



Temple Rodef Shalom

## "Forgiveness"

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman

Yom Kippur 5774/2013

Ten days ago on Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about Abraham and Isaac and the Akedah, that difficult story about God's test, and the mountain, and the near sacrifice and... in my sermon that day I also spoke about Abraham's missed opportunity to apologize to his son for that unimaginable deed. I suggested that apology is the real work of Rosh Hashanah. It is work that each one of us, without exception, must do.

I felt good about that sermon; but to be honest, when I finished writing it and even after I delivered it, I felt somewhat unsatisfied. Like apples without honey, or latkes without sour cream (or applesauce) - something felt incomplete.

At the end of the sermon I asked you to imagine how the story of the Akedah might have changed if Abraham had apologized to Isaac. Would their relationship have been repaired? From the very beginning of my work on that sermon I also tried to imagine this. And I will tell you that I had a very hard time picturing the apology and an even harder time seeing Isaac forgive his father. With this vision drifting around my imagination, the sermon seemed unfinished. I had spoken about apology; but there is a second part to the conversation - another piece needed to complete the circle. In order to explore and implore apology one must also address its other half - forgiveness.



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For those of you who heard the sermon, could you see the son forgiving his father or was it too much of a stretch for your imagination? Abraham's sin was surely one of those transgressions where forgiveness is at best complicated and at worst not possible at all. There are some horrible things, like murder and abuse, where forgiving is nearly inconceivable. I hope and pray that few of us have had to face this difficult level of forgiveness but I know that some of us have.

I don't want to let Abraham off the hook, but today I want to focus on the dimensions of forgiveness that relate more closely to most of our lives. Few of us, I hope need to apologize for attempting to sacrifice a child. But some of us sit here today feeling unforgiven while others are unforgiving. Many of us are holding grudges inside and a few of us display our contempt outwardly. Being part of a family or a community means being in relationship and that means making mistakes and, hopefully, recovering from them. It takes both apology and forgiveness to achieve this. It takes Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to heal. And just as I suggested with apology, there is not one person here who doesn't have something to let go of or someone whose apology begs a response. Perhaps a friend or a spouse approached you over these last ten days. Maybe someone will apologize today. We all are wounded in some way and these Days of Awe urge the one who hurt us to ask us for forgiveness. Can you feel it? Can you grant it? What does it take to forgive?



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This is hard work. There is no question that it is difficult to forgive. It's a terrible feeling to be left out of a special event, or worse to be betrayed by a friend, or God forbid a spouse. Who among us has not been offended or lied to or rejected at some time. Surely many of us have been nursing resentments and excluding people from our lives because of such things for years. We have probably forgotten the original reason for the dispute; we just remember that we want no part of so and so.

Perhaps we might start on the journey toward forgiving others by addressing the question of how long are we entitled to be angry? How long is it healthy to be angry? Jewish tradition is helpful here. In a discussion about the penalty for murder there is some hidden wisdom about forgiveness.

In Deuteronomy, a distinction is made between murder and accidental manslaughter. If a person deliberately killed someone, that person would be executed as a punishment. But if it were an accident a lesser penalty would be decreed. What if the accused claimed it was an accident, but others were not so sure? The Torah states that if the accused had been on bad terms with the victim, if they were known to be enemies, it would be hard to accept the claim of an accident. But we read: "If the victim and the accused were not enemies yesterday nor the day before, then we accept the claim that it was an accident."



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Commenting on this verse the Talmud says: This is the definition of an enemy: someone you have not gotten along with for three days.

To me this implies that if somebody hurts us or lets us down, we are entitled to be upset with them for one or two days. These things happen among friends. But on the third day, we ought to be over our anger, or address the error and renew friendship with the person again.

Now comes the important part: if we persist in being angry into the third day, it is because we are choosing to prolong the argument. We are deliberately performing CPR on a grievance that should have died of natural causes after 48 hours.

But why should anybody do that? Why deliberately choose to prolong the unpleasantness? I believe it may be one of those uncomfortable realities we do not like to think about. There is something perversely satisfying about being the injured party. It makes us feel more righteous, perhaps morally superior. We can look down in scorn on the person who hurt us. We feel entitled to extra attention.

Simon Wiesenthal, the Nazi Hunter, in the midst of a grim autobiography tells a wonderful story that relates to this. A man living near him in a Displaced Persons' Camp after the war borrowed ten dollars from him, with the assurance that he had a package coming from a relative any day and would positively repay him the next week. Each week he had a new excuse for non-payment and this went on for almost a



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year. Finally, one day the man came up to Wiesenthal with a ten-dollar bill in his hand: "My visa has just come through," he said, "I'm leaving for Canada tomorrow. Here is the ten dollars I owe you." Wiesenthal waved him away and said, "keep it, for ten dollars, it's not worth changing my opinion of you."

Of course he was wrong! It is a bargain to give a grudge away for nothing. To get paid for abandoning your anger, well that's a double bargain.

What would it cost you to get rid of feelings of resentment or a long standing grudge? What's hanging around in your heart clogging it up and how might you clear it out? A conversation? A letter? Some personal reflection on your own? I imagine living with festering anger might be like having a backache for ages. You've had it so long you almost don't know its there although it keeps you from moving easily. And then one morning you wake up and it's gone and you just can't believe how wonderful life is without it.

