

Yom Kippur Afternoon Speakers 2023: Violence and Forgiveness

David Kaczynski & Gary Wright

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23J4gvJh15Q>

Gary Wright and David Kaczynski were unwittingly placed on opposing sides of the longest-running, most expensive, criminal investigation in American history. Gary is a survivor of an explosive package sent by Ted Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber. Kaczynski's brother, David, reached out to the victims of these crimes leading to an unlikely friendship between Gary and David.

In this moving and very personal exchange, Gary and David discuss the different ways in which each was challenged by violence and how their friendship has grown in awareness of the power of forgiveness and the deeper meaning of our shared humanity—a vital message for Yom Kippur.

They are introduced by K.I. Senior Rabbi Amy Bernstein.

Speakers Introduction

Rabbi Amy Bernstein: So, we have the great, good fortune to hear a story, a true story, that lines up so perfectly with the themes of the high holy days. Particularly of Yom Kippur, our day of atonement. The day that we ask for forgiveness and try to believe we're worthy of forgiveness, and finding the strength and the courage to forgive others.

It is actually our practice to go ask people for forgiveness, the rabbis say you have to ask three times. So, you have to be willing to be rejected twice and go back again. That's how important asking and granting forgiveness is in our tradition.

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Gary is a survivor of an explosive package sent by Ted Kaczynski, who was also known as the Unabomber.

Kaczynski's brother, David, reached out to the victims of Ted's crimes, leading to an unlikely friendship between Gary and David.

We are very excited to give a warm welcome to Gary and David, to tell their story, this young Kapoor afternoon.

Gary's Story

Rabbi Amy Bernstein: We're so glad you're here. Thank you.

Gary Wright: Well, thanks first of all to Adam for reaching out, Hannah for setting up all of our arrangements and to Rabbi Amy for welcoming us here on your holy day. I hope your fast has been an easy one.

The story we tell today, it really covers greater than 45 years, so in 30 minutes it's going to be kind of difficult to squish everything in and bring it all to fruition, but we'll do our best. So go as fast as we can and make it happen in the time allowed allotted. But so starting the story. I mean, Amy kind of hit on it, that it was Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. Some people know some people don't. Younger people don't anymore, who it was. But it was a 17 year old year case where Ted. David's brother would develop bombs and place them, mail them throughout the country. And I was a person who happened to pick one up.

So 1987, I was a 25 year old. I had started a computer hardware software company and came to work as I normally did every day. But it was an early morning, maybe 6:30. I went to work, arrived at my office around 10:00, drove into the parking lot and when I drove in I saw. This piece of wood. Looked like construction lumber, almost with a few nails sticking out. Between the car that was my receptionist and accountant, she was basically the person who did the drawing that everybody sees. Now the famous drawing and Mike are. So I got out, picked it up immediately. Something went wrong. I mean, huge amount of pressure in a second. Was kicked back about 22 feet and everything went into slow motion. Initially I thought I'd been shot. I wasn't exactly sure what was happening, but everything was muffled. Kind of like being under the water in a swimming pool, and I noticed everything was very slow motion the way the way I compare it is like the matrix. I could watch the telephone and electrical wires. Going into my office and they were moving up and down very slowly. I looked down and I could see that there was blood starting to come out. My pants were gone from about the knees. Down and didn't really put together what was happening, but at that exact moment there was a huge voice that came into my head and just said you'll be all right now. What is that? I don't know. Voice of God echoing in my head, I don't know. But it wasn't my voice. And it was huge and booming voice and I calmed down a little bit.

They took me to my office, laid me down, called the paramedics, the police, everything and ultimately went to the hospital. So Fast forward a little bit injuries. They removed about 200 pieces of shrapnel. It was about a dozen surgeries to get through to get me where I am today. I joke and tell people I'm a hundred word a minute 9 finger typist. So I think everything's good. My hands are in a perfect position for a jump shot. So all is well. Things are good. Wasn't always that easy. Some of the bigger things that. Had to deal with were the business itself. I mean it, it got shut down. The FBI lived there for a long time. So it was difficult to live up to contracts that I had employees, my family, everybody impacted.

In those days they didn't have folks to assign for PTSD. So a lot of that knowledge I just had to learn on myself on what I was going to do with it, no physical therapy. At all. So it was learn new ways to do things, how to make your hands work and things like that. The physical well, it's tough. The mental was probably tougher and I think that's probably the case for most people financially. It was very impacting and that insurance doesn't pay for medical if it's a terrorist event or at least at that time they. Did not so. Here I am, young guy. Just going. What do I do with this? Not able to necessarily get up and make a living quickly. Did my best and I think I went back to work about a week later. I wasn't effective. I was they put up with me more than anything.

