

**Yom Kippur Day - Final
5774-2013
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A group of women were at a seminar on how to live in a loving relationship with your husband. The women were asked, "How many of you love your husband?" All the women raised their hands. Then they were asked, "When was the last time you *told* your husband you loved him?" Some women answered today, some yesterday, some couldn't remember. The women were then told to take out their cell phones and text their husband: "I love you, sweetheart." The women were then told to exchange phones and to read aloud the responses they received to this text message. Here are some of the replies they got back from their husbands when their husbands received a text message that said: "I love you!"

1. Who is this?
2. Eh, mother of my children, are you sick?
3. I love you too.
4. What now? Did you crash the car again?
5. I don't understand what you mean?
6. !?!
7. Don't beat about the bush; just tell me how much you need?
8. Am I dreaming?
9. If you don't tell me who this message is actually for, someone will die.
10. I thought we agreed we would not drink during the day.
11. Your mother is coming to stay, isn't she?

How many of you thought that was funny? How many of you felt it was not so funny because it struck a little too close to home and made you a bit uncomfortable? How many of you raised your hands for both?

It's funny – because it rings true. It makes us a bit uncomfortable because we all seem to have trouble saying the things that need to be said in life. Such simple words:

I love you
I'm afraid
I'm lonely
I need you
I'm sorry

If I had a little more guts than I do – I would have you turn now to the person sitting next to you - -and say these words. Don't worry I won't. I won't push you that far out of your comfort zone. It was enough on Rosh Hashanah when I just asked you to turn to the person next to you and say "hi!" But imagine for a second – if you did say, "I love you." "I need you." And what is interesting is that it really doesn't matter who is sitting next to you – whether it is your husband or wife, mother or father, a friend or even a total stranger – you could turn to them and say: "I'm afraid, I'm lonely, I need you, I love you" – and these words would have meaning – different meanings to be sure depending on who is sitting there – but they would be meaningful and difficult to say.

Why are meaningful things so difficult to say?

I think it might be one of the reasons we are drawn to this place, especially on these days. Because it enables us to say the things that need to be said, confront the things we feel, deep inside, that are so easily buried the rest of the time – even if we don't say them out loud.

Ten times during these Yom Kippur Services – beginning last night and ending tonight – ten times we will rise and recite one of the *vidui* – “Confessional” prayers – *Ashamnu, Al Het* - ten times we will beat our breasts and say a long list of things that are difficult to say. And the wisdom of our tradition is that it understands how difficult it is to speak these things – so it does not require us to turn to the person next to us and say them out loud, it does not even require a confessional and a priest – it requires you to merely stand before God and quietly contemplate these things that you feel in your heart.

The Cantor leads us in prayer and the words of this book are so very different from all the other words that fill our every day conversations: “who shall live and who shall die?” The rabbi speaks to us and in ways that are so different from all the other talk that fills our lives. You don't seem to need my help to talk politics. You seem to have mastered that art quite well without my help. But these other words, the ones that do not come so easily to our lips – these are the words I wish to explore with you. All these hours and all these prayers, all these sermons – if you think about it – they all boil down to different ways of saying, what for most of us has become so hard to say:

I love you, I'm afraid, I'm lonely, I need you, I'm sorry.

And just as it did not make any difference who was sitting next to you, had you said these words to them, so to it doesn't really matter to whom you pray. The words will have different meanings depending on whether you are speaking to God or yourself, they will take on different meanings at 20 then at 70 – but whenever they are said and to whomever they are said - they are worth saying - they will be meaningful no matter how difficult they are to say, maybe *because* they have become so difficult to say.

I want to present two texts for your consideration. One is not Jewish at all, the other is very Jewish – but both make the same simple point. Both of these texts encourage us to meet this challenge head on, this need to say the things that need to be said, to stop avoiding life and its real questions – and the sooner we do, the sooner we can get on with the real business of living.

