

SHABBAT SERMON
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RABBI MITCHELL WOHLBERG

I want to speak to you today about three events that took place in recent weeks ... one took place overseas, one took place in America, and one took place here at home in Baltimore. The events in all three are very different but they all share in common the themes of forgiveness and redemption ... themes that should be on our minds as we approach the High Holidays.

Our first event took place last week in Scotland where Abdel Beset Ali Mohamed Al Megrahi, suffering from terminal prostate cancer, was freed from prison by the Scottish Justice Secretary who said that Megrahi was being released as an act of compassion so that he could go home to die. Megrahi is a convicted murderer; a convicted mass murderer ... he was convicted of involvement in the sky bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in December of 1988, in which 270 people died. Outside of 9/11, it was the worst act of terrorism ever perpetrated against the United States.

There has been quite an outcry here in America about the judge's decision; an outcry that was compounded by the fact that this mass murder received a hero's welcome when he returned home to Libya ... an outcry compounded by the fact that many believe that he was released in order to help create a better climate in relations between Britain and Libya so that the British can have more access to Libyan oil ... an outcry that was compounded by the fact that the man had received a life sentence and had only served eight years. And, after all, doesn't a life-sentence mean by definition a person is supposed to be imprisoned until he dies ... and aren't there thousands of other prisoners who have a terminal illness. Let's let all of them go free! What a travesty of justice!

But those of you who were in the synagogue last week might remember that I spoke of how Jewish tradition believes that a judge should exhibit attributes of compassion and mercy. And we Jews are referred to as being "*rachmonim b'nei rachmonim*" – a compassionate people children of compassionate people." *Rachmonis* – compassion – is considered one of our highest and finest traits. So how are we to react to this release? Is there something in our tradition that could lend backing to the decision of the Scottish officials?

The answer is: absolutely not! And this lesson is clearly found in the concluding verses of today's Torah portion where the Jewish people are commanded to blot out the memory of Amalek. And you know who violated this command? King Saul! And in so doing he allowed the Amalekites to live on and to continue to be a threat to the Jewish people. There are some unpardonable sins in the Jewish tradition; there are some unpardonable murderers in the Jewish tradition. There is a new movie entitled, "Forgiving Dr. Mengele." I don't know what it is about but I know I don't like the title! The Dr. Mengeles, the Timothy McVeighs and Osama bin Ladens ... there is no forgiveness for them. Al Megrahi is a mass murderer and in allowing him to go home and feel like a hero not only allowed a murderer to feel good, but it told future mass murderers that eventually society would forgive their crimes as well.

And besides, Al Magrehi failed the most important and crucial test when one is asking for compassion and forgiveness. He never said, "I'm sorry." According to Maimonides, there can be

no repentance, no forgiveness, until there has been a verbal confession. The confession itself is the first and most crucial step; until you actually say, “I’m sorry.” “I have sinned” and “I have done wrong,” there is no possibility of repentance and no possibility of forgiveness. That is why our tradition has us recite countless times during the High Holyday season those words, “*Ashamanu bogadanu* – we have sinned, we have trespassed.” As the great German rabbi of the 19th century, Samson Raphael Hirsch, points out: “It is not God who needs an avowal or confession from us, for He knows us through and through, in fact, much better than we know ourselves. But we, ourselves, are very much in need of honest and unreserved confession. It is to our own selves that we must admit that we have done wrong, for without such a confession to ourselves we can never become better.” Al Magrahi, despite his cry for compassion, never admitted his sin and never said, “I’m sorry. I’m wrong.” Never, from the perspective of Judaism was he entitled to forgiveness.

Which brings us to the United States and Michael Vick. Michael Vick was a star football player until authorities raided his Bad Newz Kennels, where he was found guilty of running a cruel dog fighting ring. In his prime, while making millions and millions of dollars, Vick had to serve a two year prison sentence. Recently, with his time up, he was released and signed with the Philadelphia Eagles. There were many who said that he should not have been allowed back into football. And indeed, many football teams shied away from him because they were concerned about fan reaction, especially from people who have a special fondness for animals. There were those who wanted Vick banned for life. As a letter to the Wall Street Journal put it: “There must be a great void in the soul of any human being who would torture animals. Commissioner Roger Goodell, the NFL and the Eagles deserve all the negative fallout they will receive over their decision to let him play again.” One has to wonder about those words, “There must be a great void in the soul of any human being who would torture animals.” And what about the souls of football players who abandon their children, abuse their wives or take drugs? Do we know what goes on in their soul –or anyone’s soul for that matter? If we judge everyone by what goes on in their souls, everyone would be found guilty of something! The only thing we know for sure is that Michael Vick served his time and has said that he was sorry, admitted that he had done wrong. Vick – and others like him – who have made their mistakes and admitted to their crimes, who have paid the price, are entitled to a second chance. Who says so? The Torah! Where? In this morning’s Torah portion!

