

Kol Nidre Sermon, Yom Kippur 2011 A Time to Gather Stones

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I would like to begin this evening's sermon by reading for you a selection from one of the most famous passages in the Torah, taken from the book of Ecclesiastes.

"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; A time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace."

As many of you know my father passed away earlier this year, and given his advanced age and very poor health, in the spirit of Ecclesiastes, it was time for him to let go, and for us to say goodbye.

So for the last 6 months or so, I was thinking of how best to honor my father's memory and much of what he stood for - when, suddenly, out of the blue, an opportunity came my way.

I received a note from Dr. Norman Weinberg, Executive Coordinator of the Poland Jewish Cemeteries Restoration Project, stating that a group of Jews with roots in Tarlow and Ozarow, Poland, were planning on returning there to rededicate the cemeteries in these two nearby communities. Before I tell you why I decided to attend the ceremony, let me tell you a little bit of my personal history:

My great grandfather Elijah Rubenstein - who I am named after - lived and died in Tarlow, a small town north of Galicia about 70 kilometers southwest of Lublin. My Grandfather, Nehemiah Rubenstein, was born in Tarlow in 1888 and came to Canada in 1913 where he became a well-known figure in Toronto's orthodox Jewish community. (His wife, Dobra Laufer, was a native of nearby Ozarow.) Though he lived in Canada, he never forgot his roots and kept in constant contact with his home country.

If you look at the painting behind me – and see the faces of the people in the synagogue – that was the world my grandfather came from, that would have been something like the synagogue he prayed in, and the devotion on the faces of the men praying, was the kind of faith he brought with him to Canada, and that he tried to transplant here.

(Our challenge is to find that same devotion, that same authenticity, for beliefs that we cherish as deeply as they cherished their beliefs – but that’s the subject for another sermon.)

For his entire life, my father held his father in the greatest esteem, and in so many ways, followed in his footsteps.

What happened to the Jewish community in Tarlow? Those that remained behind were all murdered by the Nazis, mostly in Treblinka, and today there is not a single Jew left in Tarlow or even within miles of the town.

But last month, a ceremony was being held to rededicate the cemetery in Tarlow – and in honor of my father and my grandfather, I felt it was my duty to attend.



I also felt it was my duty to make a small donation to the restoration of the cemetery and to sponsor a scholarship for the local school, for essays written by the students concerning Jewish life in Poland before the Shoah or the Shoah itself. I wanted to honor the past – by supporting the cemetery restoration – but also do my duty to the present, by encouraging the next generation of Tarlow’s population – who had probably

never met a Jewish person in their lives - to become familiar with the now lost people who once walked the very streets of their own town. (Tarlow had as many as 3,000 Jews before the war, comprising 70% of the population. Even today, the town’s coat of arms bears a Star of David beside the cross.)

So what happened during my trip?

I visited the site of Tarlow's former synagogue. The roof had long since crumbled, and there were empty slits on the four sides of the building where all the windows were blown out - and through the top and sides of this former house of prayer, wild bushes, trees and other foliage sprouted unabated. I thought about the fact that my grandfather - as a child and young man must have prayed here, swaying back and forth in deep religious devotion - as did thousands of other Jews - and now the only swaying was that of the trees being moved by the wind as it coursed through the remains of the building. And I felt what theologians called, "the presence of the absence", the disappearance of an entire people and culture that once thrived here, and in so many other shtetels, towns and cities throughout Poland and all of Eastern Europe.



The tragedy of Tarlow's Jews did not end with the Holocaust. Following the Shoah, even those who were not victims of the Nazi genocide, who died uneventful, natural deaths, were not allowed to rest in peace. Over time, one by one, the remaining matzevot (tombstones) from Tarlow's cemetery were uprooted (probably including the stone of my namesake, Eliyahu Rubenstein, my great-grandfather), many used in homes and buildings by the local population. (The historical record is unclear, but it seems that while the German Nazis may have initially destroyed some of the cemetery, local residents continued the process until there was virtually nothing left.)

This is where a remarkable man by the name of Dr. Jan Curylo enters the story. Dr. Curylo was born in 1944 in a town just a few kilometers away from Tarlow. There were no Jewish children in his town when he grew up, but his family had great respect for the Jewish people, and he had always felt tremendous pain over the tragic fate of Poland's Jewish population.

