

**Temple Emanuel
Erev Rosh Hashanah
Rabbi Laura Geller**

You all know the old story. Max Schwartz is a deeply religious man. He prays fervently, and he has a powerful sense of God in his life. Of course he comes to synagogue every Shabbat. Sid Rosen, on the other hand, is an atheist, but he too comes to synagogue every Shabbat. The rabbi knows both men well, and one day says to Rosen: “Sid, I understand why Max comes to shul every Shabbat. But why do you come? You don’t even believe in God!” Without missing a beat, Sid replies: “Max comes to shul to talk to God; I come to shul to talk to Max.”

This summer I went to a lot of different synagogues. In Warsaw, with a group of our congregants, I went to a Reform congregation called Bet Warshava, overflowing with Polish young people discovering their Jewish roots. A few weeks later, in Tel Aviv, I went to a small conservative synagogue, where everyone was grieving over the murder of two young Israeli girls killed by a terrorist’s bomb in Nentanya, girls who had grown up in the synagogue. Then I went to a shul in Napa, California. It is Reform on Friday night and Conservative on Shabbat morning, and the very same individuals come whether the service is Conservative or Reform! And finally I went to Shabbat services at Esalen, the famous institute for human potential in Big Sur, where I prayed with a ragtag cluster of unlikely co-religionists, including one young German woman who was sure she was Jewish in her past life.

It’s hard to say what this diverse group of people have in common. They speak different languages. Some are on a spiritual path; some aren’t. Some grew up in Jewish homes, others didn’t. Some are deeply committed to Israel; others are more ambivalent. They have very different politics, very different lifestyles, and very different world views.

What do they have in common?

In my grandparents’s generation, the answer would be clear: they are all Jews, and that’s all that would have mattered. My grandfather might not have liked some of them, or agreed with them about the way they thought or how they practiced their Judaism, but he knew that in some deep way, they had a claim on him because they were all part of the Jewish people. If something bad happened to Jews anywhere in the world, it mattered to him. The charity he gave was to Jewish institutions, because, as he told me, “If we don’t take care of our own, who will?” A pillar of his life was the Talmudic dictum: *Kol Yisrael Aravim Ze-l’zeh*: all Jews are responsible for each other.

But it is a different world now. We’re losing that sense of peoplehood. What do liberal Reform Jews really have in common with a right-wing *haredi* Jew in Jerusalem? What links most American Jews to those courageous Russian Jews

struggling to create Progressive synagogues in St. Peterberg and Minsk? How are we connected to the Israeli settlers who built their homes in Gaza, or to the soldiers who evacuated them? If we define our commitments primarily in terms of personal relevance and our Jewishness in terms of our individual journeys, how does that connect us to other Jews at all?

What do Max and Sid have in common, those two guys in shul? Both of them are talking, aren't they... one to God, one to Max. And presumably, both are listening. They're both part of the Jewish conversation.

We are experiencing a paradigm shift in the Jewish world. What my grandfather would have called "peoplehood" is what I want to call "the Jewish conversation." Being Jewish means being part of the conversation. It's a conversation with the past, with those generations who came before us, who used many of the same words we will use in our liturgy tonight. It is a conversation with sacred texts, with the commentators from the fourth century, and the eleventh century and the thirteenth century and the sixteenth century, whose interpretations are recorded around the pages of the Talmud. When we study those texts, we join the conversation. In fact, every Sunday morning, for the past eight years, about fourteen congregants (doctors, lawyers, financial planners, builders, teachers, professors, and therapists) have been talking with RASHI, the eleventh century Bible commentator, and each other, in what has become a profoundly moving and important conversation. Or just think about your own Passover seder; it is literally a conversation over a text, the hagaddah. We deepen the conversation every year as we tell each other our stories within the framework of the larger Jewish story.

The Jewish conversation is also provoked by Jewish art, film, music, and theater. For example, the episode of O.C. that introduced "Christmaka" led to Jewish conversations. Phillip Roth's *The Plot Against America* initiated a Jewish conversation. Certainly the response to Mel Gibson's *The Passion* was a Jewish conversation. All the Jewish websites on the internet are part of a global Jewish conversation. J-Date leads to Jewish conversations... and sometimes more! The range of Jewish magazines from *Commentary* to *Heeb* all contribute to the Jewish conversation. Responding to Hurricane Katrina by donating through Jewish organizations like URJ or the Federation, amplifying the Jewish response to other human beings in need, is to be part of the Jewish conversation. The Jewish conversation takes many different forms; it is a conversation with other Jews, even those whose life styles or politics are foreign to us, and it is also a conversation with others who are not Jews, a conversation that translates Jewish values into actions.

For my grandfather, to be Jewish meant being part of the Jewish people. For us, it is about being in the Jewish conversation. The deeper the conversation, the more meaningful our Jewish connection can be.