So here is the first text for your consideration. I present for your consideration the words to a popular country song by Tim McGraw – it is called “Live Like You Were Dyin'.” I wish I could play it for you but you can check it out on your own after *yontif* is over. What's that you say? You didn't know your rabbi was into Country Music? Well, actually I'm not, although growing up in Cincinnati, Ohio it was a part of my early repertoire. I bet I'm the only one here who remembers the refrain to that oldie but goodie, “Dead Skunk in the Middle of the Road...” But, no, I am no longer a big fan, this particular song was pointed out to me by a friend and the title of the song intrigued me: “Live Like You were Dyin'” and then when I read about the song's back story – I was further intrigued. Tim McGraw wrote this song about his father, Tug McGraw, the famous baseball player who played for the Mets but will probably best be remembered as a Philadelphia Philly – and who sadly, died from cancer, some six or seven years ago. This song was written as a tribute to his to him by his son.

The song opens with Tim first hearing the news about his father's cancer: (I won't sing it, but I will try and read the words in my best Cincinnati Country Accent)

"I was in my early forties,
 "With a lot of life before me,
 "An' a moment came that stopped me on a dime.
 "I spent most of the next days,
 "Looking at the x-rays,
 "An' talking 'bout the options an' talkin' 'bout sweet time."
 I asked him when it sank in,
 That this might really be the real end?
 How's it hit you when you get that kind of news?
 Man whatcha do?

And then comes the refrain:

An' he said: "I went sky diving, I went rocky mountain climbing,
 "I went two point seven seconds on a bull named Fu Man Chu.
 "And I loved deeper and I spoke sweeter,
 "And I gave forgiveness I'd been denying."
 An' dad said: "Son, some day, I hope you get the chance,
 "To live like you were dyin'."

And then Tim continues as he tries to take his father's message to heart:

"I was finally the husband,
 "That most the time I wasn't.
 "An' I became a friend a friend would like to have.
 "And all of a sudden goin' fishin',
 "Wasn't such an imposition,
 "And I went three times that year I lost my Dad.
 "Well, I finally read the Good Book,
 "And I took a good long hard look,
 "At what I'd do if I could do it all again,
 "And then:

"I went sky diving, I went rocky mountain climbing,
 "I went two point seven seconds on a bull named Fu Man Chu.
 "And I loved deeper and I spoke sweeter,
 "And I gave forgiveness I'd been denying."
 Like dad said: "Some day, I hope you get the chance,
 "To live like you were dyin'."

Like tomorrow was a gift,
 And you got eternity,
 To think about what you'd do with it.
 An' what did you do with it?
 An' what can I do with it?
 An' what would I do with it?

"Sky diving, I went rocky mountain climbing,
 "I went two point seven seconds on a bull named Fu Man Chu.
 "And then I loved deeper and I spoke sweeter,
 "And I watched Blue Eagle as it was flyin'."
 An' he said: "Some day, I hope you get the chance,
 "To live like you were dyin'."

So it took the death of his beloved father to shake Tim McGraw out of *his* indifference – to get him to say the things that needed to be said, and do the things that needed to be done to make his life more meaningful. What will it take to get you to “live like you were dyin’?” What will it take to get you to love deeper and speak sweeter and give forgiveness that you’ve been denying?

That’s not only the question posed by a sweet Country Song. It is the central question of this sacred Yom Kippur day.

Rocky Mountain climbin’ – maybe. But I’m not sure many of us see “going seven seconds on a bull named Fu Manchu” –on our bucket list – so allow me a second story – this one has more of Jewish flavor, but I think it’s really saying the same thing.

Remember on Rosh Hashanah, I told you a story about two brothers who loved each other and cared for each other and on the very spot they embraced each other and demonstrated that sense of brotherly love – on that spot Solomon built the Temple.