It was just about 10 years ago, in the fall, when Poles all across the country mark All Saints Days, when it is traditional to visit the graves of their beloved family members and friends, clean up the gravesites and set candles and flowers on their graves.



That year when the Catholics were preparing to visit their cemeteries in Tarlow, Dr. Curylo asked about what was being done about the Jewish cemetery in Tarlow, only to learn that the virtually the entire cemetery was destroyed.

When he visited the cemetery, he found just one lone matzevah left – the rest had been hauled away for use in various homes, buildings, fences and other construction projects in the area.



I asked Dr. Curylo why people did what they did after the war? How could they desecrate these sacred memorials (my great-grandfather's among them)?

Why?

There was a long pause – he was silent, as was his interpreter, a young Polish Catholic friend of mine. And this silence bespoke sadness, a regret, an act of penance (for something that they were not personally responsible for) as profound as anything I have ever come across.

And I again recalled the words of Ecclesiastes.

“A time to laugh and a time to weep, a time to dance and a time to mourn, A time to speak and a time to keep silent...

In the end he finally did speak: “It’s difficult to understand”, he said haltingly, “It’s all sad, very sad. I always have a sadness in my heart for this and I would do everything that such a thing does not happen again.”

When Dr. Curylo first discovered the state of the cemetery, he again felt acutely the pain and tragedy of what befell the Jewish nation, but also an internal need to find whatever he could of what remained.

If words might have failed the good doctor in answer to my question - his deeds did not. His answer to that difficult question of “why”? was to physically take action today to reverse the injustices of the past. Deeds not words. His actions, indeed, spoke louder than any possible statement of remorse.

Dr. Curylo decided to go from home to home in Tarlow to gather up as many of the Matzevot (memorial stones) as he could, and return them to the cemetery. I was glad to learn that, in contrast to the post-war experience, Dr. Curylo efforts were greeted with understanding and sympathy by Tarlow’s residents.

Let me share a few more small anecdotes about my visit to Tarlow that day before I conclude:

-At the memorial service a number of older Polish women came to talk to our group. They told us they remembered as children the Jewish bakers giving them bilkas (small chalahs) before the Sabbath and going to Jewish homes on the Sabbath to turn on the fires for them

- One older lady remembered crying when her close friend, the last Jewish girl in Tarlow, left the town (after the war), and moved to Israel.

- A little Polish girl came up to me after I had finished speaking, and with the most eager look in her eyes, asked me, almost begged me, if it was possible to meet Jewish boys and girls her own age. “I so very much want to meet Jewish children my age,” she told me earnestly.



= As we left the town, many of the elderly residents of Tarlow gathered on the side of the road to wave good-bye to the tour bus. They may not have looked like Hollywood movie stars, but they are among the most beautiful smiles I had seen in a long time.

There are three lessons I would like to share with you from my visit to Tarlow.

1) Never Too Late

It's never too late to try and do the right thing, in our own personal lives, and in the national lives of a people. Here we have an example of someone, who 65 years later, is trying to repair wrongs done in the past. In our conversation, I asked Dr. Curylo how he, a doctor, became involved in returning memorial stones to a Jewish cemetery. In our subsequent discussion, it became clear that as a doctor, he spent his time healing people, and, in this case, he was trying to heal the wounds of history. Even 65 years later.

2) The Power of Example

How is it that after the war, people acted one way, and went along with the desecration of a sacred burial ground, and now, in the same area, people support the act of retrieving these same stones?

It all has to do with setting an example, inspiring people to do the right thing. Most of us want to act correctly, to be just, to be fair – but human nature, being what it is, can also be fickle. We are easily swayed, and often do not speak up or act when and as we should.

But when a person, noble in spirit and deed, through his or her actions, appeals to us to act as our higher selves would wish us to, the inspiration to emulate their example can often follow. Initially, it just takes one remarkable person to make that bold and courageous step.

Just after the cemetery dedication, a young Polish woman made her way directly to Dr. Curylo, to tell him that she had two Jewish memorial stones in her family's barn, and she would be returning them to their proper place after hearing about Dr. Curylo's efforts.

