**Yom Kippur 5782, Congregation Netivot Shalom**

Member Darshan - Rabbi Peretz Wolf-Prusan

I turned to Heschel a few days after 9/11. I was on the Bima of Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco, part of a community gathering, a memorial to the victims of 9/11, and the question had been raised, are there human acts which are unforgiveable?

*The Sunflower* is a collection of responses from faith and theology thinkers to a question Simon Wiesenthal had posed: are there limits to forgiveness?

The book begins with a scene from Wiesenthal’s life: It is 1943. He was imprisoned in a concentration camp. One day he is taken from his labor brigade into a hospital room. There, lying in bed is a man who identifies himself as Karl, a Nazi soldier who has requested his presence. Karl gives a gruesome account of his crimes during the war - the torture and murder of hundreds of Jews.

He tells Wiesenthal that he now feels remorse for what he has done and longs for a Jew - any Jew -- to whom he can confess and beg forgiveness.

Wiesenthal stands in silence, looking at the Nazi soldier and pondering his request. At last, without saying a word, he turns away and leaves the room.

Twenty five years later, Wiesenthal sent this story to faith and theology thinkers and asked, “What would you have done?”

This is Heschel’s response. Over fifty years ago, the rabbi of Brisk, a scholar of extraordinary renown, revered also for his gentleness of character, entered a train in Warsaw to return to his hometown. The rabbi, a man of slight stature, and of no distinction of appearance, found a seat in a compartment. There he was surrounded by traveling salesmen, who, as soon as the train began to move, started to play cards.

As the game progressed, the excitement increased. The rabbi remained quiet and absorbed in meditation; this was annoying to the rest of the people and one of them suggested to the rabbi to join in the game. The rabbi answered that he never played cards.

One said to him: "Either you join us, or leave the compartment." Shortly thereafter, he took the rabbi by his collar and pushed him out of the compartment. For several hours the rabbi had to stand on his feet until he reached his destination, the city of Brisk.

Brisk was also the destination of the salesmen. The rabbi left the train where he was immediately surrounded by admirers welcoming him and shaking his hands! "Who is this man?"  Asked the salesman. "You don’t know him? The famous rabbi of Brisk!

"The salesman's heart sank. He had not realized whom he had offended. He quickly went over to the rabbi to ask forgiveness. The rabbi declined to forgive him. In his hotel room, the salesman could find no peace. He went to the rabbi's house and was admitted to the rabbi's study. "Rabbi," he said, "I am not a rich man. I have, however, savings of three hundred rubles. I will give them to you for charity if you will forgive me," The rabbi’s answer was brief: "NO!"

The salesman's anxiety was unbearable. He went to the synagogue to seek solace. When he shared his anxiety with some people in the synagogue, they were deeply surprised.  How could their rabbi, so gentle a person, be so unforgiving?  Their advice was for him to speak to the rabbi’s eldest son and to tell him of the surprising attitude taken by his father.

When the rabbi’s son heard the story, he could not understand his father's obstinacy. Seeing the anxiety of the man, he promised to discuss the matter with his father.

It is not proper, according to Jewish law, for a son to criticize his father directly. So, the son entered his father's study and began a general discussion of Jewish law and turned to the laws of forgiveness. When the principle was mentioned that a person who asks for forgiveness three times should be granted forgiveness, the son mentioned the name of the salesman.

Thereupon the rabbi of Brisk answered:  "I cannot forgive him. He did not know who I was. He offended a common man. Let the salesman go to him and ask for forgiveness."

Heschel concluded, “No one can forgive crimes committed against other people.” Twenty years ago, after 9/11, I was focused on the bad salesman. The villain who tossed out the Rabbi of Brisk, the murderers in the planes.

But now, I wonder. I am 20 years older. My family has gone from two adults and three children to three adults and two seniors!

20 years of American intervention in Afghanistan, the Me Too movement, Black Lives Matter, Climate Tzedek, homelessness, I worry about something else. I know I’m not a villain. But what am I? I have begun to wonder about the **other salesmen** in the train car.

The ones who **witnessed** the Rabbi being pushed out of the compartment. They didn’t seek out the Rabbi to apologize. But they were there. Did they go back to the card game, finish lunch, get off the train in Brisk and did their business?

What story did they tell their families when they got home?  We saw this thing, they might say, it was terrible.  What could we do?  What should we do now? Did they sit in their discomfort? Were they embarrassed?

Twenty years since 9/11… it feels uncomfortable to reflect on everything our nation has done in the name of strength, patriotism, security, — our military reaction, our domestic response, our woeful support for first responders. The lies began even as the ash was falling.

My knee was not on the neck of George Floyd.  Or any of the other 330 brown and black, women and men, Black Lives Matter can name. Did I adjust myself to injustice? Am I now, at last, embarrassed by the story? If I am not embarrassed, what is wrong with me?

Heschel was a Hasid, descended from *tzaddikim* on both sides of his family. Yet, he is writing to us. In "No Time for Neutrality,” he writes:

“The root of any religious faith is a sense of embarrassment, of inadequacy.

I would **cultivate** a sense of embarrassment. It would be a great calamity for humanity if the sense of embarrassment disappeared, if everybody was an all-rightnik, with an answer to every problem. We have no answer to ultimate problems. We really don’t know.

In this not knowing, in this sense of embarrassment, lies the key to opening the wells of creativity.

Those who have no embarrassment remain sterile. We must develop this contrition or sense of embarrassment.”

Heschel is asking me to sit in my discomfort, face my embarrassment.

The Talmud Yerushalmi, written in the Land of Israel around 400 CE, says: “She-loshah devarim me-vat-lin et ha-ge-zei-rah – “three things **annul** the evil decree” “Tefilah, tzedakah, and teshuvah.”

Well, no. No amount of prayer, justice or repentance will annul that City of Berkeley Street Cleaning parking ticket.

The Unetane Tokef, composed in the Land of Israel in the Byzantine Period, is based on the Yerushalmi. The poet changes the impossible Talmudic formula. The poem says that Tefilah, tzedakah, and teshuvah, ma’avi-rin et ro’a ha-gezeirah – “have the power to **transform** the harshness of our destiny”.

“Tefilah, tzedakah, and teshuvah” cannot annul an evil decree. George Floyd is murdered; the climate has changed. The decree has been made. It cannot be annulled, but I can work to transform the evil. I need to sit in my embarrassment. Be shamed by it, be moved by, then to touch it and change it.

Octavia Butler wrote:

“All that you touch  
You Change.  
  
All that you Change  
Changes you.  
  
The only lasting truth  
is Change.  
  
God  
is Change.”

Heschel said, “We have no answer to ultimate problems. We really don’t know. In this not knowing, in this sense of embarrassment, lies the key to opening the wells of creativity.”

If my embarrassment of White Privilege leads to the opening the wells of creativity then this will be a Shana Tova

If my embarrassment of Global Warming leads to the opening the wells of creativity then this will be a Shana Tova

If my embarrassment of Housing Inequality leads to the opening the wells of creativity then this will be a Shana Tova

May our embarrassments become our tefilah, tzedakah and teshuvah.

Gamar Hatimah Tova.