

Yk eve
5770

“The Art of Letting Go...”

To my way of thinking, this was one of those great moments in sports which one remembers for a lifetime. No it wasn't as exciting as the time when Hank Aaron hit his 715th homerun, surpassing Babe Ruth's old record, or as exhilarating as the day I watched my favorite ice hockey team, The Philadelphia Flyers, win the Stanley Cup, or even Mark McGuire hitting his 70th homerun. Nonetheless, the nobility of character displayed by tennis great Jimmy Connors in 1991, left so indelible an impression upon me that I wish to introduce my Yom Kippur Evening message this eve by reminding you of his heroic behavior.

In 1991, the then 38 year old Connors took on the then 19 year old Michael Chang at the French Open. If you are a tennis aficionado, you might remember how the great veteran battled valiantly to tie the match at 2 sets apiece against a competitor who was not even born when Connors won his first pro tournament in 1972. What you might not remember is how after forging ahead by one point in the fifth set,

Connors thoroughly fatigued and exhausted, hobbled off the court to the sound of a standing ovation giving Chang a win by default.

“I’m sorry, I did all I could,” said Connors to the umpire. “I just can’t play anymore. Believe me, if I could stay out here and play I would.” Can you believe this? That takes guts! What proud athlete would ever consider such a move? For a fierce sportsman and competitor, like Jimmy Connors to bow out voluntarily under his own power before thousands of admirers is an unthinkable act. It is also, to my mind, a noble and inspiring act of courage, inner strength, and maturity.

Jimmy Connors, you see, didn’t give up; rather he knew when to

let go. There is a difference. Giving up is easy; letting go is extremely difficult. For us as Jews, especially perhaps because we deem life so precious, letting go is a rather arduous enterprise. Just consider the case of the so called Jewish good-bye. You know the good-byes to friends and relatives that begins at 9:30 and by 10:00 finds you no closer to the door than you were at 9:00 before you even started saying good-bye? Or

Close to our time I would also note with utmost determination & respect Simon Biles - the great gymnast who is a hero to many. Surely quite the show she gave in order to come back. Jimmy Connors, you see, didn't give up; rather he knew when to let go. They have it.

the joke that says some people leave and don't say good-bye. Jews on the other hand, say good-bye and never leave.

Seriously though my friends, letting go as we all know, is part of life and yet for those who do it well, life can be all the more fulfilling and wholesome. But for those that don't, life tends to be bitter, unforgiving, and downright nasty.

This day on this eve of the Day of Atonement, allow me to share my thoughts and those of our tradition on the art of letting go. Let us consider what it is that we typically need to let go of and reflect on ways that can enhance the quality of our living by learning how to let go honorably, honestly and legitimately.

One of the most common human emotions known to our species can be summed up as "the someone done me wrong song". The feeling of having been taken or of having been wronged (usually as we see it quite unjustly) conjures up in us the twin reactions of vengeance and begrudgement. All of us, I'm sure at one time or another has felt this way. Who among us has never held a grudge even for a short while against a brother, sister, mother, father, co-worker or even God?

Sometimes we bear our grudges through **passive aggressive behavior** and sometimes our anger is manifested more directly. And yet, the outcome is the same. **The destructive inner anger we bear towards the other is really nothing more than a reflection of our own unresolved pathos.** In short, we hold grudges because we are unwilling to let go of the incident that gave us grief. Invitations that were not extended; kindnesses that were not acknowledged; insults that were hurled upon us; promises that were not kept; expectations of others which were not met ; harsh words and insincere assurances - all of these and more we pack like quivers in our satchel of grudges which we dutifully accumulate during the course of a year. Perhaps because we are so prone to holding grudges, our Torah recognizing this, commands, **"You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your neighbor"**. (Lev.

9 infidelities

19:18) *וְלֹא תִקַּח נִשְׁבָּת וְלֹא תִקַּח כְּסֵף אֶת־נֶפֶשׁ אֶת־רֵעִי כִּי־תִקַּח וְלֹא תִקַּח* *we read* *7k after noon*

The story is told about Rabbi Shlomo Carlbach, the famous Jewish folksinger who was born in Europe and was forced to flee his home in Vienna when the Nazis came to power. During the Holocaust, many of his family and friends were murdered and tortured. After the war, he

would return to Austria and Germany to give concerts where he met Jews and Non-Jews who enjoyed his music. They asked him why he did it. “Don’t you hate them?” He answered. “If I had two souls, I would devote one to hating them. But since I only have one, I don’t want to waste it on hating.”