I shared with you my sadness that that sacred spot – which was founded on brotherly love has today become a site of such tension and animosity – where Muslims focus their hatred of Jews and some Jews focus their hatred of Muslims and Palestinians focus their hatred of Israelis and Ultra-Orthodox focus their hatred of Jews who are not like them. It is why I admitted I am not such a fan of the kotel – too much tension, too much hatred – not enough love. But if you were to join me on a short walk, I’ll take you to a place not far from the kotel that I really love. It really is not that far, and I promise you it is worth the hike. So imagine now that we are all in Israel, in Jerusalem, we are at the plaza facing the kotel. Now, Temple Beth Sholom group, please follow me, we are going to turn to your right and follow the Western Wall that is behind me, south – toward the Dung Gate – the way we would go to get back to our busses. I’ll talk as we walk. Very soon we will see some excavations. We will have to take a slight detour around the ramp that leads up to the Temple Mount, the one used by those wishing to go to the Dome of the Rock and the Mosque that is now situated there – but on the other side of that ramp are some excavations, if you look to your left and down you can see them they have exposed what has lied buried for the last 2000 years – the continuation of the Western Wall. Very soon we will come to the site of what is now called the Kotel Masorati – a portion of that very same Western Wall that is the Kotel but it has been dedicated for Jews like us to worship the way we want to. (Here is a picture of our 2011 TBS Israel Group – at this very spot) It is a beautiful spot – in my opinion an even nicer place than the kotel itself, but let’s keep walking – because I want to take you to still another spot, one that is nearby, that I like even better. Soon, the Western Wall of the Temple Mount comes to an end and we then turn the corner and start walking along the Southern Wall of the Ancient Temple Mount - -and about 200 yards further down we now come to what I believe is one of the most remarkable spots on earth. (Here is a picture of our 2007 TBS Israel Group at this spot) My friends what you now see before you – are the actual steps to the *Beit Hamikdash!* Yes, in the last number of years, archeologists

have unearthed the very steps that led up to the ancient temple –the ones our ancestors climbed as they made their final ascent to the *Beit Hamikdash*.

After their long journey to Jerusalem, after cleansing themselves in the mikvaot situated just below us, just beneath the Temple Mount, after preparing themselves ritually and spiritually for this moment – these are the steps our ancestors walked on – 2000 years ago. Do you comprehend what you are seeing? The kotel was merely a retaining wall that held back the earth of the foundation under the Temple Mount – but it was the only physical remnant we had so it became precious, and for 2000 years it became the only way we could feel close to the Temple. But today, well now we have these steps - -the actual ones our ancestors stood on. I love this spot – oh, don't thank me, as you can see from these pictures, I bring all my groups here when we visit Israel because I want them to see and feel what you are seeing and feeling now. I want every Jew to feel the holiness of this place, to understand its history, to know that those ancient pilgrims were us – just 2000 years ago! They were our ancestors. And these steps you now see before you – (I hope you can see them, come closer if you can't) these steps are where we would have been and what we would have been doing on this sacred day – had we lived 2000 years ago.

Are you with me? Can you imagine what it must have been like to stand in this very spot – 2000 years ago. You would have heard them singing: *Shir Hamalot A song of Ascent – a song of the steps – these steps. B'shuv Adonai Et Shivat Tzion Hayyinu K'cholmim* As we returned to Jerusalem we were, like dreamers. *Az Yimaley Schok Pinu, u'Ishoneynu rena – Our mouths were filled with laughter, Our hearts were filled with song.*

Can you see them - -Walking up those steps? Can you see them coming with their offering in their hands, with your loved ones at your side – you came to say: “I'm sorry” or “Thank you” – in the most meaningful and significant way you knew how. Wow –I love that place. But wait, we are not yet done with our tour –for as if you are standing on those steps – if you look up, way up high, just as they must have done so long ago – you can still see the faint outlines of the two entrances by which the pilgrims entered and exited the Temple Mount over two thousand years ago.

Over the centuries, the Muslims sealed and blocked up those gates to prevent our entry – but the outline is still there. And you can now see with your own eyes, something that until now, we only knew from the Talmud. The Talmud explains that the general populace, those who had come to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and atonement – would arrive through the right hand gate and exit by the left hand gate, moving up, through and out of the Temple Mount in a clockwise fashion. But then the Talmud goes on to explain, that three groups – entered the other way – entering through the left hand gate and exiting the right hand gate and moving up, through, and out of the Temple Mount in a counter-clockwise fashion. These three groups were mourners, people suffering from serious illness and those in search of a lost object.

I find this fascinating. Everyone going in one direction, three groups of people going in the opposite direction! Why? Why did mourners, people with a serious illness and those in search of a lost object – why did they walk opposite everyone else? The rabbis understood that the choreography of these southern Temple gates spoke to an ethical ideal – namely that one could not enter the Temple without encountering someone at the opposite end of the emotional or religious spectrum.

