



Yom Kippur Sermon -- 5779 -- Rabbi Aaron Alexander

Forgiveness In the Home of Homes

A reflection, and, as we are consistently reminded, not an uncommon one:

"My shame and guilt were overwhelming," *she writes*. "I felt like the attack, the almost deadly assault, was my fault. By drinking and putting myself in a dangerous situation, I had not only risked my life, but risked my daughter's security. I constantly asked myself, "What would she have done without you? Why are you so awful that a stranger wanted to kill you? What's wrong with you?"

Forgiving my attacker was easy. He let me live. But forgiving myself for what happened, took me 25 years.

Somehow, I felt more ashamed and afraid that maybe *his* compassion, *not* my strength, saved me. As the years passed I discovered public health, which led me to the field of restorative justice, where *both* the innocents *and those who intentionally* hurt others--have helped me learn how to forgive myself.

They taught me that everyone needs love; that seeing our mistakes and poor decisions as indicators of unworthiness, leads to self-absorption and more pain."

I'd like to talk about a topic that a generation ago barely existed as a field of study, but has more recently gained traction. Self-forgiveness--the unburdening of ourselves from what we've done, or didn't do, or couldn't do.

And, this is a sermon I'm not sure I want to give... It feels, overly self-indulgent, maybe even narcissistic, now, in the world in which we live. Should we not focus on the forgiveness we ought to give others? Isn't turning outward, not inward, what's necessary to actualize the healing so many among us, here in this room even, are so desperate to receive?

But also, self-forgiveness is not particularly Jewish. At least textually, where it is given no explicit mention that I can find. (I did look...) Which makes it somewhat unusual for sermon topic.

Repentance--*Teshuvah*.

Forgiveness/Pardon--*Mechila and Selicha*.

Atonement/Expiation--*Cappara*, Yom Kippur.

S'lach Lanu.. M'Chal Lanu...Caaaa'aper lanu.

Each of these is in some way other-relational, an interpersonal repair with another, or a clean slate from God. We forgive others, they us. God forgives. God provides atonement, expiation.

But me to me. You, for you. There's no Yom Kippur word for that.

It might be because self-forgiveness, studies show, can lead to less empathy for others. It can reduce the motivation to make amends. It can serve as a crutch--diminishing a sense of responsibility, in favor of moral righteousness, virtue signaling, denial, or blame shifting. Don't we already have enough of those?¹

If nothing else, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the days between, ask us to place a laser-beam focus on the ways we have been overtly damaging and silently complicit in the web of relationships we inhabit: interpersonal, communal, religious, and civic.

There's a legal formula in Jewish Law, Halakhah, for seeking forgiveness from somebody we've wronged:

ואם לא רצה חבירו למחול לו, מביא לו שורה של שלשה בני אדם מריעיו ומידידיו שיבקשו ממנו שימחול לו, ואם לא נתרצה להם מביא לו שורה שניה ושלישית, ואם בכל זאת לא רצה להתפייס מניחו והולך לו. וזה שלא מחל הוא החוטא. ע"כ.

If one of us has wronged another, Rambam writes, and apologizes, but the hurt party does not desire to forgive him, he should bring a group of three and approach the other to request [forgiveness]. If [the wronged party] is not appeased, he should repeat the process a second and third time. If he [still] does not want [to forgive him], let him alone--no need to pursue further. On the contrary, the person who refuses to grant forgiveness is the one now considered as the sinner.

We Confess. Show regret. Apologize--then we ask for forgiveness.² Of course, there's no guarantee it will be granted. Which, frankly, is understandable. We truly don't know the depths to which we've harmed another's soul, and those wounds often slowly unfold over long periods of time.

1. Gratitude for Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg for her processing some of this with me. There are a number of studies from which I prepared. Here's a couple: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17439760.2016.1163407?journalCode=rpos20>, Hall, J. H. & Fincham, F. D. (2005). Self-forgiveness: the step-child of forgiveness research. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 24, 621-637.

2. See my Rosh Hasnahah sermon for a more detailed explanation of the process.

But the necessity of requesting forgiveness, at least according to Jewish Law, does have limitations. After repeated efforts, one can, as Maimonides rules: *m'neecho ve'holekh lo*. Set it aside. Move on.

We tried. What more can we do?

It's good Torah. It allows for some kind of self-emancipation, even if primarily dependant on the response, or lack thereof, from another person.