To harbor feelings of resentment and anger towards others over a protracted period of time, like a cancer, only serves to eat away at our own health and well-being. We must learn to let go – no matter how hurtful the incident which gave birth to our grudge. A famous Hindu parable serves to enlighten us.

One day a Hindu master and a young acolyte were travelling together when they came upon a deep and dangerous river. On the banks of the river, stood a beautiful young girl who yearned to cross the river, but was afraid and therefore unable. Without hesitating a moment, the Hindu master picked up the young girl and carried her on his shoulders to the other side where he then put her down. The young acolyte was stunned by what he just witnessed. Didn’t the master know that it was forbidden to touch a women, let alone carry her? Wasn’t he

aware that he had just committed a serious religious offense? After travelling together for some miles, with these thoughts dying to be expressed and unable to contain himself any longer, he blurted out his charge of apostasy. Calmly and resolutely the master replied, “Young man, are you still carrying her? I put her down miles ago?”

This day let us resolve to lay down our grudges and leave them behind. My, how good we will feel for having done so!

Another item we traditionally carry around with us that sometimes haunts us into unhealthy modes of behavior is the past. Past experiences whether they be poor decisions, missed opportunities, traumatic events or sheer bad luck, can wield tremendous power over the course of our lives, if we let them. Unlike grudges, the past however, cannot be ignored. What has happened usually cannot be erased. Try as we may to turn back the hands of time, to relive that moment over again, to do it differently this time, these only time travelers have mastered. The rest of us must accept the hand we have been dealt and make the most of it. And while we can never forget what has happened, we can cut ourselves

loose of events and experiences which threaten to control our lives, leaving us the opportunity to live happily, creatively and proactively.

For example: No, a child cannot forget that his parents divorced, but he can come to terms with that life altering event so that his parent's divorce does not control or restrict the future decisions he makes concerning his life. To cite an extreme example – Holocaust survivors can and never should forget what they experienced; and yet if they are to live their lives to the fullest, they must try to rise above the demons of the past so they might live creatively and constructively in the present and future. Letting go of the past doesn't mean forgetting – rather it means letting go of the stranglehold the past can sometimes have upon us.

^{AGAIN}
I am reminded of the man who wanted to know the meaning of life. He wanted to know how to best live a life of meaning and worth. He decided to seek out a famous guru who lived on top of a mountain. As he was ascending the mountain to seek him out, to his surprise he saw him coming down, carrying a heavy burden. The man asked his question of the guru. ~~(Without~~ saying a word, the guru put down his

load, then after a short while, lifted it again and walked on. He concluded: We have to learn how to put down our load, let the contents settle, let go of the past, and walk on.

In a similar vein, those who are possessed by feelings of guilt, remorse, and shame live lives that are riddled with unhappiness and discontent. Indeed these are legitimate human emotions- emotions which make us uniquely human, for only humans possess a conscience. And yet feelings such as these when not dealt with squarely, can also inhibit our psychological health and well-being. Letting go of our feelings of guilt, whether real or imagined might also be a worthy objective for the New Year.

Perhaps most difficult of all, is letting go of the ones we love. From the time a child goes off to school for the first time at age 5, to the time the same child goes off to college at age 18, parents go through a whole succession of physical and emotional separations from their own children. The first night your child sleeps out, the first sleep away camp, the first drive in the car without you, the first credit card in their name, their first sexual experience – these are all scary moments for a parent

who is besieged by a host of ambivalent emotions ranging from pride and joy to worry and sadness. Deep down inside we know that letting our children go, means allowing them to grow. We know that it is natural and proper. We know we must give them wings. Still, however, letting go is never easy. We realize that we each deal with this inevitable consequence of our love with varying degrees of success and failure. Let go we must, we know, but how?

And lastly, how does one handle the ultimate in letting go – the ultimate surrender of those we love who have gone from life. On Rosh Hashanah, we read of a brave and stoic father of faith who is prepared to let go of his son in fulfillment of the divine behest. But what about you and I who are not so brave and faithful? Are we so prepared to surrender our loved ones with nary a complaint? Indeed the hardest part of death is the separation, for well we know that to love is to risk losing. But how can we learn to let go – to love with open hearts? To hold with open arms? In our High Holy Days Machzor we actually came across the formula that I believe can guide us in the art of letting go.

We read that T'fillah (prayer), T'shuvah (repentance), and Tzedakah (charity) have the power to ease the evil decree.

