

Forgiveness Is Complex

I imagine you are all aware that our country is in a bit of a financial crisis. There are some who blame the leaders of the financial markets. There are some who blame the people who took home loans without the ability to pay. There are some who blame the government for a lack of regulation. But our “old friends” know who is really to blame – it’s us – the Jews! After all, who controls banking and the stock market – the Jews. The Anti-Defamation League has noted a “dramatic upsurge” in anti-Semitic statements on the web about “the Jew world order” and worse. So, how would you feel if you walked or drove into the Brith Sholom parking lot and saw that someone had painted a swastika on the building? I imagine it would be a very similar reaction to what an African-American would feel if someone hung a noose in his or her presence. Before I return to reminders of Nazi symbolism, I want to make you aware of a few noose incidents.

Do you remember the Jena Six? The name was given to six Black teenagers charged with beating a white student at Jena High School in Jena, Louisiana on December 4, 2006? “In September 2006, as the school year kicked off, a black Jena High School student asked the vice principal if he and some friends could sit under an oak tree where the white students typically congregated. Told by the vice principal they could sit wherever they pleased, the student and his pals plopped down under the sprawling branches of a shade tree in the campus courtyard. The next day, students arrived at school to find three nooses hanging from those branches.

The school's principal recommended expulsion for those behind the nooses, according to the local newspaper in nearby Alexandria. Instead, The Town Talk reported, a school district committee overruled the

recommendation and suspended three white students for three days for hanging the nooses, a gesture written off as a prank.” (CNN)

After the beating of the white student by the Jena Six, there was extensive media coverage of the events before and after the attack. There are some who claim that the coverage inspired other noose incidents. The following is from a report on what occurred at the University of Maryland on September 11, 2007

“Taking a cue from the students at Jena High School, someone at the University of Maryland decided to hang a noose outside the school's black cultural center.... The message of the noose is clear: "We Don't Want You Here." But its symbolism, beyond the original threat of violence and evocation of lynching, is far more significant to any black student attending college. The noose is a reminder that some white people see such institutions as belonging to them, and the access black people earn through hard work is merely a privilege they grant us.” (ABC News)

(CNN) – In October 2007, just a year ago, “A rally ... at Columbia University was held to protest the discovery of a noose on the office door of an African-American professor.

The noose was found Tuesday at Columbia's Teachers College, ... The apparent target, Madonna Constantine, 44, is a professor of psychology and education at Teachers College. ...”

And closer to home and from just this past August:

“Children's Hospital Of Philadelphia confirmed a noose was found hanging in an electrical shop of a CHOP building.

CHOP officials said an employee found a noose hung in an electrical shop

on August 11, almost two weeks ago. After an investigation, the worker alleged to have put it there was fired. Sources said a white IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers) worker hung a noose on a light fixture on the 13th floor of the Aberson Pediatric Research Center.” (Source: MyFOXPhilly)

Why should you or I care about nooses? Because there was a noose incident this past winter at Liberty High School! A senior, white, male band member made a noose out of some cord and left it where a black 10th grade male band member would see it. Who knows what the white boy’s intentions were. Perhaps in his mind it was just a prank or a way to impress some other students. But where was the recognition of the historic symbolism of the noose and the pain, if not fear, it would cause another student? And while the response of school officials at Liberty and in the Bethlehem Area School District is a complex topic, at the least we can all applaud one result. This year the district is introducing and emphasizing the Anti-Defamation League’s program: “No Place for Hate.” But on Yom Kippur, a day of atonement, and forgiveness of sins, I am more interested in examining that issue for a moment. I met and talked with the mother of the black student in May. I was part of a group of community people who met with School district officials to discuss ways in which to address not only this one incident, but clearly a number of racial problems. The mother of the Black student is a minister who, to her credit, tried to focus on the larger issue of racism and not merely on her son’s pain and anger. I spoke with her again recently to see how she and her family felt about the issue of forgiveness. The boy who made the noose, eventually did confess and express regret. One can only hope it was sincere. But does he really

understand the history from which the noose emerged? Forgiving an individual may be tough, but what do we mean by forgiveness when a race or a nation or a group engages in prejudicial and murderous behavior? How long does it take to forgive that – are we ever able to do so – is it even our business to forgive the past?

We Jews have been persecuted so long by so many, we should be experts on the topic of forgiveness. Do you remember Pope John Paul the second's visit to Israel in March of 2000?

“The Pope made the largest gesture of reconciliation offered by the Catholic Church to Judaism by going to Jerusalem's Western Wall yesterday and placing a note asking forgiveness for persecution of the Jews.

Just as during his earlier visit to Israel's Holocaust Memorial, Yad Vashem, the Pope did not categorically apologise at the Western Wall for his church's conduct, or the silence of Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust. ... His note said: ‘We are deeply saddened by the behaviour of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer and, asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.’” (By Phil Reeves in Jerusalem - *Monday, 27 March 2000*)

Of course, the Holocaust would not have been the only issue anyway. Somewhere, we would have to think about the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition at the minimum. And while we surely have not forgotten these tragedies of Jewish history, are we in any position to forgive them, even when a Pope asks us to do so? Is it even in our hearts to want to forgive the historical catastrophes that plagued our ancestors?

This issue confronted me in a strange and totally unexpected way a few weeks ago, by no less a source than my beloved, Super Bowl Champion, New York Giants. The football Giants, along with the Jets, are building a new stadium in the Meadowlands. The cost for such a venture today is upwards of a billion dollars. Among the ways to offset the cost, the teams are trying to sell the naming rights to the new stadium. In order to follow the New York sports teams, I have been reading the New York Daily News for over forty years. In the September 11th edition, (pg. 66-67) the lead story in the sports section was written by Gary Myers. He reported that in the past, he had never cringed when looking at the name of the stadium. Mr. Myers continues: “The feeling will change for me, a member of the largest Jewish community in the country, if the new \$1.6 billion state-of-the-art palace the Giants and Jets are constructing is called Allianz Stadium.

