"Leap of Forgiveness:
Forgiveness is a Gift we Give Ourselves from which Others Benefit"
Kol Nidre 5769
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When I was a little boy, my parents used to read a book by Shel Silverstein called *The Giving Tree.* If you've read this book then you know where this sermon is going, but for those who haven't, let me quickly tell you the story. Of course, I'm unable to do it justice so I encourage you to find the book and read it. Shel Silverstein is an amazing children's author who has taught me many lessons about life, but for some reason this book has always, at least until now, been a bit of an enigma for me.

In this story there's a tree and a boy that develop a friendship. The boy is bored and looking for something to do when this tree befriends him. The tree suggests that the boy could swing from his branches and climb onto its trunk. Maybe then he would be happy. So the boy did just that and he was happy. As time went by and the boy grew up he found he was no longer interested in hide and go seek with a tree. Climbing and swinging wasn't as much fun as it used to be, so he moved on.

So often life can bring us back around to the same place we once were. Unable to achieve what he wanted, the boy returned once again to the tree and said, "I need money to buy things so that I will be happy." The tree suggested, "Take my apples and sell them, then you will have money and you will be happy." So the boy did just that and, once again, he moved on.

The years went by and the boy returned once again to the tree. He was unsatisfied with his life's journey so the dejected boy returned to his old friend, the tree, and complained, "I want to build a house. I want a place to live. What can you give me now?" The tree suggested, "Cut off my branches and you'll be able to build yourself a house." The boy did just that and once again he was on his way.

Years later when the boy had grown into a full man, he returned once again to the tree, this time wanting to travel the world. So the tree said, "Cut down my trunk and carve out a boat." So he did and once again he was gone, only to return to the tree as an old man. This time the tree preempted the request. "I have nothing left." Although the tree doesn't say it, every time I hear the story I hear the tree mutter under his breath, "You have taken everything from me, there is nothing left. Each time you came, I gave you something." The tree is thinking this but does not say it, "You have taken everything from me." Instead he says, "I have nothing left to give you." Then the tree stops. The boy responds, " I don't need anything, you see I am old and I just need a place to sit." To which the tree responds, "I am only a stump, but that is good for sitting."

This is an amazing story about unconditional giving. At this time of year I can't help but think that this story, which is an incredible story, is about always returning to the same place. It is an unbelievable story about the capacity to take, but it's an even better story about our infinite ability to give. The tree never really says, "You have used me up. There is nothing left." It seems to me the core message of the story is that there is always something more to give. As long as there is something left of us, there is something left to give.

Today, I bring you a message about the greatest gift you can give someone else and the greatest gift you can give yourself. Until we learn to give to others, we are destined to return to the same place because we cannot escape the cycle. When we learn to give the gift of giving, we are transformed from the boy who is always taking, to the tree that is always giving, and I'd much rather be the tree than the boy any day.

There is no question that the world is filled with people who are always taking. These are the same people who will never get out of this cycle and will, ultimately, repeat their actions over and over. We are all surrounded by takers and they are destined to live life like a gerbil, they keep coming around on their wheel but never get off. Today, I bring you a message of how to get off the wheel, to become a giver rather than a taker. It is in giving that you will receive. Today I bring to you a message of the greatest gift God has given us and God has asked us to share it. The greatest gift from God is not Torah. The greatest gift God has given us is forgiveness. That is what this season is all about. If we can learn to do it, to give it, we will find true treasure. You see, if we can't learn to give it then we will be destined to return over and over to the same place and never move on.

The boy moved on, but the tree could not and the tree did not. The tree was always there for the boy when he came back. Maybe we can be happy where we are.Maybe the journey of life is when we learn to live where we are. We tend to think *The Giving Tree* is about a relationship between a tree and a boy, but it's really a story about the boy himself. The tree is just the foil. Maybe forgiveness has nothing to do with the other person and only to do with ourselves.

We are here tonight, on the holiest night of the year, and we begin with one of the most recognizable pieces of liturgy. All of our lives, we have heard this story and that's strange because as far as liturgy goes, it lacks real theology. Kol Nidre is a legal nullification of any promises we have made. Our tradition teaches the incredible commitment we can make with a promise. What we swear to do, we must do, because our sacred legacy is how well we live up to what we say. Integrity is about living up to the words we say. However, we can be the most reliable person in the world but not be able to accomplish what we set out to do. We may have all of the integrity in the world, but not be able to do what we intended. We let people down and we let ourselves down. Kol Nidre is about the promises we make and Kol Nidre recognizes that we can't always live up to what we truly desire to do. Kol Nidre is letting us off the hook and we all need that. Unfortunately, the formula offered at this time technically absolves us of our promise, it's what do we do with the disappointment that remains.

