

## Rabbi Bloom Sermon – Yom Kippur Morning - 2020

You can just imagine how many sermons rabbis are preaching this year on Justice Ginsburg and her legacy. Many will discuss her career and its impact upon American society, the legal community and the law itself. All of these themes are fitting for the occasion. I would like to focus on a more personal dimension of her life which has garnered quite a bit of attention. It is her relationship with her cherished friend and colleague Justice Antonine Scalia. This unusual but well known friendship has been one of the most unique and celebrated aspects of her life and his as well. I believe that if we probe a bit deeper we might find that there are serious insights and lessons which we can derive for us all on Yom Kippur. I am not referring to this particular relationship alone but there are other examples of people who rose above differences on ideology, race and politics to forge new bonds and friendships. We need to hear those stories today too.

What are those lessons? Yom Kippur focuses on healing relationships. Justices Scalia and Ginsburg showed us what was possible when people on the opposite side of legal issues and who profoundly disagree how the Constitution should be applied in today's society can still find common ground and can overcome those political and legal obstacles. They may have not changed each other's mind but what they did achieve was to uphold the integrity of the institution of the Supreme Court and its humanity. Maybe there is a lesson about just how far people are capable of stretching to maintain the dignity of relationships even when we disagree.

How do we recite prayers to God about admitting sin and seeking forgiveness when in real life we refuse to stretch and instead carry on wars of words and ideologies? How do we pray to God when we can't or won't do what it takes to see the good in people even when we profoundly disagree with their viewpoints on all sorts of issues in life? Aren't we supposed to be giving a second look on the inside of person? Remember "Do not view the outside of a person only but rather cast your eyes on the inner person." That is what the Talmud says.

The answers to these questions lay not only in the friendship of two Supreme Court justices but in other examples not just from the Torah but from recent history as well.

First let's go to the Torah in Chapter 13 of Genesis and the story of two relatives Abraham and Lot. As family and separate tribes they left Haran and followed God's calling to arrive in the land of Canaan.

Their rivalry was escalating between these two men as their herdsmen as well as outside tribes who jumped into this growing problem of sharing land and water resources. Finally Abraham says to his nephew Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours for we are kinsmen."

So they found another way to resolve their territorial dispute and eventually agreed to reclaim other lands so as to maintain the peace. It took the realization that despite their economic conflicts the fact that they were kinsmen at heart was what it would take to get through this issue. Sometimes rivals need to find different pathways and rise above immediate conflicts in order to solve vexing issues. The bonds of friendship from their being family enabled them to overcome the water rights dispute of their flocks.

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How about another issue only this time in American history. Go back to the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. It is a little known story of his bitter political rivalry and personal animus with a fellow lawyer named Edwin Stanton. They were years earlier attorneys and rivals as co-counselors on a famous patent legal case in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1857. Lincoln felt Stanton treated him poorly and showed complete disrespect for him.

They disliked each other intensely. Soon afterwards, Stanton was appointed Attorney General by President James Buchanan. After Lincoln was elected president, his cabinet lobbied him to appoint Stanton as Secretary of War. Needless to say it was a difficult pill for Lincoln to swallow let alone for Stanton who in fact disliked Lincoln intensely.

He accepted the nomination and instead of ushering in years of contempt and conflict between the two men their relationship evolved into mutual respect. Lincoln did not like him at all but realized that Stanton was the best man for the job and his values on the Union complimented Lincoln's position on preserving the Union. They learned how to work together and find something else they had not had before which was respect. So when Lincoln was assassinated laying on his death bed it was Stanton who sat at his beside and famously declared, "he has entered the ages."

It turned out that they had a special and tragic bond since both men lost infant children within five months of each other. They found a new relationship that despite personality issues between them they eventually developed a respect and affection for each other.

