



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Turning Towards Forgiveness

Once upon a time there was a king who had a terrible quarrel with his son. In a fit of anger, the king sent his son into exile. Many years passed, and the son went through the world alone. The king's heart was softened, and he sent one of his servants to find his son, and to ask him to come home. When the servant found the king's son, the young man said that he could not go home—he was too hurt and his heart remained bitter towards his father. The servant reluctantly returned to the king, and gave his master the sad news. The king ordered the servant to return to his son with the following message: "Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to meet you."¹

We talk a lot about **asking for forgiveness** on the High Holy Days. We rarely talk about **granting forgiveness**. The Hasidic parable about the king and his son teaches that, just as Jewish tradition places great importance on **seeking** forgiveness from those we have wronged, it also emphasizes the importance of **granting** forgiveness to those who have wronged us.

Maimonides, the great codifier of Jewish law, teaches that if a person who has been wronged does **not** grant forgiveness when the person who has wronged him asks his forgiveness, the wrong-doer should bring three of his friends with him and approach the person again to ask for forgiveness. If the wronged person is still not willing to forgive, this process should be repeated a second and a third time. If the wronged person is still unwilling to grant forgiveness, the wrong-doer need not pursue the matter further. And here is the surprising part:

"On the contrary, the person who refused to grant forgiveness is the one considered as the sinner."²

Maimonides continues:

"It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and refuse to be appeased. Rather, he should be easily pacified, but hard to anger. When the person who wronged him asks for forgiveness, he should forgive him with a complete heart and a willing spirit. Even if he [the person] aggravated and wronged him severely, he should not seek revenge or bear a grudge."³

Our great teachers understood that bearing a grudge serves no purpose and is harmful both to us and to our interpersonal relationships.

¹ Adapted from "Fighting Forgiveness," by Rabbi David Wolpe:
<http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/judaism/2002/06/fighting-forgiveness.aspx>

² *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah, 2:9.*

³ *Ibid., 2:10*

You may know that the nightly bedtime ritual in Jewish tradition includes a recitation of the *Sh'ma*. I was surprised to learn that, prior to saying this most important of Judaism's prayers, we are supposed to say the following:

“Master of the universe, I hereby forgive anyone who angered or antagonized me or who sinned against me — whether against my body, my property, my honor or against anything of mine; whether he did so accidentally, willfully, carelessly, or purposely; whether through speech, deed, thought.....⁴

The bedtime *Sh'ma* was—in part— a response to the fear of death our ancestors associated with nighttime and sleep. This *Sh'ma* includes a blanket pardon of anyone who might have wronged us, in case we do not wake up. What if a wrong-doer intends to come the very next day to apologize? Without this blanket pardon, the wrong-doer will never have the chance to apologize, to seek forgiveness, and to atone.⁵

Jewish tradition understands, however, that being forgiving and merciful, rather than judgmental, is not easy. Even for God.

God, in the Talmud, prays:

“May it be My will that My mercy conquer My anger, and that My mercy overcome My sterner attributes—and that I behave towards My children with the attribute of mercy—and that, for their sake, I go beyond the boundary of judgment.”⁶

Overcoming our anger so that we can treat those who wrong us with *rachmones* (compassion) and with mercy is not easy. If even God—the Creator of the universe—struggles with having *rachmones* for those who have committed wrongs—we mere mortals have our work cut out for us.

In an ideal world, people who wrong us will seek our forgiveness and—although we might have difficulty doing so—we will grant it.

We, however, live in a real world, where people do things that hurt us and do not ask our forgiveness. We may feel wounded, disappointed, and angry. We tell ourselves that our feelings are justified—after all, this person hurt us terribly. We carry this stew of negative feelings, often for years, until it becomes like a boulder, weighing on our hearts.

Sometimes this causes ruptures in family relationships. Every family has a story—or two—of family members who do not speak to each other, sometimes for years.

Herschel Bernardi, the actor and humorist, tells the following story:

Bernardi's mother asks him to organize a family reunion. Bernardi mentions that his mother's brother, Uncle Louie, would be a great help in this endeavor, as he is the family “historian”. The following dialogue ensues:

⁴ *The Book of Jewish Values*, by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, p. 381.

⁵ “Support Me, Teach Me, Help Me to Forgive,” Yom Kippur Afternoon Service, Temple Sinai, Washington, DC.

⁶ BT *Berachot* 7a.

Mama: "Don't mention his name in this house!"
Herschel: "Ma—whatever happened—it was 30 years ago!"
Mama: "Never mind."
Herschel: "Ma: What did he do that was so terrible?"
Mama: "Never mind."

Are the details of what happened between Mama and Uncle Louie so terrible that Mama has decided to spare him the ugly truth, vowing instead to carry it with her to her grave? Bernardi comes to the conclusion that "never mind" really means that Mama forgot what actually happened.⁷

Sometimes the details of what caused the rupture are **not** forgotten and get passed to the next generation. In my family, a dispute over my grandfather's will resulted in my father's estrangement from his two siblings. My sister and I grew up not knowing our aunt and uncle and our six first cousins, except on a superficial level. We cousins discovered, years later, that we had all vowed to our own siblings that—no matter how angry we became with each other—we would never permit such a rift to occur. As adults, my cousins and I have worked hard to establish relationships that barely existed when we were children. Yet, we feel sad that we missed so much growing up.