In today’s Torah portion where we are given the law of one who is guilty of a crime with lashes being the punishment. And the Torah tells us: “It will be that if the wicked one is liable to lashes the judge shall cast him down and strike him ... 40 shall he strike him, he shall not add lest he strike him an additional blow beyond these, and your brother will be degraded in your eyes.” On a simple level, the Torah is telling us that, if one were to receive lashes, 40 was to be the maximum. But our sages noticed something else. Before receiving the lashes, the Torah refers to this person as being a “*rasha*” – “If the *rasha* – the wicked one – is liable to lashes ...” But after telling us that he is to receive 40 lashes, the verse concluded by referring to this same person as “*achicha*” – “And your *brother* will be degraded in your eyes.” Before being punished the criminal is wicked. But after the punishment he is to be considered like your brother once again. That’s Jewish law! In fact, according to Jewish law once someone has admitted he was wrong and paid the price, you’re not allowed to remind him of that ever again! He’s no longer wicked; he’s now your brother.

Which brings us home to one of our brothers ... or better yet, one of our sons; our native son Jon Cardin. All of us here at Beth Tfiloh have a special place in our hearts for Jon. He is the son, grandson and nephew of one of our most distinguished families, and he has made a distinguished record for himself in his own right.

I – like many of you – have known Jon since he was a kid. I officiated at his Bar Mitzvah and have had him numerous times at my Yom Tov table. And knowing him as I did, I was one of those who encouraged him in entering the world of politics, knowing full well how ugly it can get, but knowing full well that our country needs people like him; people of honesty and integrity who care about their world and their people. So I don't have to tell you how I felt seeing Jon's name and picture flashed across the front page of the Sunpaper last week with articles repeated again and again with his picture six times at last count ... all because Jon made a mistake. Not a mistake in proposing to Megan; I've met her and she's a fabulous woman. No, the mistake was in *how* he proposed ... well-meaning, but mistaken. Everything that could have gone wrong did, including the arrival of a helicopter that hadn't been asked for! Now right from the start, Jon did what Jewish tradition says one should do in making a mistake ... he admitted to it! He said he was sorry and offered to pay for whatever costs were involved. But, of course, that didn't put the story to rest. The Sunpaper and other media kept going back to it and what was perhaps most disturbing was reading some of the comments on blogs and some of the letters to the editor of the Sunpaper that made it seem as if Jon was one of those who had participated in the Lockerbie bombings! Now, it's the right of every citizen to vote for whomever they want but it's not right to seek to besmirch and destroy a person for having made a mistake. And that's not simply a Jewish concept. Perhaps my most favorite verse from the New Testament – and yes, I have favorite verses from many books which I would not be able to quote in the synagogue – but my favorite quote from the New Testament – indeed, it's a quote that many New Testament scholars say that Jesus really didn't say, it was only inserted later ... but be that as it may, it is such a great line because it says so much in so few words ... the words: "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." We all make mistakes, we all sin but there must be room for understanding and forgiveness. Perhaps this sentiment was best expressed in a letter to the editor of the Sunpaper which read: "Dear Editors: I have known Jon Cardin for 30 years. I do not agree with him politically on a single issue. But he is as honorable, decent, honest and well meaning of human being as I have ever known. I am proud to call him a friend and proud to have him represent me in the legislature, a position, incidentally, for which he worked as hard as any and *earned!* He messed up. Don't we all? Give the guy a break!"... signed, Andrew Wohlberg. Did you read that letter in the Sunpaper? You didn't? You know why? Because they didn't print it! Much better to stick to the negative.

In this spirit I want to take note of the funeral today of Sen. Edward Kennedy. With his passing a unique era in our country's history has come to an end. Not everyone was a fan of Ted Kennedy, but the fact is he was a great American! He had his flaws, Lord knows he had his flaws, for which some never could forgive him. But an insightful blog in The Atlantic magazine wrote of what he called, "The Jewish Redemption of Ted Kennedy," where he contrasts the Christian idea of redemption which depends completely on God's grace, while the Jewish concept of redemption depends upon one's actions and deeds. Based on his deeds, I believe Ted Kennedy redeemed himself in his service to the American people.

Did you forgive Ted Kennedy? That's not my concern. My concern is closer to home, sometimes in your home itself. We have all been hurt, slighted, and disappointed by the actions of others. But rather than forgive and forget, we wallow in our misery, hold on to our grudges for dear life. And one can understand that feeling ... when someone bad mouths you, when someone undercuts you, when someone humiliates you ... there is a natural desire for revenge. Let's be honest, there is a certain pleasure in getting even with someone who has hurt you. That's a feeling found within the best of us!

Michelangelo was surely one of the greatest artists who ever lived. He was a genius of the first order, but there was one thing that Michelangelo could not do. He simply could not forgive anyone who ever hurt him. A friend of his once dared to criticize one of his works of art. Do you know what Michelangelo did to that man? When he painted the Sistine Chapel, he used that man's face as the model for the devil. So everyone who enters the Sistine Chapel to this day looks at a work which is a testimony to Michelangelo's genius as an artist, but which is also testimony to his smallness as a human being.

Many of us are like that. In so doing you are harming no one but yourself, while at the same time violating Jewish law. Maimonides teaches: "It is forbidden to be obdurate and not allow yourself to be appeased." There is an obligation to forgive those people who have repented for their wrongdoing. And remember ... just as others have hurt you, you have hurt others. If you want them to forgive you, you have to forgive them! When the High Holidays come, if you want God to forgive you, you have to be able to say that you are prepared to forgive others.

Let's get to it today, and then when the High Holidays come around we will see the fulfillment of our prayers: "*Zochreinu l'chayim melach chafatz b'chayim* – we will be remembered for life by the king of life and be inscribed in the Book of Life." Amen.

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