



“The Happiness of Yom Kippur”

A Sermon for Yom Kippur

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You may not know that in the Talmud, Yom Kippur is considered one of the two happiest days of the year. Tractate Rosh Hashanah states: “There are no days as happy for the Jewish people as Tu B’av (which is when marriages were arranged in Talmudic times) and Yom Kippur.” This is not because we gather in the synagogue to pray all day; not because we neglect all aspects of our own comfort and beat our chests for our sins; and definitely not because of our empty stomachs. The reason stated in the Talmud for the happiness of Yom Kippur is that it is the day when people are reconciled with each other and with God.

Yom Kippur isn’t fun, but now we know that it is happy. Traditionally, it follows a whole month, during the month of Elul, of seeking and giving forgiveness, so that we will be ready to ask for God’s final forgiveness before the gates come to a close at sundown. Like an exam after gruesome months of study, today is at once dreaded and euphoric, full of relief. Jews all around the world prepare to celebrate the upcoming holidays of Sukkot and Simchat Torah, with the knowledge that to the greatest extent possible, all of our repentances have been made, and all our forgivenesses granted, so that we can enter the next year inscribed for blessing in the book of life. There’s just one inconsistency I’d like to point out. I would have thought the service would provide a more even balance between confession and forgiveness. Could it be that it’s so much more important to confess than it is to forgive? In fact, the prayer book hardly mentions forgiveness at all. We read aloud confessions of our sins and make our apologies for hours. But about forgiveness we read little more than one short prayer. How could this be? After all, when we’re talking about sins committed by one human being against another, each transgression has at least one victim. If we are to reconcile with each other, then it seems to me that we need a lot more forgiveness. I think each of us could learn more about how to relieve others of the heavy burden of guilt and how to let it go. Judaism demands a lot of us when it comes to

forgiveness, and it's time that we listened to our tradition's wisdom about how to forgive each other, and how to forgive ourselves.

Our texts have a great deal to teach us about forgiveness of others. First, I would start with what they do not teach us. The famous rule, contained in the Talmud, is that one seeking forgiveness must ask up to three times, and try to make up for what they have done. If the person they have harmed refuses to forgive, pardon is granted by default. This is the classic case of an offense and a plea for forgiveness. It might not be the most common in our lives, but it does happen. Someone has clearly wronged us, and they owe us an apology. They said something hurtful or they have been dishonest. There are times when we refuse to forgive, hoping in our own hurt that this will cause the other person pain. This is explicitly forbidden by Jewish tradition. The rule requiring three requests for forgiveness can lead to a misconception that forgiveness is something to be earned by the transgressor and granted by the victim. Maimonides tells us, "One should forgive with a complete heart and a willing spirit." Withholding forgiveness is considered a cruelty, and now we ourselves have sinned. As hard and unfair as it may be, we are obligated to work hard to come to a place of forgiveness. The three chances are not for the transgressor, who has already come to terms with his or her guilt. They are for us. A man once knocked on the door of Rabbi Lopian, a great rabbi in London, and asked his forgiveness for having sinned against him. The man told him what he had done, and it was a very serious thing. Rather than forgive him insincerely, Rabbi Lopian asked the man to come back in two weeks. He promised, in the meantime, to study, reflect, and try to prepare himself to grant a sincere forgiveness. When the man returned, the rabbi forgave him with a full heart. It is the offender's responsibility to admit their guilt and ask forgiveness, and this is hard enough. It is our responsibility to meet them the rest of the way.

The Talmudic rule is a great teaching tool, but it has limitations. Situations like this do exist, but truthfully, I think they are rare. There are more times when we feel hurt by those who do not come to us to apologize. Human relationships usually tend to be far more complex than that, and so does the process of forgiveness. Forgiveness is reconciliation. It's the repairing of a bond between two people. It doesn't always have a clear aggressor or victim, but often involves feelings that have been mutually hurt or misunderstood. Even when we feel plainly wronged, the other person may be too afraid to approach us or not realize our feelings. Our tradition understands this. Even though we are not technically obligated by Jewish law to forgive someone who has not asked, the Talmud tells us that we should not wait for a person to come to us. Many Talmudic rabbis are said to have recited a nightly prayer forgiving others for minor offenses throughout the day, with the goal of going to sleep without anger and keeping their relationships free of resentment. Rabbi Mar Zutra used to go much further. It is told that he would go out of his way to be near a person he knew he needed to forgive, giving them every possible opportunity to ask for his forgiveness. What a wonderful idea, to make it easy for someone to apologize. Everyone

feels the instinct, when slighted or hurt by someone else, to retreat. We close ourselves off, childishly hoping they will notice our distance and realize their mistake. But our tradition urges us not to make a person come to us. It calls on us to maintain the relationship and make ourselves available; in a world where we are separated from each other by distance or busy schedules, to pick up the phone; friend them on Facebook - and, if we can, to tell them our feelings. Sometimes, a person will be afraid to bring up their guilt, and an act of kindness will open the door. In our closest relationships, this is more true than anywhere else. The temptation is to turn away, to leave the room or become silent, desperately hoping that our loved one will not do the same. We want to be followed and embraced. But when we turn around and face our loved one with an open heart, it is amazing what healing can take place. Tears burst forth, replacing anger. Contrition and understanding replace stubborn pride.

Sadly, it must be said that not all hurts can be healed through the loving process of forgiveness. There are truly terrible hurts, ones that defy the teachings we have seen thus far. There are some kinds of offenses that can never be fully forgiven - Jewish law does state that only the victim can forgive, so murder is by definition an unforgivable offense. In such cases, and in cases of abuse or other crimes, it may be that there is no forgiveness, only healing.