When I first found out that it was the Unabomber. They just asked me, do you know who the Unabomber? And I mean as far as not the person, but have you heard of the Unabomber? I'm like, no. And I'd always told myself that if I read three things every day, I would be an informed person. And I kept thinking, how would I not have heard of this? This has been going on a really long time. 1978 was the first event. Mine was 1987 and most wanted person in in the United States, and I'd never heard of it. So I wasn't exactly sure what I was going to do with that later. I would learn now learn that I was considered experiment 121. So you know, it was very scientific, very deliberate.

And I'll leave it with that and turn it over to David for a moment. But it's I think important to think it doesn't matter the age, but especially as a young person, I mean, what are you going to do when something that big changes like everything forever, David?

David's Story

David Kaczynski: I want to echo Gary in saying how how deeply touched we are to be invited here to speak and present on this very holy day. I don't do much public speaking anymore, only if I think it's really meaningful and to be with Gary is always meaningful. But to be here is a real honor. Thank you.

Nine years after Gary was targeted, I came home from work one day and my wife, Linda, was meeting me at the door and and she had a serious look on her face and said, David, I think we need to talk and I assumed, OK, did I do something wrong? You know, I could read the signs. Kind of. And she sat me down and then she put her hand on my knee and said, David, I'm really. I hope. Please just bear with me. Do you think there's any chance that your brother might be this Unabomber? That everybody's talking about? And of course, my first reaction was, why would you even think such a thing? And she pointed out that a manifesto of some sort. A philosophical paper had been sent to the New York Times and the Washington Post. It hadn't yet been made public, but there had been snatches in the paper that it was an anti technology

manifesto and she knew that my brother was very anti technology. She knew that he was rather strange, that he'd written very angry letters to the family blaming them for his unhappiness and that.

We had actually taken some of those letters to a psychiatrist who said he couldn't make a diagnosis except he suspected schizophrenia. But I said, you know, Ted has never been violent. You know, he doesn't. It's he's not capable of this. Well, a few weeks later, the manifesto was. Published a part of it was online, Linda. Encouraged me to sit down and read it, and then I thought for sure I was going to turn to her and say I know my brother. I know how he thinks. I know I writes. This is not him, and instead, as she described it, my jaw kind of dropped. I would say I was still pretty much in denial. I said there was only a very slim chance, but maybe there was a chance and I agreed that we would investigate further.

Over the years, I'd saved about 100 letters from my. Other some of those letters touched on this theme of technology, so for the next month or so, we sat side by side after work every day comparing those letters to the manifesto of the published manifesto by by now we had the full 78 page document, and you know it's it was like a roller coaster. One night, I'd think, no, it can't be him. And then am I in denial. And then the next day, I'd say, how could it not be him? And I think, am I projecting all of this?

But finally, one morning I remember woke up almost like it was from a nightmare and I went it's not a nightmare. I went to the breakfast table where Linda was sitting and I said, you know, Hun, I think I think it might be a 50/50 chance that Ted wrote this. In other words, that he had murdered three people and injured. Dozens more.

So we're faced with this dilemma. I mean, what do we do? This is somebody I love. But if we do nothing. And he strikes again. We'll go through the rest of our lives knowing that an innocent person had died because we had failed to act. We'd have blood on our hands. But the other side of this was the realization, hey, if I turn him in, he's murdered three people. If it's him, and he's what if they execute my brother, I'll have my brother's blood on my hands.

We really knew we couldn't control the outcome of a trial, but there was one thing we could control. If it was Ted, if it was my brother, we could stop the violence and we, after deep discussions, we felt it was our moral responsibility to go to the FBI and tell them what we suspected.

Eventually we met with the FBI a few times, and at one point they said, David we really need to speak with your mother, do you think you could maybe approach her, tell her what's going on. That we're investigating your brother and. I knew how much my mother had worried about my brother. I knew how much she loved him. I didn't know if she could still love me, if she'd learned what I'd done, that I'd actually turned my brother into law enforcement.

I remember going to the door of her apartment. She lived just a few miles from US, Upstate New York. And, you know, I walk in the door, she sees something's wrong, she says. What is it? What is it? Mom, sit down. And here, I'm pacing the floor back

and forth. But anyway, I finally. They say, mom, you've heard of the Unabomber? This this, this. I really think there's a chance my brother might be the Unabomber. She's looking at me, saying nothing. And I said, mom, I've gone to the FBI. I've shared these suspicions, and they're currently investigating.