Forgiveness, like trust, does <u>not</u> have to be earned. It is freely given and has more of an impact on oneself than it does on the other. When you forgive, you love and when you love, you forgive, and when you love God, light shines on you.

Rambam, Maimonides teaches that full forgiveness will never come until you find yourself in the same circumstance and you choose to act differently. I would prefer to read Rambam as suggesting that we are destined to find ourselves in the same circumstance again and again until we have figured out how to change. We are destined to return to the same place, to the same issues, until we can move on, but what if we don't find ourselves in the same situation again? To which God reminds us that we do. We will find that we are like gerbils on a wheel repeating the

same behavior over and over. Again Rambam is instructive, "*Azohi teshuva gemura? Zeh she bah l'yado davar she'avar bo v'efshar b'yado la'asoto, Ufarash.*" What is full and real repentance? Is it when the same circumstance presents itself and we choose to act differently? In a wonderful book entitled *Amish Grace,* the authors trace the process of the Amish community and how they find forgiveness after the brutal massacre in Nickel Mines of October 2, 2006. They say, "Our actions are rarely random. We all embrace patterns of behavior and habits of mind that shape what we do in a given situation. When we consider the behavior of groups, we call such patterns *culture*…" They continue, and I paraphrase, when they examined those habits they found the practice of forgiveness at the roots of their spirituality. (pages 68-71)

Someone once told me that insanity is believing you will achieve a different result by doing the same thing over and over. However, we can change our habits and we can change our responses, but we have to make that choice, we have to make that determination and then it is the new desired response that we have to repeat over and over. We have to practice forgiveness.

Our liturgy tells us that today is the day we start over. *Hayom Harat Olam*. Today we start over and things can be different. Next year, when you come back, and you will because we are all destined to return, we can't help it, I pray you will be in a different place, in your relationships with each other, in your connection to the community, in your connection to God and in your understanding of yourself. There is no question that apologies are needed. We need to confess and we need the circumstance to prove, to test, to gain confidence. Then we need to take that leap of forgiveness. At first it will feel artificial, but learned behavior is always awkward. You must begin somewhere, somehow. It might seem disingenuous but you must begin and the sincerity will come. Emotions follow action. It's not always the opposite.

Fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me. Can we be more forgiving of others than we are of ourselves? This cliché seems to suggest that we should never let our guard down, for once we have been fooled we become a fool, once we have been tricked we have become less. I reject that, once we have been fooled, we have been fooled and that's it. I can't live my life believing that the world is out to get me. I can no longer subscribe to the idea, as P.T. Barnum once said, "There's a sucker born every minute." I refuse to see the world as those who have been taken advantage of and those who take advantage. I refuse to conjecture about motivations and today I let go of all negative assumptions about myself and others and I ask you to do the same.

We are all born pure and kind, yet over the course of life we get away from ourselves, our true self. Life loads us with negative experiences and we are transformed, we are morphed into less kind, less sympathetic beings. We now return to find ourselves again. Once I learn to forgive myself I will learn to forgive others.

I often give sermons and, if you don't know it already, I write out every word. I don't ever, from this bimah, go off script. I'm always afraid I won't be able to find the right word and I'll stumble. I'm afraid of looking silly. However, there's an even better reason to write out every word. It gives me the opportunity to edit myself. I can choose what to say and what not to say. Sometimes we say things we wish we never had. They slip out and can offend. While standing here, I pick my words carefully – and I haven't always been that way. I have often said things I

wish I'd never said. I didn't mean to hurt, I certainly didn't mean to offend, but the words just came out. Once, when I was younger, I overheard my parents arguing about the salary my father was making. I heard the exact figure. Proud of that piece of information, I went to school the next day and told all of my friends how much my father made. The minute I said it, I regretted it. It turns out that the amount of money he made was great and what was even worse, now everyone knew. The story gets worse. Those kids then told their parents and the next thing I knew my parents knew that I knew and that I was sharing that information. My father sat me down in his study, closed the door and quietly explained, "There are certain things we do not share outside the family." I started to cry because I knew what I had done was wrong. I knew it the second I opened my mouth at school. I think, deep inside, I knew the minute I had the information, that sharing it would be wrong, but I was so proud. I cried, because I knew it was wrong and there was no way to undo it. I cried – deep inside, I wish I had never done it and for the next 34 years I have felt badly about it. Every time I open my mouth, I'm afraid of what will come out. Today I forgive myself and I let it go. I ask you to do the same. I ask you to forgive me for anything I have said and, more importantly, forgive yourself. Let it go.

The Giving Tree is about a tree that is taken advantage of, a friend that gives without reciprocity and a friend that has been stripped of everything. I think the message is that there will be people like this in our life, we just have to figure out what to do with them, and more importantly, do we want to be the tree or the boy.