Stanton's secretary wrote about the two men: "No two men were ever more utterly and irreconcilably unlike. The secretiveness which Lincoln wholly lacked, Stanton had in a marked degree; the charity which Stanton could not feel, coursed from every pore in Lincoln. Lincoln was for giving a wayward subordinate seventy times seven chances to repair his errors; Stanton was either for forcing him to obey or cutting off his head without more ado. Lincoln was as calm and unruffled as the summer sea in moments of gravest peril; Stanton would lash himself into a fury over the same condition of things. Stanton would take hardships with a groan; Lincoln would find a funny story to fit them. Stanton was all dignity and sternness, Lincoln all simplicity and good nature.... Yet no two men ever did or could work better in harness. They supplemented each other's nature, and they fully recognized that they were a necessity of each other."

One more case from the recent past which affirms how rivals can learn to work together and develop new respect for each other. This past week the famous Chicago Bears halfback Gale Sayers an African American passed. Besides being a Hall of Fame football player, the story of his friendship with his white Italian colleague, the fullback Brian Piccolo, was not altogether different than the Lincoln and Stanton rivalry. The two men did not like each other very much and things got worse when they were assigned to be roommates on the Chicago Bears. Their personalities and temperaments were different and neither initially liked the other. They were also the first interracial football players to room together in the NFL. You might remember the 1971 movie Brian's Song which told this famous and heartbreaking story.

But over the years as they played football they learned how to understand each other and they saw in each other a different side of the humanity of the other. They eventually became a

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powerful offensive team on the gridiron and brothers in their personal lives. The tragedy was that Piccolo was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer and tragically died at the age of twenty six. A month before Piccolo died of cancer, Sayers received the coveted Hallas award for excellence and sportsmanship. His acceptance speech went down as one of the classics in sports history.

**Sayers said:** I'd like to say a few words about a guy I know, a friend of mine. His name is Brian Piccolo, and he has the heart of a giant and that rare form of courage which allows him to kid himself and his opponent -- cancer.

He has a mental attitude which makes me proud to have a friend who spells out "courage," 24 hours a day, every day of his life. Now you flatter me by giving me this award. But I say to you here and now, Brian Piccolo is the man of courage who should receive the [George S. Halas Award](#).

It's mine tonight -- and Brian Piccolo's tomorrow.  
I love Brian Piccolo.  
And I'd like all of you to love him too.  
And tonight, you hit your knees:  
Please ask God to love him.

You see that in all three stories how human beings can change and how they can find things in common whether we are speaking about the famous friendship of two rivals Justices Ginsburg and Scalia or Lincoln and Stanton and Sayers and Piccolo. Even Abraham and Lot found a new dimension of their relationship to end the conflict in their times.

When are we going to find that dimension in our times? The Yom Kippur liturgy says in one confession,

“God, bring down my walls of defensiveness and self righteousness. Help me to stay in humility. Please— give me the strength to do what is right.” (P. 293)

Or the Israeli poet Dahlia Ravikovitch wrote in our mahzor (P.295)

“Even rocks crack, I tell you  
And not on account of age.  
For years on their backs in  
The cold and the heat,  
So many years,  
It almost creates the impression of calm.  
They don't move, so the cracks can hide.....  
Till a seal comes to rub  
Against them,  
Comes and goes.  
And suddenly the stone has an  
Open wound.  
I told you when rocks crack, it

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Happens by surprise.  
Not to mention people.”

When are we going to read these words in our liturgy which call upon us to find the goodness not only in ourselves but also in our adversaries or rivals?

It is easy to hate and lambast the other. It's hard to overcome harsh emotions and take the moral high ground. These unique Americans found that way and they serve as models for us on Yom Kippur. Talk about reaching out to God for forgiveness? Not so fast. Let's take care of the business with our fellow human beings. As Abraham said to Lot. 'Are we not Kinsmen?' I wonder if God is waiting for us to ask that question in our relationships with our contemporaries?

Yom Kippur is about healing relationships and isn't God telling us "to hit our knees" too because we have to do better? These stories say, as Abraham said to Lot. "Let there be no strife between you and me.... for we are kinsmen." That is the point and shouldn't that be our goal on Yom Kippur. It worked for Sayers and Piccolo, Stanton and Lincoln, Ginsberg and Scalia and Abraham and Lot. What about us? If not now, when?