

“SPEEDILY, AND AT A NEAR TIME”

By Bob Bledsoe, CLL

My wife Jayne was away for the weekend, and when she's gone for more than a day or two I take advantage of it and give in to one of my vices. I smoke cigars. Back when Jayne was a three-pack-a-day smoker, she was okay with my cigars, even going so far as to order my favorite brand at the convenience store she worked at so I'd always have a steady supply. When I took up a pipe she encouraged that too, saying the pouch tobacco aroma reminded her of her dad's bureau drawer and the smell of his shirts in the winter.

But that was a decade and a half ago, and now that Jayne has given up cigarettes, she says the odor of cigars nauseates her. So because I love her, I wait until she's gone for a few days before I buy some, and I stop smoking them the evening before she returns, so she won't smell

them on my breath when she kisses me “hello.” She knows I smoke when she’s gone, but she prefers not to be reminded.

I had an errand to run in New Richmond so I stopped at the new convenience store on G on my way home to pick up a pack. They had dozens of different cigarettes, and only six kinds of cigars. Three of them were Swisher Sweets. Swisher Sweets are the Carling Black Label of cigars, started as a novelty that somehow became a mainstay. Pop one open after a fine steak dinner and you get the same effect as lighting up a Swisher Sweet.

There were two other brands I couldn’t even bring myself to look at, and a box of Dutch Masters Presidents. If Swisher Sweets are Black Label, Dutch Masters are Coors. They’re so ubiquitous most cigar guides don’t cover them because everyone has smoked it at least once in his life and probably vowed never to do so again. But of my choices, they were the least offensive, so I bought the box and got in the car and lit up.

Dutch Masters are big long tubes of cardboard and tobacco and they must be coated with sugar because the tang you taste when you put one in your mouth is like the tang of cheap sugary cereal. Still, I lit it and it wasn’t bad as I’d thought and I started the car and took off for home.

I’d gotten about a mile when I had a sudden and rather painful memory spasm. You know what those are like, you’re suddenly given a window into some moment of your past that carries with it all kinds of emotional and maybe physical baggage and for just a second it’s as if you’re back in that moment and have the rest of your life to relive, knowing what every moment from then on will be like. For me, it was the memory of sitting in the back seat of a big blue Monte Carlo behind my grandfather while he drove, smoking.

I realized then I'd never smoked a Dutch Masters President before and I realized too why that was: they're what my grandfather George used to smoke. The smell was unmistakable. So was the blue on white box with its appropriation of Rembrandt's "Syndics of the Clothmaker's Guild" tableau on the front. Even the thick, aromatic choking smoke that swirled around the interior of the car as I lit up and that, twenty-four hours and the windows left open, I could still smell. The stubby thing held between my forefinger and middle finger, the same way George held it when, reduced to a shrunken crab with a nearly translucent skull in a wheelchair, he'd clutched it in his pincer fingers for his one-a-day smoke. When I glanced at myself in the rear view mirror my lips were pursed around the big cigar just like his, and I could suddenly see him in my eyes and in my nose and in my cheeks. The recognition was a slap to the face.

My grandfather George, my dad's dad, was a real piece of work. I've spoken a few times in the past here about him. I don't have many fond memories of him, not that he beat me or verbally abused me, because he never got the chance. He was kept at bay by his grown children, who banded together when the moment threatened, to provide a barrier, sometimes literally, between their father and whoever his victim might be. Because the truth is George was just plain mean. He'd been a sterling example of a nasty drunk for many decades, coming home from the factory in the middle of the night after hours at the single bar in town—this was western New York where we don't have the tradition of multiple town bars, just one where everyone went—and smack the wife around, and when the kids were big enough to get in his way, to smack them around too. In 1955 he was told by his doctor that he had the choice to either stop drinking bottles dry or he'd be buried in one, and to his credit he did stop. That's when his family discovered the alcohol was actually the stopper that kept the nastiness checked. After going cold

turkey his only outlet involved his fists and his feet, and he was too small a man, in several ways, to use them on anyone outside his family.

I have a vivid memory at sixteen of my own dad, who'd come to terms with his own violent temper and his baggage, crying exuberantly as he tried to explain to him how he still loved him, and my grandfather George barking back at him, "Hark!", because he couldn't hear the television.