For decades, these stones lay in a state of desecration, until then one man's actions inspired others to choose the higher road.ⁱ

3) Building Bridges

In life, there will always be conflict. We constantly witness acts of injustice and unfairness all around us.

But what do we do when come across these cases?

Do we magnify the conflicts?

Do we simply remain indifferent?

Or are we saddened by the conflict, but still do nothing? Or do we attempt to make a difference, do we try and be the change that we want to see, that Gandhi so famously spoke about...

Let me close with one last story:

A journeyman carpenter travels from village to village looking for work. One day he spots a man standing by the edge of his property, looking agitated.

When the carpenter explains the nature of his work, the man becomes interested.

“Very good” he says, “I can use your help. You see, down the road, next to my property, a creek has been just been built by my brother to separate my land from his. My own brother! Just to spite me! So I want you to build a wall between our properties, so long and so tall, that I will never have to see his face again when I look out from my home. I am about to embark on a trip, and will return in one month, at which time I expect your work to be finished, and then you will be richly rewarded.”

The carpenter agrees and the brother starts off on his way.

A month later he returns, and to his astonishment, as he nears his home, he sees what appears to be a magnificent, exquisitely made bridge, spanning the creek his and brother’s estates. Even more surprising to him, his brother, who hasn’t even said hello to in years, is standing on the bridge waving to him from the centre of the span.

“What a wonderful thing to do” his brother exclaimed as he neared the bridge, “I always knew you cared for me, but I never knew how to break down the hostility that had developed between us over time. Now you have shown me the way. Let us finally embrace.”

After their heartfelt embrace, the returning brother looked at the carpenter and said, “This is a fine piece of craftsmanship – I have much more work for you to busy yourself with here.”

To which the carpenter replied, “Thank you, but I must be on my way. I have many more bridges to build.”

Conclusion

At the end of our discussion, I thanked the kind doctor for his good works. I explained to him that our tradition teaches us that honoring the departed is called “chesed shel emet” (the most altruistic act of kindness), as we cannot expect a reward from the recipients for our efforts. I also expressed to him that our tradition tells us that acts of kindness live on forever - as would his actions in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people.

Finally, I asked the doctor how he felt, 10 years on, seeing what he had accomplished, how all these people from around the world had arrived here in Tarlow for the cemetery dedication his actions helped make possible.

I expected him to say, that he felt good over what he had achieved, over the results of his efforts.



Instead this is what he said:

“I feel that I have to gather more stones...”

“I feel that I have to gather more stones...”

His words reminded me of the carpenter in the above story (“I have more bridges to build”) and again of the words of Ecclesiastes:

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to break down, and a time to build up; A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together.

I had come to Poland as an act of respect to my late father and grandfather – it was a time of sadness, a time of mourning, a time of letting go of the past – in some way – and I met someone who was literally gathering stones together, and figuratively, in his own small but so meaningful way trying to heal the wounds of his community, the wounds of history.

If we haven't begun to the task of healing our own souls, our own relationships, this day, this Yom Kippur 5772, is the time that has been specifically given for us to do so.

This is the time that the Jewish people have set aside for over 3,000 years - to gather together rather than push each other away, the time to plant, to build up, to love, to create peace in our in own souls, in our own lives and in the world.

And, if like the good doctor in the story above, we are already on the right path, already filling our hours with good deeds and noble acts - this season should remind us of how much more we have yet to do.

In the words of the rabbis, "The day is short, the labor is vast, and the master is pressing. But you are not obliged to complete the work, but neither are you free to evade your duty."

And in the words of Robert Frost,

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep, And miles to go before I sleep, And miles to go before I sleep."

I wish you all a year of good health, good deeds, and of peace happiness and joy for you and your families.

L'shana Tova.

ⁱ (The final text is still being confirmed for the monument at the Tarlow cemetery, but the current draft being considered, which will be written in three languages, appears below:

In memory of the righteous Jews of Tarlow brutally murdered during the war at the hands of the soulless Nazi murderers, whose graves will forever be unknown, and in memory of those whose graves were desecrated here.

May the descendants of Tarlow's Jews honor their memory through the observance of Torah and Mitzvot and by creating peace in the world.

This cemetery has been restored by North American Jews with roots in Tarlow and surrounding region with the assistance of members of the local Polish community.)