



The Face of Our Brother

Kol Nidre 5769

It is fitting that this most solemn time of Yom Kippur begins at night. Outside these walls the sunlight has receded into shadow. The darkness of this night moves us to consider the darkness in our world and the darkness within ourselves. We confess our sins. We consider our failings. We agonize over our harmful actions that have driven the light into deepest shadow. And we remember those in our community and our world who “walk through the valley of deepest darkness,” those who suffer through an unrelenting night.

When will the night end?

According to Jewish tradition, two rabbis once debated the question “how do you know when the night ends and the day begins?” The first rabbi said: “The night ends and a new day begins when you can tell the difference between a blue thread and a purple thread.” The second rabbi said: “The night ends and a new day begins when you can see the face of your brother.”

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To paraphrase the poet Robert Frost, we are well-acquainted with the night. The violence in this world casts a terrible shadow. Terrorists kill and maim their brothers as they turn buildings into rubble and twisted metal. Brothers kill brothers on the field of battle. This is true in every generation. In every generation, brothers kill brothers.

The Torah reflects this reality. The first story the Torah tells after the story of the world’s creation is the story of one brother murdering another. Cain, the son of the first humans, Adam and Eve, kills his brother Abel. It didn’t take long – only until the second generation after the creation of the world – before one brother spilled another’s blood.

Here is another story in the Torah about brothers. Abraham fathers two sons. His firstborn, Ishmael is the son of Hagar, an Egyptian handmaiden, a slave of Abraham’s wife Sarah. Years later, Sarah gives birth to Isaac. Sarah demands that Abraham banish his son Ishmael from their household, and Abraham

complies with her wishes. Abraham casts his son Ishmael into the wilderness, where he nearly dies of thirst.

The Jewish and Islamic traditions teach that Ishmael is the ancestor of the Arabs and that Isaac is the ancestor of the Jews. The conflict between Palestinians and Jews begins with the story of a family, the story of two brothers, Ishmael and Isaac. And the conflict begins when these brothers become strangers to each other.

Many a conflict begins with estrangement. Estrangement leads us to fear. Fear leads us to anger. And anger leads us to hate.

Tonight I want to talk about our own brothers – and sisters – and friends – anyone -- whose faces we may no longer see because they have become strangers to us. I doubt that there is a person in this room who cannot think of at least one relationship that needs repair; or, saddest of all, one relationship that cannot ever be repaired.

Sometimes we don't recognize that someone has become a stranger to us until that person dies. When I am called to officiate at a funeral, one of the first things I do is to meet with the family and friends of the deceased. I ask them to tell me about the person. Sometimes they have a lot to say. Their words paint a vivid picture of their loved one. They mourn their loss, but they also have an abundance of memories to give them strength and comfort.

The saddest conversations after a death are with the people gathered together who don't have much to say about the person who has died. They don't have much to say because they didn't really know the person they called "their loved one." While that person lived, they neglected to ask the right questions of him. Or they neglected to listen carefully, or notice what he loved in life. And now, at the graveside, it is too late. They will never know the world that is no more.

A few months ago, I officiated at a funeral for a man who was estranged from his grown children. He had grandchildren he barely knew. These children and grandchildren did not attend the funeral. But afterwards, one grandson telephoned one of the people who cared for his grandfather and asked questions about the man he had met only once, when he was too young to remember. All that this grandson will ever know of his grandfather is a few sentences, a few anecdotes. All that he will ever see of him is a photograph. It is too late. The world that was his grandfather is forever lost to him.

Sometimes we become strangers to each other without meaning to do so. We drift apart from each other slowly. There are other things more pressing than picking up the telephone, or writing an e-mail, or finding a time for lunch. We lose touch. We may not notice the estrangement at all; or we may think about it from time to time, but our thought quickly flees away.

And proximity is no guarantee of intimacy. We can drift apart from someone we see regularly. We can even drift apart from people who live under the same roof.

But sometimes our estrangement is deliberate. A brother, or sister, or parent, or friend does something to hurt us. We wait for an apology that does not come. Our hurt turns to anger. Our anger leads us to estrangement. The person who has hurt us becomes a stranger. And because he is a stranger, we do not wish to do the work of forgiveness. It's not worth it.

When we allow this to happen, we forget who we are. Consider this story told by Rachel Naomi Remen. She writes about going to hear a well-known rabbi speak about forgiveness at a Yom Kippur service:

(The rabbi) walked out into the congregation, took his infant daughter from his wife, and, carrying her in his arms, stepped up to the podium. The little girl was perhaps a year old and she was adorable. From her father's arms she smiled at the congregation. Every heart melted. Turning toward her daddy, she patted him on the cheek with her tiny hands. He smiled fondly at her and with his customary dignity began a rather traditional Yom Kippur sermon, talking about the meaning of the holiday.

The baby girl, feeling his attention shift away from her, reached forward and grabbed his nose. Gently he freed himself and continued his sermon. After a few minutes, she took his tie and put it in her mouth. The entire congregation chuckled. The rabbi rescued his tie and smiled at his child. She put her tiny arms around his neck. Looking over the top of her head, he said, "Think about it. Is there anything she can do that you cannot forgive her for?" Throughout the room, people began to nod in recognition, thinking perhaps of their own children and grandchildren. Just then, she reached up and grabbed his eyeglasses. Everyone laughed out loud.

Retrieving his eyeglasses and settling them on his nose, the rabbi laughed as well. Still smiling, he waited for silence. When it came, he asked, "And when does that stop? When does it get hard to forgive? At three? At seven? At fourteen? At thirty-five? How old does someone have to be before you forget that everyone is a child of God?"

Everyone is a child of God. That makes us all brothers and sisters. Even those who have become strangers to us are our brothers. Even those who have hurt us are our brothers.

This is the night of Yom Kippur. This is the night we are reminded of our frailties, of the fractures in our relationships with each other and with God. And we are

also reminded that we do not have all the time in the world to repair these fractures. If we wait it may be too late.

The hope of a new dawn begins with each of us on this sacred night. Are we willing to forgive those who have wronged us? Are we willing to reach out to those who have drifted apart? It starts with each of us. If we mend these fractures in our relationships and bridge that which divides us, one relationship at a time... if we renew the bonds of love within families and friendships...if we strengthen neighborhoods and communities....then one day the shadows in the world will diminish, the night will slowly lose its hold, and we can look with hope for the dawn of the new day.

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