We are all carrying burdens of bitter memories and offenses, which serve no purpose except to weigh us down, to stifle our creativity, to erect barriers between us and other people. More than that, living with hatred within us, we risk becoming haters. Like a virus feeding on its host, anger and malice consume the one who keeps it inside, not the one who inflicted it. Forgiveness resolves conflict; spite perpetuates it. We cannot



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imagine the sense of relief that we could gain when we find the courage to lay that hatred, that anger and those burdens down.

Now if Isaac were sitting here in the congregation, maybe right over there... I imagine he would be saying, “Sure rabbi... I understand... I know that denying forgiveness is a mind-game we think we play on the other person but we really play on ourselves. I get how destructive it is to hold on to anger. I get it. And you know, really I do want to let go of this but I just can’t! My father is guilty and I will not give him the pleasure of just walking away from all of this. It’s not as easy as you make it out to be.”

Perhaps it might help Isaac to know he is not alone with his feelings about his father. Many of us feel this way about a person who hurt us. If only Isaac could understand that his forgiveness is not actually about his father at all. It is about Isaac himself, his health, his happiness, his life. Forgiveness is a kind of inner transformation. It is what we do to unplug the pain and angst from that hurtful event we obsessively go over and over and over. Nothing changes until we understand that we have no control over the offender, not his apology, nor her sincerity. We only have control over our own emotions. The transgressor is still a transgressor and even after we forgive, he still has to right his wrong. That is his work alone. We can’t do that for him, just as he can’t create forgiveness in us. The offense may well be his, but the corrosive pain of bearing a grudge and holding onto resentment is ours to live with or ours to release.



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On Rosh Hashanah I said that apologies are complex. Forgiveness is no less so. Could it be possible to learn to forgive? While I'm not sure, I have been helped by insights offered through the 3 Hebrew words for forgiveness – selicha, mechila and kapara. You might recognize these words from the prayer we just sang, *v'al kulam* – let's all join in that... (singing) – *v'al kulam, elochai, selichot – selach lanu, michal lanu, karper lanu* - three words and three levels of forgiveness – each has a different meaning connecting us to the range of the possibility of healing.

Selicha – *selach lanu*: Forgive us. In my understanding this is the simplest level. This is the level of letting go. I will try to disconnect the emotions I have been holding since that time that I was offended. I'm not sure I am going to forget the event and I can't say it hasn't changed me but I do want to move on and I want you to move on and I want us to move on together, I forgive you.

Mechila – *Michal lanu*: pardon us. This is a deeper level. It is an act of the heart and it involves sympathy. I try to reach an understanding of the offender and identify with his or her troubled-ness and find compassion for his or her frailties. I now see the person from a broader perspective, perhaps with a wide-angle lens and look beyond the hurt that is immediately in my view. Mechila does not necessarily lead to reconciliation or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender is human, flawed as we all are and deserving



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of sympathy. Sometimes, as we accept the limitations of others, we become more accepting of our own weak points and even learn to forgive ourselves – that's the great byproduct of Mechila.

The third kind of forgiveness is kapara, kaper lanu: Atonement for us. A startling idea, this deepest level seems to ask: God take away the hurt and fear and make it as though it had never been. Sometimes, if we work very hard and are very lucky and have lots of time, we can arrive at a place where the hurt we received truly does not exist anymore. Do we remember it? Barely. It does not enter into our life in connection with that other person. We have healed. God has atoned for us, it seems, and cleansed us of the sin.

Forgiveness, then, is not a single act but a process with many steps, selicha, mechila and kapara – a direction, a path on which we all must walk. I realize though, that despite the insights of Jewish tradition, sometimes there is no map. And sometimes the road is very long with unexpected turns and very steep hills. But our rabbis remind us that the gates of repentance are always open. The road is never closed and there are no tolls to pay along the way.

Let us take a first step on that road together today. Would you join me in imagining a moment of forgiveness? Take a relaxing breath. You might want to close your eyes but you don't have to. Picture yourself in a very safe loving setting – your favorite place. It's a happy occasion and a



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beautiful day. Near you, surrounding you, are those you love the most, your most intimate circle of family and your very closest friends. Now picture the circle getting wider. You invite in extended family and more casual friends. All of them are here to celebrate you, to rejoice in your happiest occasion. Your heart is so full that you welcome everyone today. You are safe and loved and secure. Now imagine welcoming into the party a few others about whom you feel neutral, people you don't know as well but have no reason to dislike. When you are totally comfortable in this most wonderful scene with all of your loved ones there...now... can you welcome in just one additional person to your mental celebration? Can you widen the circle for one person with whom you feel tension, a lingering hurt, an old grudge like a pebble that you need to take out of your shoe? Yes, they have wronged you. But can you recall one good thing they ever did for you? Can you think of one worthy quality of that person, one godly spark? Can you bring yourself to welcome them into your circle? They are standing there on the edge of that wonderful group, perhaps holding an apology. Invite them in.\*

As we open our eyes, we can take this image with us throughout the day. This is the beginning of forgiveness. Selach lanu: Forgive us; Michal lanu: pardon us; kaper lanu: atone for us. The gates of repentance are always open as this circle can always be open to one more person.



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Let us try to end Yom Kippur significantly lighter than we began it. Not because we are fasting – that is temporary. Let us walk out of the synagogue lighter than we entered because we will have jettisoned stale grudges, worked through lingering misunderstanding and moved beyond unhealed hurts. On this day, may forgiveness be the gift we give to others and to ourselves.

Amen

\*guided imagery by Glenda Rosenberg