

Reflections for Yom Kippur Morning, 2005

Good morning. Wow, this is great. To be standing up here I mean. At Kahal B'raira any one of us, even someone like me, Jon Levine, can grow up to be president. Think about that for a moment.

Perhaps here at KB we dispense "Judaism light." Our holiday services don't last all day. We don't practice many of the 613 or so commandments sited as being crucial to being an observant Jew. However, we do struggle to understand what it means to be a good person in a complex world. We do strive to create a supportive community. We do seek to uphold the principle commandment, the commandment Rabbi Hillel taught while standing on one foot. "Do unto others what you would have others do unto you."

You know, even though I often have thought about the things I would say today. I am not going to pretend that I have easy solutions to difficult problems. Do you ever wonder if we, as human beings, are too interested in the hot tip and the quick fix? Why is that? For a particular problem there might be any number of solutions but we end up focusing on the first thing that comes to mind.

Today I wish to speak about: First how we miss the mark, then how we deal with our regret through Forgiveness, and Resolution.

The Hebrew word for sin is "*chet*". "*Chet*" was originally an archer's term which meant "to miss the mark." Even though the archer takes careful aim, the shot arrow misses the target's bulls eye. In our daily lives, we all may miss the mark. We all can aim to do better. In my experience people usually aim to behave well. We rarely do wrong intentionally. We rarely try to behave poorly. Doing wrong or misbehaving is literally missing the target.

Perhaps in the past year we created targets for ourselves, for what we had hoped to do or to gain, experiences we hoped to have had, and ways we had hoped to act.

Did we do our best? I know I didn't. I made mistakes. OK, I'm sorry. I promised you that I would come through and I didn't. I have been wanting to change the way I act and.... Well, there was the time when I ... and I was gonna lose the weight and... I lost some and... I stopped and it's not so bad as it was.... And, I wanted to respect everyone's way of living. We all have things that we think are important and I wanted to respect your important things. But sometimes it was inconvenient for me to, and then maybe I decided that your important things were not worth respecting so much after all...Oy.

Our ancestors remind us over and over, in stories and texts that people are not perfect. You can look it up. We dream to reach for the stars, but still we are human beings and thus we are not perfect.

Ok, I missed the mark. I'm sorry.

But sometimes sorry isn't enough.

Today, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement is the day we must begin to go beyond "I'm sorry." Otherwise we make the same mistakes over and over. We become repeat mark missers. Repeat mark missers do nothing to correct their aim. Every year, as we grow older, we should work at being more on target. Although we are not expected to be perfect, we are expected to improve our aim.

According to my dictionary, atonement, to be "at one" is about balance.

At the end of a typical day, I am tired. I often have paper work to do. There are household chores. I want to relax with my family. There are things I need to do. I am pulled in many directions. It is hard to be "At One."

Today we have a chance to find some balance. To stop and think. To be at one. To improve our aim.

Improve your aim by seeking forgiveness and resolution.

At this time of year, we discuss forgiveness. Maybe we seek forgiveness for ourselves more than seek to forgive others. To be forgiven....you overlook my shortcomings and I'll overlook yours.

The other day, I was in line to buy a cup of coffee and there was a message on the blackboard behind the counter. It told me that holding on to anger and resentment is bad for you. I can believe it. Those sentiments eat away at you. Becoming consumed by anger or resentment is isolating. Now, I think of isolation differently than I think of alone time. I like alone time when I want to read, or take a quiet walk. Isolation is a loneliness that feels like it is keeping me apart rather than time I get to spend alone.

Well, I can hold a grudge as well as the next person. I finally forgive when there is more reason to just get over it and get on with life. Who is really suffering by my remaining isolated and resentful? Eventually, even I realize that the only person I am punishing is me.

If I had any special tricks on how to easily let go of that anger or resentment it would be worth the price of admission. I don't know if there are any special tricks. It may be that each of us needs to figure it out for ourselves. On a case by case basis. Don't grab the first solution that comes up and then stop working the problem. Some questions are best left unanswered because as we grow our answers may change.

Where does one go for guidance?

It's funny, when you look around, messages speak out to you from the strangest places. Out of the mouths of babes, car radios, burning bushes... the message board behind the counter in the coffee shop. So, good advice is everywhere.

But can we really get the advice – take it in--until we are ready to receive it? Sometimes we need to be tuned in to the wisdom to pick up the signal. Sometimes, when dispensing our words of wisdom, we might be broadcasting loud and clear, but the receiver of our wisdom is tuned in to another channel.

Here's a good one. I like it because at this time of year we look at what we harvest or reap, from the seeds we planted or sowed earlier in the year:

If you sow an act, you reap a habit

If you sow a habit, you reap a character

And if you sow a character, you reap a destiny.

When I was younger, I used to wonder what my destiny might be. Isn't it simply the resulting crop of acts and habits I have sown?

In the world of cause and effect, yesterday's actions create today's events. Another way of saying this is we don't get to vote on the way things are, we already did.

The longest journey begins with one small step.

In the prayer book my family used when I was growing up I read,

“Let all the vows and oaths we make between this Yom Kippur and the next be null and void after honest effort.” You're kidding right? We aren't even talking about last year? We're already planning on being sorry for the wrongs we will commit in the coming year? Wow, our ancestors really do have something to tell us about human nature.

But, can we trust that we can determine when we achieve honest effort? Have we tried hard enough to be good?

Is there absolute good? Absolute bad? How would those absolutes become established? Last year the KB Youth Group made a movie about the meaning of life. It was screened at one of our Shabbat services. After the movie was over the audience questioned the kids about what they learned about the meaning of life. My son, Ben, answered that each of us gives our own life meaning. Wow, was I proud of him when I heard him say that. Each of us gives our own life meaning.

Making new years resolutions: they are the prayers we speak. A call out to the universe. This is what we are going to do! We take a risk when we speak our resolutions. We may be ignored, laughed at, or even worse, supported by those around us to live up to what we say we will do. We speak our resolve because otherwise, on our own, how can we really be expected to provide honest effort?

May I suggest a couple of resolutions?

Have a complaint? Complain only to that person who can do something about it. How much good does it really do to talk behind someone's back? If you don't like the way something is being done, talk to the person who can make it different.

It does no good to complain to Joe about Jerry washing a red sweat shirt with your white socks. I am not saying to dump your anger on Jerry. But by ask the question, “How can we keep this from happening again?”

Want to create a destiny? Are you really committed to making it happen?

We hope and we dream. It is when we speak those hopes and dreams to the people around us, our families, friends, our coworkers, our classmates, that we spur our world into action. So my second suggestion for a resolution is to speak your dreams. Start this year by telling those around you what dreams you are committed to accomplishing.

My dream is that we all aim high. May we apply honest effort to hitting our marks. And may we be forgiven and forgive ourselves for those marks we miss.

And above all, may we all write ourselves in the Book of Life for the coming year.
Thank you.