Another memory, equally powerful, that selfsame trip. Being woken at two in the morning by my dad leading his dad back from the room my grandmother, who was dying from leukemia, was sleeping in. George had laboriously walked, since by this time he was starting to suffer from the hardening of the arteries in his legs that would eventually kill him, from the bedroom they'd shared for sixty-odd years to the guest room on the other end of the house where she'd taken to sleeping to berate her for faking. "You're not fooling anybody," my dad later told me he'd said. "Get up! Make me breakfast!" My dad was sleeping in a chair just outside the door and George had gotten by him without waking him. I slept upstairs and made it down in just enough time to see my dad leading him not all that gently by one arm, quickstepping him back to his bed. My grandmother mercifully didn't hear him at all and went on sleeping.

I'd like to be able to say that perhaps this was his way of dealing with grief, to deny it, and that this was his attempt to shock her into responding, the way a doctor might shock a patient into acceding to a risky procedure by laying out the realities of life or death without it. I can't say that, however, unless the hardening of my grandfather's veins somehow softened everything

else. No, I'm pretty certain he was convinced leukemia was her way to avoid cooking his breakfast. The only thing I would come to regret about his death is that it was faster and less painful than it should have been.

But Yom Kippur is about asking for forgiveness, and as great a bastard as he was, George never really did anything bad to me. He was bad to my grandmother and my uncles and aunt and my dad, and while I don't remember anything he particularly did that was good to me, I also don't remember him doing anything bad. I loved my grandmother. I love my uncles and aunt. I love my dad. He was nasty to them. That should be enough.

But it isn't because much is made of Yom Kippur as the day we ask forgiveness of those we've wronged but it isn't as often commented on about whether we have an obligation to offer forgiveness to those who ask it. My grandfather never asked to be forgiven by anyone to my knowledge. I've asked forgiveness in the past for the wrong I've done him by holding against him all these years the nastiness he did my family. But now the time is come for me to grant him forgiveness. Can I do that? Is it in me? And if it is, is it something I should do?

This is Yom Kippur and the time is come for me to recite the Kol Nidre: "All vows, obligations, oaths, and anathemas, whether called 'konam,' 'konas,' or by any other name, which I may vow, or swear, or pledge, or whereby I may be bound, from this Day of Atonement until the next (whose happy coming I await), I do repent. May they be deemed absolved, forgiven, annulled, and void, and made of no effect; they shall not bind me nor have power over me. The vows shall not be reckoned vows; the obligations shall not be obligatory; nor the oaths be oaths."

The Kol Nidre, so-named for the first two words of the prayer—"all vows"—is the traditional opening of the Yom Kippur service. It is meant to be recited three times by the cantor, according to the Mahzor Vitry, the book of rules concerning religious practices: "The first time he must utter it very softly like one who hesitates to enter the palace of the king to ask a gift of him whom he fears to approach; the second time he may speak somewhat louder; and the third time more loudly still, as one who is accustomed to dwell at court and to approach his sovereign as a friend."

It sounds on first hearing as if the Kol Nidre asks god for absolution from swearing oaths, as if to say, "Look, I mean none of the things I'll swear to for the next year." But listen to it again: "All vows, obligations, oaths, and anathemas, whether called 'konam,' 'konas,' or by any other name, which I may vow, or swear, or pledge, or whereby I may be bound, from this Day of Atonement until the next (whose happy coming I await), I do repent. May they be deemed absolved, forgiven, annulled, and void, and made of no effect; they shall not bind me nor have power over me. The vows shall not be reckoned vows; the obligations shall not be obligatory; nor the oaths be oaths." The request is not to be absolved of oaths by god but that god be aware the petitioner knows he will break oaths in the next year. We all do this: we have to do this. No one can keep every promise he makes. If that was so, we'd have long since achieved personal and world peace, stopped war, lost weight, given up cigarettes. George W. Bush alone would have brought dignity back to the White House. This is a part, better or no, of being human. We don't lie, necessarily, we just know we won't be able to keep every promise we make.