Imagine how powerful that was. Here you were a pilgrim – you had journeyed days to come to the Temple. You had brought your offering and just presented it at the Temple – you had given thanks and expressed your appreciation for the blessings that were yours. Maybe you had come to thank God for a child or grandchild who had been born to you. Maybe you celebrated a marriage and gave thanks for the presence of love in your life. Maybe your crops had been plentiful and you had just come to say thank you for your many blessings. And here – just after you had made your offering, just as you were leaving the Temple – probably feeling pretty good about our life and your lot – just as you are exiting – who do you see coming towards you - -mourners and those who had a serious illness. In the midst of your joy and satisfaction you were immediately confronted with those whose lives were difficult and in crisis – you were expected to comfort them and encourage them, to support them and love them. At the precise moment when you were most susceptible to self-congratulations and smugness – you were taught to reach out to others and feel their pain.

Remember what our friend Tim McGraw said when he had this kind of a moment?

I was in my early forties,

"With a lot of life before me,

"An' a moment came that stopped me on a dime.

I imagine – those pilgrims exiting the Temple – confronted with those who had lost so much – they too must have felt that their, oh so pleasant, comfortable lives – had “stopped on a dime.”

"I spent most of the next days,

"Looking at the x-rays,

"An' talking 'bout the options an' talkin' 'bout sweet time."

Some of them may have even stopped and taken a moment to speak to those walking opposite them and:

“asked them when it sank in,

That this might really be the real end?

How's it hit you when you get that kind of news?

Man whatcha do?”

But I also hope that there was a very different calculation going on in the minds and hearts of those who were entering through the exits – those who were carrying such a heavy load – those mourners, those gravely ill and those who had lost something – because I don't think this choreography was merely to humble those who felt so good about themselves – no, I think there was a message for the mourners as well. The intent of having them enter the exit was not to segregate those whom life had hurt, but rather to create a situation whereby the mourners could be comforted by the rest of the community. These two lines of Temple visitors facing each other are simply the ancient version of what we do today when we leave the cemetery after a funeral. The mourners do not walk away alone, but pass through the two rows of people facing them so that they leave the cemetery surrounded by a bond of human comfort.

But there was one thing that always bothered me in this choreography – one group that didn't quite fit – I got how it would be instructive for people who had a year of celebration – to confront those whose year had been less fortunate – and I got how it would be helpful for mourners and those gravely ill to be comforted by the rest of the community, to be reminded that what goes around comes around, but I never understood that third category – those who

were searching for a lost object. It did not seem to match the critical life seriousness of the other two categories. Until Rabbi Harold Kushner suggested an interesting possibility. Maybe, he suggests, maybe the Talmud is not talking about people who have lost a physical object, but who have lost themselves. They have lost their faith, their connection to Judaism, their sense of what it is that gives meaning and depth to each day of life. Amidst the pain and tragedy of life, they have lost their sense of the mystery and the wonder of life. And thus they came to the Temple as some of us come to shul on Yom Kippur knowing that something is missing.

I can imagine what it must be like for these people to walk in the entrance of our synagogue. They see so many who have celebrated a good year – a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, a wedding, a birth or maybe an engagement or the recovery from an illness. They see us walking in our door on the right, -- and they sit here lost -- next to empty seats once filled by a loved one or a friend, they carry in their hearts memories of better times and better days that are not today. They need to see us – and we need to see them. Some have entered this sanctuary through the other door. Those who have lost their way in life and search to recover an enthusiasm, a security, a sense of joy they once took for granted.

Regardless of which door we entered tonight – we must be here for each other. In the words of the great prophet, Tim McGraw – we must be prepared to love deeper and speak sweeter and give forgiveness we have been denying. We must finally be the husbands (and wives) that most of the time we are aren't and become the kind of friend; a friend would like to have.

You don't have to go sky diving, or Rocky Mountain climbin' – although you are welcome to if that is your thing – but regardless of what door you entered to get into this sanctuary tonight – I hope we can spend the rest of these 25 hours being here for each other – being here together – facing each other – seeing each other – just as our ancestors did so long ago when they entered their Sanctuary on this holy day.

Remember those wives who surprised their husbands by texting them and telling them they loved them? On this sacred day, there is so much in our hearts – words that need to be said: to our family, to God, to ourselves:

I love you
I'm afraid
I'm lonely
I need you
I'm sorry