There are different ways to have the conversation. Sometimes, it is like a conference call; other times, like an internet chat room with participants from all

over the world. Who knows, maybe it's even a conversation over Rosh Hashanah lunch about the rabbi's sermon... (Be gentle in that one!) Taking all these conversations seriously is what it means to be Jewish.

At this season, at this very moment actually, as we begin a new year, there is another version of the Jewish conversation that we all need to have. It's not an easy one. It is a conversation about forgiveness, *mechila*. At this season, we Jews are asked to make a list of everyone we know, everyone with whom we interact, and especially everyone important to us... and we are supposed to seek *mechila*, forgiveness. We're supposed to ask: "Will you forgive me for anything I might have done or said this past year that hurt you?"

Think about that for a minute. Think about a friend or family member with whom there's been some tension, some hurt, some feelings of being let down. Now imagine inviting him or her out for coffee and asking: "Will you forgive me for anything I might have done or said this year that hurt you?"

Not so easy to do, is it? Because if you take it seriously, if *they* take it seriously... the question will lead to other questions: What did you do? What did you say? And the questions will lead to a conversation... about hurt feelings, unresolved anger, unfinished business. And maybe it will be hard for you to listen to what they are saying, and then you'll want to respond: "Well, you let me down as well." Or maybe, the hurt was too great, and your friend can't let it go, or won't let it go.

Or maybe your friend misunderstands what forgiveness really is. It isn't that what you did was okay... maybe it wasn't. Forgiveness is, rather, a commitment not to let the hurt poison the relationship, not to carry a grudge. The forgiveness we ask for is a letting go of the hurt defining the relationship, and the making room for healing.

So you ask for *mechila*, forgiveness. And then, if you both really listen as well as talk, the conversation might continue long enough to clear up some stuff that has been getting in the way of being close. Maybe, if it becomes a real conversation, you'll discover a new depth in the relationship. Maybe you'll feel a lightness, a lifting of some baggage you might not even have noticed you were carrying. Maybe this Jewish conversation can lead to a new beginning, a deeper connection.

This conversation is hard to have... so hard that the tradition is actually observed more in the breach than in reality. Often people ask the question, if at all, in a kind of pro forma way, leaving no real option but to respond, "Of course I forgive you. Do you forgive me?" A ritual, but not a real conversation.

With whom do you need to have this conversation? Who needs to have this conversation with you?

Probably many different people. Think about them now... maybe even make a list in your mind. And then try, over the next ten days, to have some of these conversations, even by phone or e-mail if you can't do it face-to-face.

As I make my list, it includes some of you. And when I talked with Rabbi Aaron and Cantor Kliger about my sermon themes this year, about asking for forgiveness, they shared with me that they felt the same way, that they also wanted to ask forgiveness, *mechila*, from you.

We know that we have done things or said things that might have hurt some of you this year. If we hurt you, we each want to say to you: "I am genuinely sorry." We want to try to say that without being defensive. We know that each of you deserves to have a rabbi or cantor who is there for you when you need a spiritual leader, and although we try very hard, sometimes we miss the mark.

So I want to ask my colleagues to join me now, to ask you for forgiveness. [Rabbi Aaron, Cantor Kliger, and Rabbi Heller come to the front of the bimah.]

All: Will you forgive us for whatever we might have done or said this year that hurt you?

Rabbi Geller: I hope you will forgive me for those times I wasn't able to be fully present to you when you were grieving or going through a tough time...

Rabbi Aaron: [Asks for forgiveness]

Cantor Kliger: [Asks for forgiveness]

Rabbi Heller: [Asks for forgiveness]

All: Please forgive us for anything we might have done or said this year that hurt you. [Long Pause... everyone back to their seats...]

How can this be the beginning of a conversation and not just an empty ritual? We're standing up here, in white robes, talking. You are sitting in the pews... listening. Hardly a conversation...

Hardly a conversation yet, but perhaps the beginning of what could be an important Jewish conversation. Treat this as an invitation; we want you to talk with us about those times we did hurt you. We want you to talk with us, and not with other people *about* us. Perhaps by talking together, really having a conversation, we can come closer... and then our connection can grow deeper. We might also talk about all the things that have gone well, all the ways that the congregation is a thriving exciting place with lots of activities, leading the way in Jewish education and the arts, a place where Israel really matters, where we work together with other faith communities to make a difference in Los Angeles, a place where the Jewish conversation is happening in so many life-affirming ways.

This is what it means to be part of a community, people who talk to each other about what is most essential. Community can expand to peoplehood, with all of us, as different as we might be, talking and listening to each other... talking and listening in the presence of God.

As we learn in *Pirke Avot*, that wonderful sacred text whose name, *Pirke Avot*, could be translated as: *Pieces of the Conversations of Our Ancestors*: “When two people sit and words of Torah pass between them, the Divine Presence is there.” In other words, share in the Jewish conversation, and God is there with you.

So here we are, with Max and Sid, with my grandfather and yours, with all kinds of Jews, and with each other, ready to begin a New Year.

And so, let’s open our prayers books, and begin a Jewish conversation with God...