

Yom Kippur Comments – Sept. 22, 2007
Tamara Weil

Before I begin my remarks, I would like to thank the Katz' family – and especially Terry – for the gift you gave our community. You brought a most remarkable man into our lives. Martin Adler was kind, gentle, brilliant, humble and very funny. We will miss him deeply. For those of us who knew Martin, just having a connection to him made us better, kinder, more thoughtful people. Thank you, Terry, Jonathan and Molly for sharing Martin with us.

I don't normally read speeches – actually, I've never read a speech - on the rare occasions that I have been asked to give them, but today you'll have to bear with me, because I feel a bit more vulnerable than I have during past high holidays.

I seriously considered using my allotted eight minutes as time for silence, because one of Martin's favorite quotes from *Pirke Avot* is by Simeon, son of Rabbi Gamliel, who said, "I have found nothing as good for the soul as silence, and whosoever is profuse of words occasions sin."

On the other hand, he *said* it.

So...I *am* going to talk.

I'd like to focus today on forgiveness, and one of the big obstacles to forgiveness - our remarkable ability to rationalize just about anything. And then I'd like to talk about one strategy that may be useful in getting beyond rationalizations and justifications to forgiveness and atonement. And finally I'd like suggest a question that may help us understand the relationship between forgiveness and our relationship with each other and with HaShem.

I read that the word for forgiveness, "mechilah," which we so desperately seek from HaShem today, is related to the word for circle, "machol." And that if our lives are meant to be complete circles, incorporating all of our experiences and relationships, when we hurt someone, or when someone hurts us, the circle is broken. Forgiveness is the way we mend the circle.

It seems to me that one of the biggest obstacles to forgiveness is our unique ability to rationalize, sometimes unconsciously, thoughts and behaviors we would find totally unacceptable if we saw them in a more objective light. You don't have to raise your hands for this one, but just think about how many times during the past year, the past month, the past week, or even just since I've been talking, have we committed sins that our minds automatically rationalized for us. Right, we don't know, because our minds are very powerful and we were not conscious of it. So I tried to become more conscious of this phenomenon, and after keeping careful track of my own rationalized sins during the past week, let's just say I lost track sometime after "a lot."

Which reminds me of a scene from the movie, *The Big Chill*, which, as most of us recall, is about a group of ex-college roommates who come together one weekend to mourn the suicide of one of their friends. So, Jeff Goldblum who plays Michael, a reporter for *People* magazine, is talking to his friend, Tom Berringer, who, plays Sam, a really bad actor. Michael has just explained why writing for *People* is a noble and meaningful endeavor, which even he doesn't believe. And Sam says, "Why does it sound as if everything you just said is a mass of rationalizations?" and Michael responds, "Hey, don't knock rationalizations, I don't know anyone who could get through a day without two or three juicy rationalizations. Rationalizations are more important than sex." And Sam says, "Nothing is more important than sex." To which Michael responds, "Oh yeah, have you ever gone a week without a rationalization?"

I'm not saying that rationalizations don't have a legitimate place in our moral lives. For instance, when my sister asks me how I think her hair looks, do I respond with "Your head has now taken on the exact proportions and color of a really great Halloween pumpkin?" No, because I can justify a much kinder – yet less true – answer because lying under these circumstances trumps honesty when the truth would unnecessarily hurt or embarrass someone. However, most of the time, rationalizing and justifying lead us on paths we'd rather not travel.

I believe that part of our work in becoming better people, better Jews, is to find ways to become aware of our negative use of rationalizations and justifications and interrupt the cycle that hurts others, that hurts HaShem, and ultimately, hurts ourselves. Trust me, I am no expert on this, but let me propose one way to help combat this obstacle to forgiveness – and that is to learn to listen more carefully to our souls. Our minds are so powerful, if we think too much, we lose the ability to hear and respond to the call of our soul. In fact, I don't think we can access our soul through our minds, only through our hearts. And even then, it's not so easy. Maybe it's just me, but my soul is not as communicative as I would like. I *do* know that when I sense a very strong emotional reaction to something, a powerful longing or desire, an intense curiosity, or even a jolt of adrenaline, I know that Hashem is trying to tell me to clear my mind, be silent and tranquil and wait for the still, small voice of my soul. It doesn't always, or even often, work, but once in a while I am rewarded with a feeling, a sense, more than words, that leads me to a decision or in a direction - without the need for rationalizations - that feels right, that sometimes even feels *kadosh*, holy. While we need our minds to implement our goals and plans, we have to use our souls to recognize and then let go of, our rationalizations and justifications. I think only then can we truly forgive and be forgiven, return to HaShem and experience a true *tshuvah*.

Finally, I'd like to suggest a question that might ask ourselves that may help us make a link between rationalizing, forgiveness and our relationships with each other and HaShem. Since the beginning of Elul forty days ago, we have asked ourselves some tough questions. What has my life meant over the past year? What did I do to make the world even a little better? Who have I hurt and how can I make amends? What opportunities to do something good did I let slip away, what did I *not* do or say, because I

was too busy or too uncomfortable to help? Is there life on other planets, and if so, do they dress better than we do?

After we've let go of rationalizing and justifying, and made room for forgiveness, I think one of the most important and difficult questions to ask ourselves is, to paraphrase a famous politician: "Is my life, spiritually and emotionally, more meaningful and joyful than it was a year ago." I think this is a critical question for at least two reasons: because I believe, we can make the most positive changes in ourselves and our world when we are truly living a meaningful life. Rabbi Hoffman told me yesterday that we all suffer and that suffering doesn't automatically confer upon us some sort of special status - it's what we do with our pain that matters - if we use the suffering to learn, grow, and ultimately become better, that is what HaShem wants of us. And I believe that Hashem wants us to live joyful and meaningful lives. Kabbalists believe that when we make Hashem joyous, in return Hashem makes our lives more meaningful and joyful, which is a truly beautiful cycle, and perhaps the best we can expect from our time on Earth.

We come together today in a communal confession - we are all sinners - we pray as one, and Hashem hears our prayers and understands our plight: we live in a tough world with lots of obligations and commitments, but Hashem only cares that we sincerely turn toward God today and that we try very hard to stay in touch with our souls. In Kabbalah we learn that one of our main tasks in repairing the world is picking up the divine sparks and returning them to the broken vessels that were destroyed during creation. First, we need to find our own divine sparks (and we all have them) in our own souls. And if Hashem believes in us and gives us this time to make our lives more meaningful and more joyous, who are we to argue?

So my wish for each of us for the coming year is, that when we gather together again next year, and we ask ourselves: "Is my life more meaningful and joyous today than it was a year ago?" May we truly be able to answer, "Yes, it is."

Gemar Chatima Tovah!

May you be sealed for a good life!