So we tell god in a voice tinged with both familiarity and honesty, "All vows, obligations, oaths, and anathemas, whether called 'konam,' 'konas,' or by any other name, which I may vow, or swear, or pledge, or whereby I may be bound, from this Day of Atonement until the next (whose happy coming I await), I do repent. May they be deemed absolved, forgiven, annulled, and void, and made of no effect; they shall not bind me nor have power over me. The vows shall not be reckoned vows; the obligations shall not be obligatory; nor the oaths be oaths." We tell god, "Listen, I know I'm going to make some promises I won't be able to keep so don't think me so bad when I don't keep them. You understand how these things are. Hey, you've done it yourself!" That, in a nutshell, is a hidden secret of the Torah: god doesn't keep all his secrets. He can't. He's only human.

The tradition in Yom Kippur now is to read from Leviticus, although I'm not going to do that because, well, first because we aren't Jewish and we can amend tradition, but also because the passage from Leviticus—it's a passage about marriage and specifically about what marriages are not allowed and its inclusion in Yom Kippur ceremonies is thought to have something to do with the eight days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur being the time when most young people chose their prospective spouses. But another tradition holds with a reading from the Book of Jonah, and this one I will do because it does fit with the meaning of Yom Kippur as the Day of Atonement.

We're all familiar with the story of Jonah, the commandment to preach and his refusal and spending three days and nights in the belly of a fish and all that. But this part comes after:

[Chapter 3] The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³So Jonah set out

and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

[Chapter 4] But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" ⁵Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself

there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

6 The LORD God appointed a bush,^a and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." ¹⁰Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

There's a much longer exegesis to this passage, but for now let this suffice: god makes a promise to destroy Ninevah, Jonah makes the announcement, they change their ways, god decides against it and Jonah takes his decision not to do so personally. "Why did I bother coming here and having all that hassle with the fish if you weren't going to destroy them? I could have said all this stuff from my Barcolounger and it would've had the same effect." And god responds, "You're so worked up I didn't give you blood and gore and veins in your teeth. Listen, there are people down there and I asked them to remember me and they did and that's all I really ask of anybody. There's people and animals down there and what's the point of making things worse if you can make them better?"

There was nothing in my grandfather to suggest Jewishness. He was, from the time I first remember him to his death, an old man in too-big green pants held up by suspenders, a checked shirt, and a seed cap over thinning hair. I don't remember him saying anything specifically against Jews but I've little doubt he included them in "the coloreds," the shorthand he used to invoke anyone he didn't like—blacks, Hispanics, Asians. Nonetheless, I choose the Day of Atonement, the most important holy day of the Jewish calendar, to come to grips with his memory.

Next comes the recital of *selichot*. *Selichot* literally means "forgiveness," and it is to this tradition I now turn. The prayer is intended to prepare the mind of the reciter toward *teshuvah*, repentance. It focuses on God's "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy" and its repetition is a series offered to acknowledge both god's greatness and the undeserving forgiveness god extends. It derives from Exodus 34:6-7 and is based on the lesson Moses has learned from god. "Ha-shem, Ha-shem, *Merciful God, merciful God, powerful God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness and truth. Preserver of kindness for thousands of generations, forgiver of iniquity, willful sin and error, and Who cleanses.*"

This sense I have of both requesting and granting forgiveness to my grandfather has come about not by overt reflection or by praying or any of those things, but in the same way that Jews ask god in the prayer we offered earlier ask for forgiveness from god: "speedily, and at a near time." Well, it's not so speedily. My grandfather George has been dead for twenty-five years now, but better late than never. But the greater meaning I think I can exhibit here. I forgive him his trespasses and his faults. I forgive him openly. Unconditionally. Perhaps, perhaps even undeservedly. This is the way we are meant to love one another. Not, "love us or we'll destroy

you,” but “remember us and love us.” Not with an “if it’s not too much trouble,” because really it’s always too much trouble. We’re better off not loving one another, taking each other into account. Ignoring everyone else’s feelings, we’d get more things done

But that isn’t the way life or god asks us to act. We should love one another, forgive the other when he stumbles, not to excuse him or forget his flaws—I will never forget my grandfather’s nastiness, the beatings he heaped on his wife and children, the harsh words he had for other people—but to recognize he will do these things and we must love him all the same. If this is the way we expect one another to behave, if I ask forgiveness of my community, if I ask it of my grandfather, and if I in turn grant it to my community, my grandfather and myself, can I ask any less of my god?