This is my mother, my passed away a few years ago, but this is my defining memory of her. She got up from the chair where she was sitting. She walked up to me. She put her arms up around my neck, pulled me down. She was only like less than 5 feet tall and and. She kissed me on the cheek like a blessing and said, David, I can't imagine what you've been struggling with.

And from that point we we knew that we were in this together as a family, myself, my wife Linda, and my mother Wanda. Ted was arrested a few weeks later, and at that point, I guess there had been some kind of leak within the FBI. It was publicly released, that he'd been, quote, turned in by his own brother. The media kind of surrounded our house. I remember there was a cameraman. I didn't have words for what we were feeling. We were trauma. So it was Linda and my mom and me. And here we are. And Linda's putting blankets over the windows because we feel so isolated.

I didn't know if people could ever understand what kind of a family could produce someone as violent as the Unabomber or what kind of a brother would turn in his own brother. I think there was a late night comedian who actually said, oh, imagine one family you got the una-bomber and the una-snitch. I thought, wow. That was cruel, you know. Anyway, so we felt so isolated, like we were exiled from the world as we knew it.

Gary's Lessons Learned

Gary Wright: Years later, I got to meet David's mom, and I'm pretty much a nimby-a-style guy. I'm tall compared to how short she was. She's a very short woman. So wonderful person though.

This part I'm going to choose to read. I normally don't, but I just wanted to make it as poignant as I could when it comes to this topic of forgiveness. It's a it's a big one, right?

So there are no cookie cutter recipes for the forgiveness journey. We can observe examples of people who successfully move past an offender. Or something egregious, but we can never truly understand the nuances and struggles of their journey.

What I what I share with you today... Just a minute. Sometimes you don't speak for a while. The emotion catches up with you. Does it every once in a while.

What I share with you today is not prescriptive. It's simply an overview of things I considered and decisions I made. The ideas, choices and actions associated with forgiveness can be complicated and challenging. Even something as simple as an inappropriate remark can cause each of us to react harshly, put up barriers, and develop

different opinions about a person who has offended us. But what if an event or action in question is so large or egregious that it begs the question, can it, or should it ever be forgiven?

In my case, a man spent hundreds, if not thousands of hours building an explosive device and planning an attack with the sole intent of killing me. His actions caused permanent physical injuries, impacted my mental and emotional well-being, challenged my sense of security and inflicted pain that will last a lifetime.

To further complicate things, this man was a ghost and there was a very real possibility that I may never know his identity. For years, I would wake up in the morning and my first thoughts and feelings were how much pain am I in? Has anxiety kicked in yet? Who is this person? And are they coming back?

I continually struggled with the following question. What am I going to do with all this? I'd get my answer about six years later. I had finished an interview with a segment with Tom Brokaw, which it never aired. Michael Jordan elected to retire that day, so you could choose Michael Jordan or Gary Wright. I mean, what's it going to be? Right. So it it, it never really happened, but it was. It was really interesting.

I was driving down the road. And then I heard that booming voice. Again, it was took me took me by surprise and it basically said in order to move on, you have to forgive. Let yourself fall into the hands. God, my first thought was you've got to be kidding me. Just let go and free fall. It kind of felt like I would be jumping out of the plane out of a plane without a parachute. This thought really impacted me, so I pulled over to the side of the road to absorb what I had just heard or interpreted, and I became flooded with emotion and confusion. The thought of forgiving the man responsible for my injuries was a continual debate in my mind that lasted for months. I wasn't about to accept anything that had happened to me, and at that time there was no way I would tell that person I was OK with what they've done. I also considered and weighed what other people might think and how it could possibly change their opinion of me. I believe for many people this is one of the key barriers preventing or delaying forgiveness.

I continued my journey of discovery and read the thoughts of academics and medical professionals, civic and spiritual leaders, and came upon a few quotes that I found empowering.

The first was "the weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attitude of the strong" from Gandhi. I wanted to feel strong.

"Forgiveness is not an occasional act. It's a permanent attitude" by Martin Luther King. I realized it was going to be a lifelong thing.

Then, "To be wronged is nothing unless you continue to remember it" by Confucius. So through the ages, there were so many different examples of which I'm putting my head around at this time. And I just took the time.

