

**Yom Kippur Family Service:
Kahal B'raira
September 2004
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This morning we have been hearing about rules to get along with others, to remind ourselves of the Hillel's idea: "don't do unto others as you don't want others to do to you." We all know that, don't we? But rules can only help us so far, because as we also know no one is perfect. While I agree with Josh Ostroff who spoke here at Rosh Hashanah about the joys of reflection this time of year, it is hard work to do it, isn't it?

Since no one is perfect, we are here today to reflect on how to do a piece of this work meaningfully. How can we forgive ourselves, for those things that we have done wrong this past year? While we undoubtedly learned how to do forgive ourselves when we were young, situations and people change so that we need to re-learn everyday. We all want to be good people, but – let's be honest, folks, -- sometimes forgiving is very hard to do so. And, some of us older folks still need to remind ourselves to keep on trying to forgive ourselves ...

I want to talk about how we learn to forgive and what I mean by re-learning this concept. First, a definition, according to Webster's: "to forgive" means "to stop being resentful against a wrong" and "resentful" means "angry, upset" – so we need to "stop being mad at something bad that is done to us or that we do" -- which is sometimes quite easy and sometimes almost impossible. But unless we do that, we can be quite unhappy. If we can forgive ourselves, then we can accept who we are. Few of us get it right the first time, so we need to take our time and re-learn how to do it.

Let's think back to the ways that we learned to forgive – from our parents, from our experiences, from stories. I want to highlight one such story: E.B. White's Charlotte's Web that many of us have read years ago and some of us may be reading now. If you are in the first group, you may wonder why it will be my comments' focus. Ok, it is a good read; but so what? I think that its message can help us re-learn to forgive ourselves and accept where we are now.

Charlotte's Web is a great story about the friendship between Wilbur, a pig, and Charlotte, a spider and how they help each other. It is also a story about forgiveness, since to move forward both Charlotte and Wilbur need to forgive themselves and also to accept their own limits: Wilbur couldn't save Charlotte, but yet he saves himself and Charlotte's children. As Charlotte puts it: "After all, what's a life, anyway? We're born, we live a little while, we die. A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that." (p. 164) Charlotte wants to help Wilbur as much as she can, but finally comes to accept that she cannot do more than she can.

So Charlotte learns how to forgive herself and accepts her life as it is. Later in the book

Wilbur also accepts his life as it is. Can you accept yours? Can I? Ok, ok, do your best, forgive yourself, help and live with others, and accept that you 're not perfect. But you've heard this before; and we've all had enough lectures about it. Instead I won't lecture. I'll simply remind you what you know: that you can forgive yourselves for all those mistakes, small and big. Yes, of course, adults: parents, older siblings, and teachers can help ... but only if we assist – as I daily re-learn both as a teacher and a parent – to do this in ways that can be heard, and we too admit how difficult this work is and that we share how we do it.

Since being told “forgive” does not work, I want to leave you with two last thoughts. First, the realization that forgiveness can come unexpectedly and belatedly. Sometimes I'm not ready to forgive right away. Second, let's embrace and use stories like Charlotte's Web as accessible ways to teach about responsibility and forgiveness. Otherwise these concepts are too complicated and out of reach for most of us.

Thank you.