still recall his acts of gemilut hasadim and still tell his story and cite his life as a guidepost to live our own. Thus, it is our blueprint, too, as we each mourn and experience our individual pain of loss on this poignantly powerful day of Yom Kippur, especially as we are about to recite Yizkor.

As you stand and recall your loved ones and as you evoke their memories and their teachings; did they teach you the lessons that come from the following poem:

Is anybody happier because you passed his way.
 Does anyone remember that you spoke to him today.
 The day is almost over and the toiling time is through.
 Is there anyone to utter now a kindly word of you?

Can you say tonight is parting with the day that's slipping fast,
 That you helped a single brother of the many that you passed?
 Is a single heart rejoicing over what you did or said.
 Does the man whose hopes were fading now with courage look ahead?

Did you waste the day or lose it?
 Was it well or sorely spent?
 Did you leave a trail of kindness or a scar of discontent?
 As you close your eyes in slumber, do you think that you can say-
 I have earned one more tomorrow by the work I did today?

Zichorom l'bravcha – May the memories of our loved ones be for a blessing upon us. And, one day, be it far, far away, may our memories become a blessing upon those whom we have loved. But for now, G`mar Hatima Tova – may we all have earned one more tomorrow.

ALUASA

Rabbi Mark Mallach
Temple Beth Ahm – Springfield, NJ
SHEMINI ATZERET - Oct 14th 2006

Kim Jong Il

Shabbat Shalom v`Hag Sameah.

I want to paint a potential scenario, and I emphasize, potential and that is not based on any known facts or evidence.

Imagine the following conversation taking place between the Chief of Mossad, the Israeli Secret Service, and Israel's Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert:

Mr. Prime Minister, I have a grave matter to discuss with you.

Yes, what now?

Mr. Prime Minister, you are aware of the nuclear weapons test performed by North Korea earlier this week?

Yes, of course, but what does that have to do with us, our worry is the Iranian nuclear program.

Mr. Prime Minister, our ciphers have just decoded secret communiqués found in a Hezbollah bunker in Lebanon, which establish a direct link between Hezbollah and North Korea.

Oh my God, what does this mean? What sort of link?

For the past 5 years Hezbollah, bankrolled by Iran, has been funding North Korea's nuclear development program. The agreement between Kim Jong Il and Sheik Nashrallah is for Hezbollah to secretly fund the nuclear program in exchange for at least 5 nuclear warheads, and that Iran will provide Hezbollah with the long-range missiles to launch them.

Can this really happen, and how soon?

Mr. Prime Minister, our best projection is that Hezbollah will have the capacity to launch a nuclear attack on us within 2 years.

What do we do?

Too far-fetched of a scenario? But, if you were Prime Minister Olmert, and you were given such a report, what would you do?

Truth to be told, North Korea is a rogue nation, whose leader does not care about world opinion, UN Sanctions, and doesn't even seem to yield to pressure from its strongest benefactor, China. And, truth to be told, Tel Aviv is not likely a target of North Korea, but Los Angeles certainly is! But Kim Jong Il is not the only leader of a rogue nation – the biggest threat to the security of Israel and the stability of the world is from a Holocaust denier, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the president of Iran. This is the world we live in and the unsettled future we face. So unsettled that when a small plane accidentally strikes a high-rise in NYC, the first reaction is a terrorist attack and fighter jets are immediately launched.

And, my dear friends, all of this is juxtaposed tonight against Shabbat and Yom Tov shel Shemini Atzeret, defined in the Torah as *Z'man Simchataynu* – The Time of our Celebration. Indeed, we are commanded to rejoice, yet, we know that this holiday season carries a liturgically undercurrent of the frailty of life itself with the Yizkor service that we will recite tomorrow.

It seems so bizarre, a world on the brink of turmoil once again, an ever present and ever growing threat against Israel and, yet, we are commanded to rejoice in one sentence and to recall those who gave us life in the next!

And then, as we move from Shemini Atzeret, we enter right into Simhat Torah and we are commanded to dance and celebrate with our Sefrieh Torah. How do we make sense of it all? Perhaps there is deep wisdom in the commandment: *visamachta bichagecha...thou shall rejoice on this festival*. Perhaps our Torah and our sages want us to appreciate the times of joy and celebration that we are given as a counterbalance to the sadness and madness that so often surrounds us.

Therefore, Let us rejoice AND let us PRAY FOR PEACE.

ALUASA