Allianz, the front-runner to secure the stadium’s naming rights, is an insurance and financial services company founded in Berlin in 1890 that moved to Munich in 1939 and had ties to Nazi Germany. Its CEO at the time, Kurt Schmitt, was Adolph Hitler’s economics minister. It was the insurer of the Auschwitz death camp’s facilities and personnel.

Even if Allianz has tried to make restitution over the years to the families of the Holocaust victims, why should a football stadium be a reminder of the painful events that led to the murder of six million Jews?”

Later in the article, Gary Meyers informs us: “A public relations firm has been hired by the New Meadowlands Stadium Corp[oration] to perform due diligence on the companies interested in naming and sponsorship rights... ‘In this instance, [New Meadowlands] management and the teams’ owners became sensitive to Allianz’s history,...’ This thorough review

found that Holocaust experts, former government officials and leading Jewish and survivor groups believe that Allianz has made determined efforts towards restitution and continues to do so today.””

I was upset by the report and actually conflicted. I was enormously unhappy at the thought that a German company with past ties to the Nazis would have its name linked with the Giants. Who ever thought that Auschwitz and its personnel were insured?! But if the company had admitted its role and made restitution, living today, now more than six decades after the end of the Holocaust, what more could one ask of it? They clearly accepted responsibility, made restitution and were no longer engaged in anti-Semitic activity. Isn't this what Judaism means by atonement? Fortunately, at least for me, after a lot of negative media coverage, the football teams broke off discussions with Allianz the day after Gary Myers report.

Many Americans seem to be tired of hearing from Blacks about slavery and from Jews about the Holocaust. Are they right? Have civil rights and affirmative action for Blacks and restitution for Jews atoned for past atrocities? Is it time to forgive, although never forget?

But a different article that I read earlier this summer made me ponder the point of forgiveness as a future conjecture. The article was a dispatch from Daniel Gordis this past July (18) and was entitled: “When Mistakes Are Worth Making.”

The central topic was the exchange of prisoners, “almost two hundred dead bodies and several living terrorists including Samir Kuntar (who, we should recall, shot a man at point blank range in front of his four-year-old daughter, and then killed the girl by smashing her skull against a rock with the butt of

his rifle – and all this at the ripe old age of 17) for two soldiers [Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser.]... In strategic terms, it was probably a mistake. But [writes Gordis] sometimes mistakes are worth making. Take the Disengagement. It is now clear that the Disengagement from Gaza was a horrifying, costly and still painful mistake. But – and I realize that this is not a popular position – it was a mistake that Israel needed to make. It was the mistake that proved, once and for all, that the enemies we face have no interest in a state of their own. They just want to destroy ours. That is what Israelis learned, now without a doubt, as a result of the Disengagement. There’s almost no one left around here myopic enough to imagine even for an instant that further retreats will get us peace. OK, there are still a few arm-chair peace-niks in the States, insisting that there is simply no conflict that cannot be resolved. But here? Precisely the opposite. Now we know that the right was correct – further retreats will only embolden our enemies. They’ll demand more. And more. Until we’re gone.

... The Disengagement was probably a horrifying mistake that Israel needed to make. For now we know, even those of us (and I include myself) who were naïve enough to imagine something else. Peace is not around the corner. Peace is not a year or two away. Peace is not possible. Not now. Not a year from now. Not a decade from now. Because their issue isn’t a Palestinian State it’s the end of the Jewish one.”

Coming from someone like Daniel Gordis who was a self-proclaimed believer in peace with the Palestinians, these thoughts came as a shock. The shock for me was not what Daniel Gordis thought about the prisoner exchange or the Disengagement, but the frightening and haunting sentences: “Peace is not possible. Not now. Not a year from now. Not a decade from

now. Because their issue isn't a Palestinian State it's the end of the Jewish one."

But what if the world demands it? What if there is a breakthrough because the stars are aligned and the needs of many other countries outweigh the needs of Israelis and Palestinians. Then what? Will we Jews in the United States, let alone our Israeli brothers and sisters, like Daniel Gordis – will we forgive the Palestinians for all that has happened these last sixty years and more? We will probably not have to worry in reality, because even if there is a Palestinian state, I doubt that anyone will ask for forgiveness. But what if someone Palestinian leader did so? How would we react? And will we want the Palestinians to forgive us for some of our life altering mistakes? Who really suffers if and when we do not forgive?

Perhaps these unbelievably complex issues of group forgiveness can help give us some perspective on how much easier individual forgiveness may be. I continue to hear heartbreaking stories of family members who are more distant than total strangers. Ripped apart by events that brought pain and anguish, one or the other or both refuse either to reach out or to accept another's atonement. Will anyone really die more at peace knowing that they have fought to keep a brother or sister, a child or parent, a sibling or cousin – at a distance? Rabbi Harold Kushner certainly does not think so. He writes: "Forgiveness is not a favor we do for the person who offended us. It is a favor we do for ourselves, cleansing our souls of thoughts and memories that lead us to see ourselves as victims and make our lives less enjoyable. When we understand we have little choice as to what other people do, but we can always choose how we will respond to what they do, we can let go of those embittering memories and enter the New Year clean

and fresh.” I know that the African-American student who saw the noose is still not ready to forgive the person who left it for him; but his mother is trying to help him understand Rabbi Kushner’s perspective. I suppose many of us face the challenge of letting go of embittering memories and I hope we succeed and enter the New Year clean and fresh.

AMEN