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'Forgiveness may not take away our pain, but the act of offering it will keep us from being sucked into the downward spiral of resentment.'

Hillary Clinton, former first lady



IN HER PRAYERS: At a Yom Kippur service at Temple of the Arts in Beverly Hills, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton carries a candle in memory of the victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the recent earthquake in South Asia.

On Yom Kippur, Forgiveness Is Divine

Sen. Hillary Clinton reflects on a subject close to her heart at a service in Beverly Hills.

By K. CONNIE KANG
Times Staff Writer

Taking a break from fundraising in Hollywood, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton on Thursday dropped in on services for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, at a Beverly Hills synagogue and spoke about a subject close to her heart: forgiveness.

"I've had quite a bit of opportunity to think about forgiveness," the former first lady told about 2,000 people at Temple of the Arts on Wilshire Boulevard. "Forgiveness is not a luxury. It's a responsibility. Forgiveness may not take away our pain, but the act of offering it will keep us from being sucked into the downward spiral of resentment."

But the New York Democrat, who spoke without notes,

also said learning "the lessons of forgiveness" is hard.

"It takes years, if at all, for them to become rooted in our own souls and hearts in a way that opens our minds and our souls to the real profound meaning and opportunity that forgiveness offers," she said.

As an adult, her first "real experience" with "observing the power of forgiveness" came at the 1994 inauguration of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa, she said.

After thanking the guests who had come from around the world, Clinton recalled, Mandela said he was especially honored to have in the audience three jailers from the prison on Robben Island, where he had served 27 years.

"I was dumbstruck that in the midst of this historic moment, the three people who were asked to rise — amid all the royalty, presidents and prime ministers and other important officials — were three of his former jailers," Clinton said.

The incident made such an

impression that when she saw Mandela in ensuing years, she broached the subject.

He told her that he got the insight about what hatred was doing to him as he was breaking rocks in a quarry one day. He had realized that his abusers had taken everything away from him except his mind and heart.

At that moment, Clinton said the former South African president told her, he decided he did not want to live in bitterness and anger. "He told me that when he finally walked out of prison a free man, he knew he had to leave the feelings of anger and bitterness behind or he would remain imprisoned," Clinton said.

"Now, most of us will never face years of prison and hard labor at the hands of those who denigrate and degrade our very beings," she said. "But, all of us will confront ... feelings of resentment, of being wronged."

In her journey of forgiveness, she had some "good guidance" about how "to purge" herself and move on.

She was helped by the parable of the prodigal son in the New Testament, and such books as "Why Forgive?" and "The Gates of Repentance."

She told her audience that Western civilization owes much to the Jewish faith for the tradition of beginning the new year in this way.

"How fortunate we are to have an opportunity to take time out as you are doing here on Yom Kippur to think of the large issues that really matter in life," she said. "Each year, going back to Leviticus, the Jewish people have recognized both the psychological and theological power of atonement and forgiveness."

Rabbi David Baron, who had invited Clinton to speak a year ago, said her insights on forgiveness "touched" his heart and that of his congregation.

David Yeskel of Santa Monica, who attended the services with wife, Jodi, and daughter Sasha, said: "She enthralled the congregation. It was a perfect day for her to speak on the subject."