



9/29/2011 Rosh Hashanah Morning.

We live in angry and often vengeful world. Just turn on your AM radio, to one of those call-in shows and listen for a few moments or stand in a slow-moving line at the bank or supermarket or simply get into your car and drive in the passing lane on I-80 just under the speed limit, then you will quickly discover how many angry people there are out there.

Yes, ours is an angry world. We seem to carry around with us a tremendous reserve of anger, and appetite for vengeance, just waiting to be wedded. But if the anonymous rage of the baseball fan, or the impatient motorist was all there was to it, It really would not be so terrible. For this kind of anger may upset us, may annoy us but generally it affects us only from a distance.

What really affects us, what really has impact on our lives, is the anger we come to feel for those closest to us. After all, there is no one like close friends and family to make us “loose it,” to make us “see red.” They know our vulnerabilities, our sensitive places better than anyone else and we rely on them so much - that when they let us down, we feel monumentally hurt and angry. So, we resolve not to get mad but to “get even.” We resolve to cut them out of our lives, once and for all.

Is there one of us in the sanctuary this morning that has not felt this kind of anger and hurt, who has not cut himself off in this way from the one we loved?

Think about it. There are those of us who've been together as business partners through the years. But then our relationship goes sour, we feel cheated and disappointed. Our partnership comes undone, and we find ourselves at best in a state of icy silence, at worst in litigation. We pass each other without a word or sign. Mutual friends no longer invite us to the same parties. A wall has come between us, and we are lost to each other forever.

Or – we've worked together on a project here at the Temple. We've served on the same committee, the same board of directors, then we take opposite sides of a controversial issue and suddenly it becomes personal. Now we can no longer sit around the same table or the same pew. We are averting our gaze and pretend we don't see each other. A wall has come between us, and we are lost to each other forever.

Or – our children treat us without proper respect. Our parents meddle in our personal life, our brother fails to acknowledge the birth of our child, and our ex-spouse will not carry his share of the burden- so we cut them off -completely and utterly. For us they no longer exist, are no longer alive. You

know, it's not only Mennonites who practice "shunning." Most of us, sadly – do a pretty good job of it.

Do you doubt it? Then look at us, look at your own family. I'll bet there is at least one branch of it, you've never met or at least not spoken to, in years and years. There is one who will not seat at the same table as Aunt Martha or cousin Erwin who refused to come at all if Uncle Sam will be there. There is a parent or a brother or a sister whom we can not even invite to our own child's Bat Mitzvah.

Here is one of the saddest, yet most basic facts of our life, we get angry. We get hurt. We are disappointed by each other- especially those closest to us. So, we cut them off. We write them out of our life. We build walls between us so high, so impenetrable that we never touch again. And the only communication between us is in angry outburst, malicious rumors, or all-consuming effort to "get even."

We seem to feel a need for a "hate parade" in our lives- the former partner who cheated us, the employer who let us go without a closure, the husband or wife who left us for another. We cling to our anger. We hang on to our grudges and we nurture them - and will not let them go!

Why?

Because it affords us the luxury of self pity, because it satisfies our sense of outrage justice, because it allows us to see ourselves as pure and good and the other guy as ugly and evil. Such satisfaction however does not come free. There is a price to pay. What one of my colleague calls this “psychic carcinoma”.

First and foremost, holding grudges deprives us of our freedom; it limits us, controls us, it controls our life. It’s like the story of Elizabeth Kenny, the Italian nurse who originated a method of treating Polio. Once she was asked how she managed to stay so cheerful. “I suppose you just were born calm and smiling,” said her friend. Elizabeth Kenny just laughed and said, “Oh, no as a girl I often lost my temper. But one day when I became angry at a friend over some trivial matter, my mother said to me: ‘Elizabeth anyone who angers you conquers you.’ And I have never forgotten her words.” What a brilliant insight! Sooner or later our anger takes control of us. Our grudge becomes obsession. Our rage turns upon us and destroys us from within.

Holding grudges also tears families apart when we need each other most. Recently I heard from a friend how his grandmother celebrated a 100th birthday. From all parts of the country, her family assembled to be with her. However, because of an angry divorce, her son could not be there. His

mother celebrated her 100th birthday and he was not there with her – because of a family feud.

Right here in our own Temple I have seen- –children torn by conflicting loyalties, forced to choose between divorced parents as it comes time for a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. As those kids grow up their parents become an undesirable part of who they are. When we cut them off- our parents, no matter what the reason- we cut off that part of ourselves which they used to occupy. It's like cutting off a limb, a precious part of us.

It reminds me of a young man I know, who is so angry at his fun-loving younger brother, that he refuses ever to be spontaneous, ever to display sense of humor. So anxious is he to avoid anything resembling his hated brother that he has cut off a wonderful, healthy, funny, side of himself. This is what happens when we build walls to close out those we love. As we cut them off. We cut ourselves. As we remove them from our lives, we diminish ourselves and do irreparable damage to our own lives.

We pay a terrible price for our grudges and our anger and the world that we build. That's why we need TESHUVAH - "turning." TESHUVAH...TURNING!