So one day I ride race bicycles. I was out riding my bike and it's a place where my mind settles down and my thoughts become clear and it kind of dawned on me that perhaps I needed a different definition for what forgiveness meant, one that was

personal to me, one that I could honor and embrace, and it took some time. But I came up with the following definition; “I love myself enough that I won’t let others see me as angry or less than who I am or what I might become.” I felt it honored me, my values, and and it was who I was at my very core. And when I started to think about it later. It’s more appropriate today. It could even be a tattoo. So no, I don’t have ink on me, but it could be a phrase.

So, the choice to forgive is very personal, one that can be complicated, thorny, and messy. People around you will have opinions about your decision, will probably be happy to share them with you, good or bad. We all face the challenge of finding ways in which to forgive another person, whether it’s a family member or friend, which I think just might be the most difficult. A colleague or in some cases a total stranger. My advice is to be patient with yourself, find your own definition of forgiveness, one that respects and honors who you are and realize you are so much stronger than you think. After all, isn’t it you that has to live with the decision to forgive or not?

David’s Lessons Learned

David Kaczynski: My worry about there being future victims sort of shifted after Ted’s arrest, it was clear that he was the person responsible, indeed it was very necessary that we turned him in, under his small cabin they found another live bomb, ready to be mailed to somebody. So, I was worried that Ted would be a prime candidate for the death penalty. It was my biggest fear. Time went we we actually went to the government a couple of times, met with the committee at the federal level. That makes the decision about whether to pursue death or life imprisonment. We presented our case, we talked about his mental illness. We talked about, you know, some mercy for the family. If not for the perpetrator of such a crime.

Anyway, at one point the attorney General announced that she was going to seek the death penalty for Ted Kaczynski. And I felt I felt like a victim at that point. I mean, first of all, they were supposed to keep this secret. Who had, you know, turned him in. And secondly, I really thought that they would take the death penalty off the table for the reasons I just cited.

Linda heard this so many times. And she said, David, you know, this whole thing isn’t just about you. You might feel like a victim here, but there are real victims out there. People have lost their loved ones, their family. And I was like, no, you don’t understand. You know, it’s it’s not just loss and grief, it’s guilt. And my victimization is... And she said, David, you’re being too self-involved here, you need to understand the bigger picture.

My wife and I practice Buddhism and we went to our shrine room in a little room in the morning and there was something different on the shrine. There were now Linda had put 3 candles on the shrine and I didn’t have to ask her what those candles

represented. They represented the three lives that my brother had extinguished. And we meditated every day for months and months and years. It turned out, with those 3 candles there.

And over the time, it involved that we should find some way of reaching out to the victims, apologizing to the victims, seeing if they needed or wanted anything from us, a conversation and, and to be honest with you, there was something I wanted from them to the fact that just the feeling that we wouldn't forever be split apart and divided that my world wouldn't be blown apart by my brother's bombs. That we were human with human needs and human commonalities, and that we could empathize with one another.

So we did. Took a long time and a lot of dialogue, but Linda and I drafted a letter. We sent it, I think to we had 13 or 14 addresses. We never were able to find Garry's address. Oddly enough, and and I was kind of disappointed we got 2 replies and they were kind of like, OK, thank you for writing. But we don't really want to meet or talk with you. Anyway, it felt like we were still in a world apart, and then one of Linda's close friends who had actually helped us in the investigation of Ted. She worked. Susan Swanson worked as a private investigator, had seen Gary on TV and she said, you know, David, I think you could call him. He doesn't sound like he's that angry. He's got a different frame of mind.

And so I thought about it, meditated on it for a couple of months, and then I finally said, I'm going to try it. My need was great to feel that I wasn't divided from all the people who had been harmed, and I remember calling. Garry's House and I was sort of prepared for what I was going to say, and there was an answering machine that came out and said you've reached the right house at the wrong time, and I didn't. Know quite what? To say, you know, I said. I'm David Kazinski. I think you know who I am and I'll try calling back. After next time I called back, Garry's daughter picked up the phone and said, dad, there's somebody on the phone for you. And I talked to Gary. And wow, it was like it was amazing it was.

It was I mean he empathized immediately says, I hope your brother doesn't get executed. And David, you have nothing to apologize for. You did the right thing. I really, really love you for what you did. And protecting other people. And then he said something amazing. He said, you know, I know you have some family members, some people you're close to, but maybe if you need to talk to somebody, someone sort of outside that family loop, call me anytime, day or night, you could call me. And it was like. Oh my gosh, it was like a bridge across this abyss between myself and all the families that had been harmed.

