

Yom Kippur 5780 – September 9, 2019
Rabbi M. Beaumont Shapiro
Wilshire Boulevard Temple, Los Angeles

There could be thirty-three million Jews in the world today, but there are only thirteen million—up to twenty million Jews are missing because of a broken promise. In 1917 the British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour sent a letter to Lord Rothschild making a promise.

“His Majesty's Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object....”

Had Balfour kept his word, we wouldn't have had to wait another forty-one years and fight a war for Israel to be born, and six million Jews would have had a place to go before Germany's Final Solution.

Politicians and their promises. Remember George H. W. Bush's now infamous campaign promise, “Read my lips; no new taxes?” The promise helped him win the election, but breaking it, cost him reelection.

On a beautiful fall day in 1993, Yasser Arafat, the president of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, stood on the White House lawn, shook Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's hand, and promised peace, declaring in Arabic; “The difficult decision we reached together was one that required great courage...Our two peoples are awaiting today this historic hope, and they want to give peace a real chance.”

Arafat reneged on the deal, and a quarter century later we are still waiting for peace because of his broken promise.

But it's not just politicians, it's us too. We live in a world, and a town, of broken promises. So many of us are often casual about making promises with no real intention of keeping them—they're throwaway promises. “Let's do lunch,” “I'll call you later.” Nothing earth-shattering, right? Then there are the ones that hurt a little more when they're broken.

“The job is yours!”

“It's a deal!”

“You have my word.”

“I won't miss your game.”

“I'll see you at your recital.”

When we break a promise, no matter how small it may seem, it can tear at the fabric of our relationships with our acquaintances, our colleagues, our friends and our family—the very people we claim to love the most.

Any one of us who has ever been in a relationship with a partner who broke a promise knows just how much it can hurt. That's why infidelity is so painful. Because it is a breaking of one of the most sacred promises one human being can make to another.

Yes, few things hurt more than a broken promise. But if that's true, then the reverse must also be true. That few things mean more than keeping a promise.

"I could have died every day during my childhood," says Michael Stolowitzky, who escaped capture by the Nazis during World War II thanks to his Catholic nanny Gertruda.

When Michael's mother had a stroke and lay dying, Gertruda made her a promise.

"She knew my mother was about to die," said Michael. "She promised that she would save me, raise me as her own son, and take me to Palestine. She kept that promise and because of that, I am alive."

After his mother died, Gertruda and Michael left Poland and traveled to Lithuania.

Then the Germans occupied Lithuania. Gertruda had him baptized by a Catholic priest at age 8 and Michael served as an altar boy.

"She always told him, 'Michael, don't forget. I'm saving you. You are Jewish,'" and helped him remember Jewish holidays, he said.

When the war ended, they made their way to France, where they boarded a luxury ship to Haifa, disguised as American tourists.

"We drove on to the Galilee," he said. "We never came back to the ship."

When the State of Israel was founded in 1948, Stolowitzky reunited with wealthy relatives. His aunt told Gertruda that they would adopt Michael and she needed to return to Poland. "This is a Jewish state," his aunt told Gertruda.

Upon hearing these old words spoken to Gertruda, Michael, then 12, decided to live in a one-room apartment in Jaffa with Gertruda. "She cleaned houses, and I turned my back on my family and money," he said. "To me, she's a saint. She gave me life. If not for her, and the promise she kept to my mother, I wouldn't be here."

Most of us will never make a promise like Gertruda, but today, we make an awful lot of promises to ourselves—and to God. So, here's a little advice for us all.

You'll often hear a traditional Jew say two Hebrew words before committing to virtually anything, *bli neder*—which means, "it's not a promise." It seems like such an odd thing to say after actually making a commitment. "Excuse me, I know I'm telling you that I'm going to do something, but I just want you to know, I'm not *promising* to do it." "*Bli neder*" is really an

acknowledgement of the power of a promise and that a real, true promise, is not something one should make lightly without intention. In other words, don't make a promise you don't intend to keep.

You know what I hate? I hate the gym in January. It's overcrowded with all of the people who have made resolutions to exercise more in the New Year. But by February, it's back to normal as resolutions to get fit go the way of so many other good intentions—abandoned.

But imagine a world in which people actually did keep their promises. A world built on trust rather than skepticism. A world without rogue nuclear tests, and broken peace treaties. A world filled with deeper and richer relationships, like Mary and Ben's.

They met in the second grade and he always, no matter what, took care of her.

Mary Lapkowitz had Down Syndrome. Ben Moser did not. They were inseparable at their Pennsylvania elementary school, and if Mary wasn't being included in an activity, or was on the outside looking in, Ben included her.

Their teacher, Trace Spogli, remembers it to this day. "If she was looking like she wasn't having fun, he would go over and talk to her ... He just always watched over her," Spogli said.

In the fourth grade, Ben made Mary a promise. When they were in high school, he would take her to the prom.

"I thought Mary was really cool," Ben said of their grade school days. "She was sweet and easy to get along with."

Mary thought much the same of him.

They went to different (and rival) high schools. He's became a quarterback. She helped her dad, who was her school's equipment manager.

When they were both seventeen, Ben kept his promise and asked Mary to the prom. She was a vision in purple, he wore a complementing purple vest. As they posed for photos with their parents, the pair smiled, arm-in-arm. Mary had a wrist corsage of white roses, Ben had a matching boutonniere.

Neither thought their pairing was anything out of the ordinary. A friend is a friend, after all. And a promise is a promise.

Over and over again on Yom Kippur we recite *Ashamnu*, confessing twenty-four of our failings. Twenty-four times we beat our chests and say to ourselves, "I will be a little more honest, a little kinder and less stubborn. I will be less arrogant and more

humble. I will be less neglectful and more attentive.” Twenty-four promises we make to ourselves and to God sitting here today.

There’s an old story about the famous Chassidic master, the Baal Shem Tov. As Yom Kippur approached, he stood outside his synagogue with the doors locked. The time for the service approached and a crowd gathered on the steps. Everyone was anxious to get to their seats and begin, but the Baal Shem Tov refused to unlock the doors. Soon, there were hundreds of people pressed up against one another outside the doors of the synagogue.

“Rabbi,” one of them finally shouted, “why won’t you open the doors?”

“I can’t let any of you in,” replied the Baal Shem Tov in distress, “there’s no room left in the sanctuary.”

“No room left in the sanctuary,” the man said, challenging the rabbi. “That’s impossible, every member of the congregation is standing here outside. How could the sanctuary possibly be full?!”

“It’s full alright,” replied the Baal Shem Tov, “Full of your prayers. Full of all the promises, all the lofty intentions, all the silent vows you left behind the last time you were here. Not one of you took them with you when you left this holy place.”

This Yom Kippur, let’s not leave this room full of all the prayers and promises we uttered, but left behind. Let’s take them with us out of this holy place. Let’s take them to our families, our friends, our coworkers, even to the strangers we meet. Let’s take them into this new year so that next year, this room will truly be empty, waiting for us to sit together again and look back on the promises we made—took with us—and kept—today.