But there are other hurts, the most significant ones of many of our lives, involving broken relationships and betrayals. Our happiness can be dampened for years with pain caused by people we used to love - a spouse whose husband left them after five years of marriage; or another who was constantly made him feel they weren't good enough. A friend lied to and betrayed. It is hard to know how to forgive. One cannot always expect oneself to remain open, nor would that necessarily be the healthiest choice. It's not possible to solve every interpersonal problem together with the other party. We could just be too angry. At the same time, these conflicts that bring pain at the mere thought of them, may be the ones we most need to forgive, or, at the very least, let go of our anger and our hurt. Rabbi Harold Kushner tells of the advice one rabbi gave to a woman who had been mistreated by her husband and, ten years later, still felt rage. The rabbi said, "For ten years you have been walking around with a hot poker in your hand, ready to throw it at your ex-husband. But you've never had the chance. All you've done is burn your hand." How does one let go of these kinds of feelings? There is no Jewish text that gives us the key. One inspiring story, though, is in the book of Genesis. Jacob stole his brother Esau's firstborn blessing through an act of trickery and then ran away. In biblical times, this was an unimaginable thing for a brother to do. When he heard the news, Esau screamed in anguish and threatened Jacob's life. Over twenty years since that day, Jacob wrestled with his guilt, but he had had no contact with his brother. The moment finally came when he, all alone, came to meet Esau and his great army. Jacob walked slowly forward, stopping to bow down seven times, gripped with fear. How would Esau respond to Jacob after all these

years? He hoped desperately for reconciliation, praying against odds that his brother would be willing to hear him out, or at least spare his life. Finally he came close, and Esau ran towards Jacob. He embraced him, wept, and kissed his neck. He looked at the livestock and other gifts Jacob had sent as peace offerings, and said, "What are these gifts you have sent? Keep them, brother. I have enough."

Esau was not the same man who had vowed to kill his brother twenty years before. He was transformed, ready to forgive and begin the friendship anew. The greatest insight contained in this story may be that it gives us not even a glimpse of the journey that brought him to this point. We don't know what it took for him to move from anger to love. Perhaps this is intentional, because that path is different for every person. Each of us knows what it is with which we need to wrestle. There may be conversations to be had with one who has hurt us, but much of the journey happens inside. We see in Esau that he worked hard to reach that point, and we see, in his love for his brother, the reward. Esau no longer even needed to hear Jacob's apology. He had moved beyond it. I imagine that he now saw his brother not only as the one who committed this act of deception, but as the same brother with whom he used to spend all of his time, from the moment of birth, playing Mario Kart on the Wii and watching every season of American Idol. Esau could now see their relationship in its bigger picture and, more importantly, he himself had overcome the loss and the pain that had come from their ordeal. They had come full circle. We feel the relief that can come from forgiveness and the reparation of a relationship. We see that the rabbis of the Talmud were right - reconciliation is truly a happy thing.

To forgive another, we have to open ourselves up to them as a whole person, larger than the sum of what they have done to us. We have to begin to see their perspective. We must even open the door to the possibility that in some ways, it may be we who need forgiveness. This can be scary, but as we all know, seldom does responsibility belong to just one. Even in those situations in which the guilt is clear in our minds, to begin to forgive we need to find empathy in us for the experience of the other, the pain or fear that led them to hurt us. It's hard to do, because it means letting go of a piece of our anger. We examine our own feelings and explore the points along way when we stopped seeing our friend or family member for who they are and began to see them only as the source of our pain. A friend once told me that he began to forgive his former partner for the way she broke up with him when he found himself breaking up with someone else, and suddenly he thought he could understand the position she was in. It was painful and soothing at the same time, he said, as he started to see his own role in what had happened between them. This man would not have been able to see this unless he was tuned in, open to finding a way to forgive his one-time partner. We must try, actively, to find our own right path to peace with the others in our lives, for their sake and for ours.

Finding forgiveness for others is a hard and threatening process, but it is a Jewish

process, and it has great rewards. Our most difficult task, however, and the one that can bring us the most happiness, is to find forgiveness for ourselves. We are our own worst critics. We feel guilty over things we have done to others and even after they have forgiven us or even forgotten all about it, we have a hard time letting go. We are hard on ourselves for what we have done for our own self-preservation. We feel guilty for failing to be everything for every person in our lives. The Yom Kippur liturgy takes us to task for finding fault in others for things we tolerate in ourselves, and this is true. But so is the opposite. There are shortcomings in us that we refuse to accept, even though we are exceedingly gentle on others for the same things.

It might be the greatest gift you could give to yourself and to others in your life to forgive yourself for these things. While we are encouraged to examine and improve ourselves on Yom Kippur, and we are commanded to confess, Jewish tradition does not intend for us to be overly hard on ourselves. On the contrary, our tradition errs on the side of granting forgiveness when there is a question, in order to give a person peace. If we are to strive to forgive our neighbors, then we must also believe that they have the power to forgive us. Judaism does not ask us to live a life of perfection, nor to feel guilty about our mistakes. We do our best; we acknowledge our transgressions; we ask for forgiveness, and we let go. This is the source of the happiness of Yom Kippur. We let go, of our pain caused us by others, of our guilt at what we might have done, of our fear that we are not good enough, of everything that belongs to the year 5769 and before. With the embrace of this community and with God's forgiveness and love, we enjoy the relief and elation for which this day is intended. Let me be the first to wish all of you a happy Yom Kippur.