It was like a sign of hope that there is at least a possibility. That we can heal. The things that divide us. That are, are emotional wounds. We can heal, help each other to heal, and Gary has meant the world to. Me. He has brought me that sense of hope, that sense of belief, that it's not the divisions between us that matter so much, but that there is a real possibility. There's a real possibility for hope and for healing, and for love to triumph.

Wrapping up

Gary Wright: Yeah. I guess as we come to wrap this up a little bit, the the trial came and ultimately I got to tell Ted to his face. I forgive you. Really interesting moment in that when he was, I was at sentencing hearing a lot of you can imagine how pressure packed it was. Very small room, but lots of emotion, you know, everywhere around you. But when I told him that. It was he'd been writing on a notepad, never seen him. He dropped his pencil and it was like the perfect transfer was like you own it now. I don't have to carry it. It was kind of surreal in some ways in the in this sea of this courtroom. There's victims, family members and things on the right side as I'm looking at you on the left side is the media and David and his attorney, that's it.

So I walk off the stage, I give David a wink and. As we walk out afterwards, I looked down the path and he's on a podium just the way that I'd seen him a few times on the television. Just interview after interview. Sometimes you wonder about friends. And while we were down there, I mean, to me, friendships defined by what people do. It's quality, it's, you know, who they are as people and I was having lunch after this has gone on and my phone starts ringing and I looked down and it's a 916 area code California area code I think. FBI sold my number again or something. Somebody wants to talk and I pick it up. And it was actually David and he, he said well, where are you? I said. I'm in Old Town Sacramento and I said, where are you? He said the Holiday Inn. I said right in front of me, he said. What do you want to come up and talk? So we did.

Unlikely, yeah, probably a couple of guys, normal guys, different backgrounds, but, choice to forgive it's a big one, like I said, but you're strong. I mean it's it's something that, it frees your spirit. Everything's lighter. They don't have to think about it anymore, even if they don't want to be forgiven. In my case, there was no way of ever knowing. I've never spoken to Ted, but he did it anyway. And I think in the end. That's how I got to be whole again. So you know, it's just something to consider. There's so many stories out there in the world and all we can do is just take in information, right? And do what we do with it. But...

David Kaczynski: Thanks Gary. I remember a book that I read when I was about 20 years old that was just very powerful for me. I've read it many times over again. Some of you may be familiar with it. It's 'Man's search for meaning' by Victor Frankel who was a concentration camp survivor and a a psychiatrist who wrote about? Our ability to take even the worst possible circumstances, and of course I wouldn't compare mine at all in any way to what his were during the years that he was in the concentration camp and lost his wife, but his a fundamental message was we can. Always transform. We could take any situation, no matter how painful. How. Disabling it may be and create meaning out of it and I believe that is what has guided Gary and me since then at least Gary came to New York.

I was working, I accepted a job as a director of New Yorkers against the death penalty and we we we worked together and Gary came and. Another high profile

victim, Bud Welch, who lost his daughter in the Oklahoma City bombing, joined us. Bill Babbitt. Who had turned in his veteran brother here in California. A man who had served in Vietnam had a piece of shrapnel in his head. Had beaten an elderly woman to death who had been sentenced to death by an all white jury's black man.

So we're pointing out all kinds of reasons, but, but fundamentally our message was, you know, violence, whether it's got the imprimatur of justice on it or not, violence cannot change the world for the better. It may look powerful because you can even kill people. You could change their lives. You could do all kinds of things with violence that look powerful, but it's not really powerful. What's powerful, more subtle, may be long-lasting is love. That is the power that Gary helped me. My wife helped me. All the people sort of involved in, in sort of so constructive ways. Even the attorney who helped us save Ted's life ultimately.

I'm now struggling with some grief. He died apparently by suicide in prison this summer, in federal prison. He had stage 4 cancer. He never spoke to me again, kept that door closed. It's not the same maybe, but there's... I believe in spiritual brotherhood too. And Gary is my brother. In spirit, in spirit. So anyway...

Gary Wright: Yeah, we definitely have that. Well, thank you for like I said, allowing us to be here today, it's such a special day. And for indulging us. I know it's a long day. For all of you, but hopefully there's a piece in there somewhere. I always have said I'll speak as long as it does something for somebody. And so my dad used to say when you die, they're going to take a rock and kill your mouth. But that's just me, right? So anyway. But thank you really very very much appreciated.

The Ted K Archive

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