

Kol Nidre Family Service, 2014/5775

by Rabbi Laura Geller

You all remember Shlomo, don't you? He is the boy who grew up in Nineveh, the perfect city, the one we hear about in the story from the Bible we read tomorrow afternoon.

Well, it wasn't always a perfect city. In the days of the Bible it was a pretty horrible city, with people being so mean to each other that God sent this prophet, Jonah, to tell the people that unless they stopped being mean to each other, the city would be destroyed in forty days. Jonah walked all around shouting: "Stop being mean! Change the way you treat each other! If not now, when?"

And you know what? The people listened, and they changed, and from that moment until now, Nineveh became a great place to live.

Most of the people born in Nineveh never left. After all, why would you leave a place where everyone was nice to each other? Nobody was greedy, so everyone shared the good stuff they had. Neighbors all knew each other, people helped each find jobs, old people had young friends and young people had older people they could look up to – why would anyone leave?

Shlomo might have been the first kid in about seven hundred years to leave. And he left because he realized that the rest of the world wasn't like Nineveh. That seems weird, I know, but Shlomo, like the prophet Jonah, believed that people could change, even if they had been really bad. So he set off on this journey to convince people to change, thinking: "If not now, when?" He believed that other cities could be like Nineveh if only people knew that being nice was possible. So he set out on a journey to let people know that. He thought to himself: "If not now, when?"

Last week he was in Beverly Village. He got the kids there to think about how much they have to be grateful for, and when he left, everyone was much happier. So he was feeling pretty good about himself and his mission, ready for whatever he might find in the next town just down the road. Just as he was passing a sign that said *City of Angels*, he saw a girl about his age sitting on a bench crying. He sat down next to her.

He sat there in silence for a little while, and then turned to her and said "My name is Shlomo. What's yours?"

"Rebecca," she answered. He continued: "I couldn't help but notice you're upset. Anything you want to talk about?" Now, even though he was a complete stranger, Rebecca did want to talk. The same thing sometimes happens when

you're on an airplane, sitting next to a perfect stranger you will probably never see again, but for the hours on the flight, you sort of pour your heart out. Know what I mean? So Rebecca did pour her heart out.

“About two months ago my best friend Sara wore a new dress to school. She doesn't have a lot of money and doesn't get new clothes very often, so for her, it was a big deal. But it wasn't a pretty dress. The colors were all wrong for her, and it was too long. It made her look like an old lady. She asked me how she looked, so I told her the truth. But I told her in front of some other kids, and I sort of made a joke about her. It really hurt her feelings. I mean, I guess I really embarrassed her. Anyway, she hasn't spoken to me since. I feel terrible and I don't know what to do.”

Shlomo just listened while she talked. He didn't interrupt, or rush in to tell her that he knew how she was feeling. He just let her talk, and cry a little. But when she asked him directly “What do you think I should do?” – he said “Do you know that soon it will be Yom Kippur? Do you know about *mechila*, asking for forgiveness?”

Rebecca responded, “Well, I am Jewish, so I know about Yom Kippur. I mean I go to temple with my parents. And they fast on Yom Kippur. And I go to Sunday school. But I really don't know what it's about. And what is *mechila*?”

“*Mechila* means asking for forgiveness. In fact, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, every Jew is supposed to go up to all the people they know and say ‘If there is anything I might have done that hurt you, I am really sorry. Is there anything I can do that might fix it a little? Will you forgive me?’”

Rebecca stiffened a little. “Boy that would be hard to do. Can’t I just tell God how sorry I am?”

Shlomo: “Unfortunately, it doesn’t work that way. If you’ve done something to hurt another person, you have to apologize to them first. God can’t fix what went wrong between two people.”

“Well what if I asked her and she said, ‘No I don’t forgive you.’”

“It’s a good question,” Shlomo said. “You’re supposed to ask up to three times, and if after that the person doesn’t forgive you, then it becomes their problem, not yours, and you have to let it go.”

So that day, Rebecca gathered up all her courage and went up to Sara. And she thought to herself, “I gotta do it now. Because if not now, when?”

Rebecca: “Sara, I’m sorry for the mean thing I said about your dress.”

Sara: “Yeah? So what? My feelings are still hurt.”

Rebecca got a little teary and walked away. She went back to the bench where she met Shlomo and there he was waiting for her.

Shlomo: “How did it go?”

Rebecca: “She didn’t accept my apology. She’s still upset. And I feel awful.”

Shlomo: “Well, remember, once may not be enough. Sometimes people don’t feel like you’re telling them the truth that you’re sorry – that maybe someone made you say it. Go tell her again.”

So the next day, Rebecca went over to Sara’s house, and this time she brought a little necklace that she thought would match Sara’s dress nicely. It was made of different color glass beads. It was her way of saying that she was REALLY, REALLY sorry. And when Sara answered the door, there Rebecca stood with the gift in her hand.

Rebecca: “I know that you may not have believed me that I was sorry. But I really am. And to show you just how sorry I am, I wanted to give you this necklace of mine that I think will match your dress perfectly.”

Sara (after pausing): “Well, thanks, I guess. But I’m still really angry at you. What you said really made me sad.”

Again, Rebecca got teary and walked away to find Shlomo. There he was sitting and waiting for her on that bench. And she told him what happened this time.

Shlomo: “It sounds like she’s mad at you, but not as mad at you as she was. Go ahead and try it one more time. Remember – Jewish tradition says that you have to apologize three times. After that, it’s clear that you’re sorry, and that the other person is holding a grudge. So one more time.”

Rebecca took a deep breath. “Okay. I can do this. One more time. I really hope it works.”

This time, as Rebecca walked up to Sara, she was already a little teary before she even started.

Rebecca: “Sara, I don’t think you know how important you are to me and how much it hurts me to know that I hurt you. I understand why you’re so upset with me. And I hope that you will find it in your heart to forgive me because I don’t want to keep on going without you as my friend. I miss you. And I’m sorry.”

Well, Shlomo was waiting on the bench for Rebecca to come back and report what happened this third time. And he waited for an hour. Then two. Then three. And it about time for Kol Nidre to begin.

Shlomo: “I don’t want to miss temple. I hope that everything with Rebecca and Sara worked out okay. I’m worried about them. Maybe I gave bad advice.”

Well, Shlomo prayed at temple on Kol Nidre, and the next morning on Yom Kippur. No sight of Rebecca – not in the morning, not in the afternoon, not at Neilah. Someone at the synagogue was nice enough to invite Shlomo to the community break-fast and so Shlomo went. He was really glad to have someplace to go. And there across the table, he saw Rebecca! She was standing next to a girl wearing a dress that was too long and all the wrong colors for her – with a really pretty colorful necklace made of glass beads. Rebecca saw Shlomo, motioned for him to come over and introduced him: “Shlomo, I want you to meet my best friend, Sara.”