All is Forgiven

We have come here as we do each year on this holy night, seeking forgiveness for things we have done. Though there are much older prayers, there are no moments in our liturgy which can match Kol Nidre for its sense of anticipation, of possibility even of transformation. We hope to leave this service feeling different, lighter than when we came in. I try to imagine what synagogues were like before electricity, and in particular, what Kol Nidre eve was like in a room lit only by flickering candles, shadows dancing on the walls as the worshippers stood and swayed and listened to the chanting of the words which would free them from vows they were forced to utter.

We live in a different time, and the original purpose of Kol Nidre has passed, - we have not been forced to outwardly embrace another faith - but the power of the moment continues. We have strayed from the path, and we seek assurance that we will be welcomed if we return. Tonight I would share with you two brief stories of return and reconciliation. The first is an excerpt from Ernest Hemingway’s short story, *The Capital of the World.*

“No one could really say why he ran away. Or perhaps he didn’t, but was kicked out of his home by his father for something foolish that he said or did. Either way, Paco found himself wandering the streets of Madrid, Spain with hopes of entering into a profession that would most likely get him killed – bullfighting. Those who train under a mentor have a good chance of surviving this profession, but Paco’s memory of his mistakes and guilt over what happened blindly drove him to this one way street to suicide.

“But that was the last thing his father wanted, which is why he tried something desperate which he desperately hoped would work. There was little to no chance that he would be able to find Paco by wandering the streets of Madrid, so instead he put an advertisement in the local newspaper *El Liberal*. The advertisement read,

*“‘Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven! Love, Papa.’*

Paco is such a common name in Spain that when the father went to the Hotel Montana the next day at noon there were 800 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers…and waiting for the forgiveness they never thought was possible!

I wonder how many of us have had moments in our lives when we felt like Paco, sure that we were not worthy of forgiveness. And I wonder how many of us could be that father, not just toward a child, but to anyone who has hurt us. Could we be so magnanimous? Commenting on the story, Steve Goodier wrote, “I notice that the father did not say, “All WILL BE forgiven IF you do this or that.” Not, “All WILL BE forgiven WHEN you do such and such.” The father simply says, “All is forgiven.” This implies ‘No strings attached.’

A second story, entitled “Rags,” from the book, *The Language of Faith*, by Robert Dewey.

The man first notices the boy when the train gives a great lurch. Coming down the aisle, the finds himself flung into the unoccupied seat next to the boy, who turns quickly. Surprise cannot hide the anxiety on the boy’s face. “How old is the boy?” the man asks himself. “Seventeen, maybe eighteen? What could worry someone so young?”

The look the man had seen on the boy’s face is not easy to explain. Is it shame? Or guilt? Or fear? Whatever it is, the boy’s tension seems obvious. The man feels sure the boy is fighting to keep from crying. The man begins to read. The boy sits, but every now and then he steals a look at the man instead of peering out the window quite so intently. Finally the boy asks the man if he knows what time it is and when the train will get into Smithville.

The man gives him the time, but says he doesn’t know about Smithville. “That where you’re headed?” he asks the boy. “Yes,” replies the boy. “Very small town isn’t it? I didn’t realize the train stopped there.” “It doesn’t usually, but they said they’d stop for me.” “You live there, do you?” “Yes, That is, I used to.” “Going back, then, eh?” “Yes. That is, I think so, maybe.”

It is quite a while before he speaks again. When he does, it is to tell the story of his life. Four years ago, he had done something so wrong he had run away from home. He couldn’t face his father, so he had left without seeing anyone. Since then he had worked here and there, but never for long in one place. He had learned about the pain of life. He had often been without money, usually very lonely, and, once in a while, close to real trouble. Finally he had decided to go home to his father’s house.

For a while, that is all the boy tells. The man doesn’t press him with questions. But finally he asks just one. “Your father knows you’re coming?” “Yes,” replies the boy. “Then he’ll be there to meet you, I imagine.” “Maybe. I don’t know.” Silence again. Then, after a long look out the window he continues his story.

“I sent him a letter. I didn’t know if he wanted me back. After what I did, I wasn’t sure he could forgive me. He has never known where I was, and I’ve never written to him, except for the letter three days ago when I said I’d be coming home. But I know how much I hurt him. It must have hurt! So, in this letter I said I’d come home if he wanted me to. There’s a tree right by the little station in Smithville, a few hundred feet this side of it. We used to climb that tree all the time, my older brother and me. In the letter, I told my Dad to put a sign on the tree if he wanted me to get off the train and come home.

“I told him I’d look for a white rag on one of the branches that hangs over the fence where the train passes. If there’s a rag on the tree, I’ll get off; if there isn’t, I’ll just ride on somewhere, I don’t know where.”

The train rushes on through the night, and once again, the conversation wanes. A kind of silent companionship had developed between the man and the boy. Both now wait for Smithville.

Suddenly the boy turns from the window and speaks with such intensity that it takes the man by surprise. “Will you look for me? I’m sort of scared. All of a sudden I don’t know what to expect.” “Sure. I’ll be glad to,” says the man.

They change seats. Shortly after the man had begun to peer into the darkness, the conductor comes through announcing, “Smithville, next stop!” The boy makes no move, says nothing. He merely drops his head into his hands, waiting.

The man peers into the darkness. Then he sees it. He shouts so loud everyone in the car can hear him. “Son, that tree is covered with rags!”

We often refer to the Torah as a Tree of Life. On Yom Kippur, I imagine Through Torah, the Divine words in our lives, we are eternally reminded of the rags that hang on God’s trees.

Listening to that story, did you imagine yourself in the role of the father or the son? Or perhaps both? Whether we are parents or not, there are times in each of our lives when we are this father. We have been deeply hurt by someone and we have to decide whether we are willing to forgive.

And there are moments in our lives when we are this child, having done something for which we are deeply sorry, wanting forgiveness but wondering if we will be rebuffed.

No matter what else is happening in your lives, I can tell you one thing with certainty. Tonight, on Kol Nidre, we are all the children of a loving and forgiving God who is covering the Tree of Life in rags. On Yom Kippur God is saying to us “Come home. All is forgiven. Come home from your self-imposed exile from one another, and come home from your self-imposed exile from Me. This is how you will write yourself into the book of life renewed.