When a family member or friend with whom we have had a good relationship does something hurtful and does not ask our forgiveness, it is our responsibility to let the person know how we feel. These discussions, although difficult, can open the door for resolution and healing.

There are people, however, with whom we are not able to have such discussions. These people are often family members whose actions cause us to feel hurt, frustrated, resentful, and angry. They call us only when they need something—and they may not be there for us when we need them. They often misinterpret what we say or do as a personal slight, and they say things to us that are hurtful. Often they are unaware of the hurt and frustration we feel. And—although this might sound strange coming from a former psychotherapist—airing our feelings with them will probably not help. These are people who have a set way of dealing with us and with the world, and—although as Jews we should never give up hope that people can change—we have to be realistic. When we continue to expect these family members to change, we are the ones who suffer.

Often these individuals are family members with whom we long to have close and loving relationships. It is hard for us to acknowledge that these relationships will never be what we would like them to be. Granting forgiveness, in this case, "means giving up our hopes for a better past."⁸

"Forgiveness," writes Dr. Elana Stein Hain, "is about letting go of what we may still feel we are owed in favor of building relationships with others. Rather than standing on ceremony over what could have been, I am willing to loosen the reins, to be open to what might emerge. Often times what needlessly keeps us from forgiveness is a focus on what we deserve, what we are entitled to."⁹

⁷ "An Evening with Herschel Bernardi," Vanguard Classics CD, 1995.

⁸ *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*, by Alan Lew, p. 50. Little, Brown and Company, 2003.

⁹ https://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=1795&Cat_Id=275&Cat_Type=Blogs

Being forgiving makes it possible for us to let go of our negative feelings towards parents, siblings, and children who—although they have caused us pain—we love, and who love us. How many of us have allowed long-held grudges keep us from those we love?¹⁰

Being forgiving, of course, does not mean that our relationship with the person who has hurt us will be the same as it was before. There are times when the hurt is so great that the same connection we had with that person cannot be rebuilt. But we can let go of the intensity of our negative emotions. We can give up the feeling of self-righteousness that comes from holding onto grudges.¹¹

Rabbi David Wolpe writes:

[Granting] Forgiveness is about more than finding reasons, or understanding. Often our anger melts away when we truly understand the circumstances of the other, but that is not identical with forgiveness. Although it is important to try to understand the motivations of other people, true forgiveness occurs when conduct has been inexcusable, not when it has been understandable. A misunderstanding that is cleared up is not an occasion for forgiveness, but for further clarity. Forgiveness is a generosity of the heart, not an example of clear thinking.¹²

We grant forgiveness because we also need to be forgiven. We have said or done hurtful things to those we love, we have been quick to anger and slow to understand, we have jumped to conclusions without knowing the facts. All of us need forgiveness.

Tonight we let the haunting melody of *Kol Nidrei* enter our hearts. We ask God to forgive us for the wrongs we have done, and we ask for the strength to be kinder, more loving human beings in the year to come.

Kol Nidrei asks God to free us from vows and oaths we are unable to keep so that we can enter the New Year unburdened. The *Kol Nidre* prayer ends with three biblical passages about forgiveness:¹³

“Knowingly or not, the whole community of Israel and all who live among them have sinned; let them be forgiven.”

“As in Your love, You have been patient with this people from the time You led us out of Egypt to the present day, so, in Your great love, may You forgive Your people now.”

“And God said: I have pardoned in response to your plea.”

¹⁰ *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*, by Alan Lew, p. 50; *Wounds Not Healed by Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness*, by Solomon Schimmel, p. 72. Oxford University Press, 2002.

¹¹ “Fighting Forgiveness,” by Rabbi David Wolpe: <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/judaism/2002/06/fighting-forgiveness.aspx>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Gates of Repentance*, pp. 252-253. CCAR Press.

In its conclusion, *Kol Nidrei* shifts from a legalistic formula for the abrogation of vows to an emphasis on “forgiveness (*s’lichah*), kindness (*chesed*), and communal cohesion (*I’khol adat b’nei Yisrael*).¹⁴ We have all sinned, *Kol Nidrei* tells us, and in forgiving us, God responds to us with mercy rather than with anger. Marge Piercy writes:

We forgive mostly not from strength
but through imperfections, for memory
wears transparent as a glass with the patterns
washed off, till we stare past what injured us.
We forgive because we too have done
the same to others easy as a mudslide;
or because anger is a fire that must be fed
and we are too tired to rise and haul a log.¹⁵

The king who exiled his son realized that— no matter how wonderful it was to be king—he felt empty. He knew that he had to remove the heavy stone of anger and hurt that weighed on his heart in order to make room for the love he had for his son, and to welcome his son back into his life. The king understood that he contributed to the bitterness that his son felt toward him. The king knew that resolving their differences would not be easy. “Return as far as you can,” he said, “and I will come the rest of the way to meet you.”

This year, may God open our hearts so that we can move away from judgement and turn towards mercy and forgiveness.

Amein

¹⁴ “Courting Inversion,” Rabbi Aaron Panken, PhD, in *All These Vows: Kol Nidre*, pp. 198-199. Ed. By Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, PhD. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011.

¹⁵ “How divine is forgiving?” by Marge Piercy. From *Available Light*, 1990.