We need to ask – from who have we turned away during this last year? From whom have we averted our gaze, avoided contact, cut ourselves off? This morning we need to tear down

the walls which divide us from friend, brother, spouse, and parent. We need to turn toward them, reclaiming them and make peace with them at last.

This is the most sacred task of these days of repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. According to our tradition on these days we are required to turn to neighbor, parent, child, spouse -ex spouse! -And beg as well as grant forgiveness. Our Jewish tradition is clear – and it is wise indeed! For the truth is: we need it. We need reconciliation. We need to be relieved of our anger, purged of our hatred as the New Year begins.

We need to feel free. We need it to be cleansed of the poisons of hatred and anger which consumes us from within. We need to forgive, not only for the sake of those we love -but for our own sake, because we can not bear to live without it. Maybe they deserve our forgiveness, maybe they don't. Still we need to forgive – no matter how hurt we are, no matter how angry we are. For when we hold grudges we are diminished, we are left broken. We need to forgive -for our own sake. Ultimately nothing is unforgivable –except not to forgive.

Do you think such forgiveness is impossible? Or do you think it can not be done. Because the story of Joseph shows us that it can. We all remember the tale -how Joseph boasts to his

brothers about his dreams- and about his fathers favors. His brothers are unable to bear his arrogance even a moment longer, sell him into slavery to wondering band of nomads. The family is separated- father from son, brother from brother. A world of space and time comes between them, and they are divided – seemingly forever.

Then in one of the strongest “success stories” of all times, young Joseph rises from slavery and impoverishment to become the grand Vizier of Egypt, second in command only to Pharaoh. We can only imagine the dreams of vengeance Joseph nurtured in his soul. “Someday I will get even with all of them.” Well, it’s not long before his opportunity arrives. A famine has broken out throughout the Middle East. Egypt is the only country where food is available, so Joseph’s brothers come to beg food of the grand Vizier. While they do not recognize Joseph as their brother, he easily recognizes them.

Joseph extracts a terrible revenge. He torments his brothers, plays cat and mouse with them, insisting that they leave behind their youngest brother, Benjamin, if they want to go home with food. Joseph’s pleasure -as he lives out his fantasies of revenge- is terrible and clear, and we do not particularly like him for it – finally, Joseph is transformed, his love overwhelms his hatred. He can stand to see his brothers suffer, no more. In a moment brilliant and overwhelming,

Joseph throws himself, sobbing on the shoulders of his long-lost siblings. “I am Joseph, your brother,” he cries. In one memorable and passionate moment, brother forgives brothers in reconciliation total and complete, sweet, and ennobling.

The message is clear here. It’s how we choose to comfort the anger and vindictiveness we all sometimes feel. We are asked not to ignore it but to triumph over it. We are asked to turn our anger into healing, our enemy into friend, through the precious gift of forgiveness. It’s like the story of the prince who welcomes his enemy warmly and graciously into his palace. After the visit, his skeptical aide asks: “Oh Prince, I do not understand. This man is your mortal enemy. Yet you treat him with forgiveness and kindness. If I were in your position, I would destroy him.” At this the king response: “You don’t understand. I do destroy my enemies- when I convert them to friends.” So, it was – long ago – with Joseph and his brothers, so it must be with us. We need to forgive those who’ve wronged us – for our sake ever more than theirs. We need to put an end to this cycle of pain. We need to purge of the poison of hatred which consumes us from within.

Today on this first day of the New Year, I want to begin this topic publicly with all of you. Like you, I have kept grudges, been vindictive, nursed tiny hurts. I’ve ignored, pretended not to see. Perhaps on occasion I would try to be angry. Other

times I hid behind righteous indignation out of blindness or personal advantage. Today, in this sacred place, from this bema, I say publicly: If I have wronged anyone in this sanctuary, that's knowingly or unknowingly, then I truly and humbly beg your forgiveness and if you have wronged me- I forgive you totally and without reservation. More than anything else I need to begin this New Year reconciled and at peace. And so do you!

That's why I'm asking you to start now, starting this morning, children forgive your parents; wives your husbands; friends your neighbors. Forgive them if you've tried before and they've turned you away. Forgive them- even if you haven't spoken in years. Forgive them. Don't be embarrassed. Don't be ashamed. Turn to wife, your child, your friend. Touch and say: "Please forgive me. You know, I forgive you." Do it this morning, on the morning of Rosh Hashanah. Do it right now- before it's too late. Do it and be cleansed. Do it and be whole, perhaps for the very first time in your life.

My friends for us, the holy sight, in all the world is the KOTEL- the western wall in Jerusalem. What are we called upon to do in this holiest of all places? We beg for forgiveness, to reconcile ourselves, to make Shalom. How ironic that our most sacred shrine should be a wall – a place which ordinarily divides and separates us, yet we Jews are called upon to go to this place, in order to bridge the gap between ourselves and

our God, between ourselves and our fellow creatures. This is what these High Holidays are about more than anything else – about breaking down the walls which divide us by begging and granting forgiveness. On this Rosh Hashanah morning I pray: may we demolish the walls that divide us, give up the grudges that control us, abandon the hatred which consume us, and begin the New Year, fresh and whole and finally, finally at peace Amen!

L'Shannah Tova Tikatevu V' Tecatemu!