✓ or to bear the unbearable

Let us see how each of these traditional Jewish values can teach us the art of letting go.

The word T'fillah, prayer, comes from the Hebrew root, L'hitpalel, meaning "to judge oneself". It has to do with looking deep within, of getting in touch with who we really are, and of judging ourselves. The Jewish sense of prayer is in essence reaching out to God by reaching inward to the self. T'fillah can give us the power to clarify our values and measure ourselves by what really matters in life. Usually we come to realize thru prayer how trivial are the grudges we hold, and how unproductive is the guilt we harbor. We also realize that life is too short to allow the past to dominate our future. A four year old boy once asked his mother, "Do days come back?" She said, "No, they don't son." He responded, "Good, because Tuesday and Sunday were awful." We have all had our bad days – even our bad years, but because thankfully they don't come back we must count each day precious. As the psalmist

prayed, “Teach us, O Lord, to number our days, that we may get us a heart of wisdom.” (ps. 90:12)

T’fillah, prayer, the art of worship, if we would allow it, can help us put much of what we unnecessarily hang onto, into proper perspective, it gives us a spiritual timeout to reflect. It can teach us to let go; it can help us free ourselves of the stones in our soul which weigh us down with discontent.

Likewise, T’shuvah, repentance, which comes from the Hebrew word meaning to turn, can turn us in the direction of healthy living. Our Rabbis teach us that one has truly repented or done T’shuvah only when we have turned away from that which caused our “fall” in the past and when confronted a second time we act meritously. That is to say, that if we have truly learned something positive from the experience, if we have grown from it and matured by it, then the grudges we held, the shame we felt, and poor judgements we made pale in significance to the lessons we have garnered about ourselves and about life. T’shuvah can help us let go of the past and turn our lives around for the better. In short, we learn how to wrest the blessing from the curse.

Finally, and most importantly, the value of **Tzedakah** – of righteous living – holds the power to transform our lives for the better. **Tzedakah gives us the opportunity to convert the dark moments of our lives into moments of transcendence and actions of significance.** For you see, the word Tzedek which means to do rightly, obligates us to make a positive impact upon the world. Therefore, the end result of letting go of a painful past experience or negative emotional state is its ability to be transformed into acts of loving kindness and righteousness. For example, a mother who loses a child for lack of seatbelts on a school bus, works tediously to pass a law that makes seatbelts on school buses mandatory – so other mothers will not suffer as she did. Or a drug abuser who at one time was only an overdose away from becoming but another sad statistic, now goes around to elementary schools preventing others from falling prey to this fatal addiction. **The same can be said of anyone who takes a negative past and turns it into a positive future.** If not for him or herself, than certainly for others. This is letting go at its best for not only has the person grown and matured but has been able to set the world right side up, or at least a small corner of it.

Our Jewish tradition in fact is so aware of the benefits of this transforming behavior that it mandates as a Mitzvah that we give Tzedakah to a worthy cause on the anniversary of the death of a loved one. Indeed Jewish law bids us not to remember the pain and sorrow of death, but rather commands us to do good in the name and memory of the deceased. Similarly, we are expected to make an Aliyah to the Torah on the Yahrzeit of a loved one precisely because we are commanded to turn back to life and to that which is the life and length of our days – our Torah. In fact, when one makes the Aliyah blessings over the Torah, one holds onto the handles of the Torah – called in Hebrew, the Atze Chaim – The Trees of Life. Precisely, when we are most likely to dwell on the past or the morbid details of death, we are bidden to turn back to life and cherish it. Letting go in this way, is not letting go at all – it is holding on – holding on to the best life has to offer.

My friends, letting go is not any easy thing. It can be scary and painful for it forces us to reconcile ourselves to others, to the past, to our ^{to our own} ~~own~~ ^{sense} ~~own~~ ^{mindfulness} innermost being. And yet, for those who develop this art, life takes on new meaning. These, my friends, are the days of awe – the days set

aside to clean out our souls, to take stock, to do T'fillah, T'shuvah, and Tzedakah. May we take these days seriously.

A final story:

One Rosh Hashanah, a number of years ago, during a children's service, I asked the children if they could guess why we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. I received a plethora of creative answers – but the one I will cherish the most came from a 7 year old boy who said, “We blow the shofar in order to blow out the bad stuff inside of us, so that we can be filled up with good stuff.”

This Yom Kippur, let our souls ring with a T'kiah G'dolah, letting go of that which is destructive, unkind, and foolish and may our souls be filled instead with life and love and abundant joy.

And let us say