But had our tradition meant that self-forgiveness ought to occur, it likely would have said so, explicitly, as it often does with such heavy matters.

But we have no language for that--for self-forgiveness.

I really wish we did, though. Because as much as self-forgiveness may dull empathy and potentially cause us to avoid responsibility, there's another side to the scientific debate.

Studies also show that a practice of self-forgiveness is an essential component to our emotional health and psychological well-being--it likely frees us from bitterness and anger. Self-forgiveness is about letting go of self-regret and self-pity, of becoming more aware of ourselves without being overwhelmed by what we find. Forgiving ourselves is an act of self-healing--*refuah*.

And, tragically, its absence is often linked to suicide attempts, eating disorders, addiction and other all-too-common human challenges.

Anne Lamont once quipped: Forgiveness is giving up all hope of having had a better past. [Repeat]

How true that is. So too, self-forgiveness.

It's not forgetting. It's not erasing. It's not pretending. It's not hiding. It's not denying.

There is no "poof!" it's all good now.

It's confronting a mirror, admitting, regretting, and *then* pardoning.

Think, for a moment, about what you are carrying on your emotional backs this year. Now. It's a been a long year.

I'm not trying to make you feel bad, I promise. Well, maybe a little. But lists like these tend to reflect the author moreso than anyone else.

We lost our tempers.

We shamed our kids.

We didn't show up.

We weren't supportive when we should have been.

We didn't make eye-contact and smile when we could have.

We forgot to call. We didn't call enough.

We didn't listen, or even try to.

We didn't stop talking.

We shared someone's secret.

We attacked opinions without fully understanding the position.

We offered critique, not to help him understand, but to knock him down a peg.

We ignored context. We permitted lies. We became numb to gaslighting.

We were public when we could have been private, private when we could have been public.

We pretended his words didn't matter, his tweets benign.

We have allowed our own trivial concerns to outweigh the harrowing conditions that others face.

We have doubled-down on our subjective moral purities, shunning compromise, jeopardizing liberty.

We have trivialized the fears of Jews on campus, or in Europe, or in Israel--because sure, others have it worse--forgetting that the competition of "isms" jeopardizes, all of us.

We have allowed other-imposed stereotypes to over-influence us towards apathy and indifference, sometimes even overt discrimination.

We have blamed ourselves for the pain others have caused in us. We tell ourselves, if only I had done this, said this, looked like that, it would have been different, unable or unwilling to recognize the truth of who it is stands before us.

We have even blamed our successes on others--convincing ourselves we couldn't have done it, we didn't matter -- it was all them.

We have watched in frozen horror as children are detained, caged, in our names, convincing ourselves that we are too small to protest--so easily forgetting *that when it was us*, many small people saved many of *our* lives as they were being told we didn't matter, were less than human, didn't deserve it, or that our parents should have known better and left sooner.

We have heaved the burden of gun-violence upon teenagers--children--the victims, who must now consider bullet-proof backpacks to keep themselves safe.

We have allowed the length of a news-cycle to determine the breadth of our compassion.

This, my family, is what we, each of us, bear. And more. And it sure is heavy.

The question I am asking you tonight (today), the question I am asking myself: Will this unwanted luggage nudge us to change, or freeze us in a status quo?

The question I am asking us tonight (today) is: what might be possible if we love ourselves enough to face and forgive the ways in which we've fallen short, as we were created to do? The things we couldn't control, or maybe even could, but did so poorly, and now hold us back? And they do hold us back, even (especially) if we are unaware of it.

So does our tradition command that we self-forgive? I believe, actually, that it does. And I believe it is this very night/day which proves it.

We walk in the room, and before any prayer is uttered, a declaration is made.

Anu Matirin Le'Hitpallel im avaryanim. We grant permission to pray with those who have transgressed.

We are all sinners. All of us, guilty. .

Yom Kippur begins with an affirmation of imperfection. A solemn reminder that mistakes are not the aberration, they are the condition.

And then, nestled between ancient sounds that always feel completely new, we renounce our vows. We begin the holiday with words that assert: in order to receive atonement from the Master of the World on Yom Kippur, we first come to terms with what it is we won't accomplish, couldn't fix, and untether ourselves from the regressive yoke of those mistakes.

כְּלֵהוֹן אַחֲרָטָנָא בְּהוֹן... כְּלֵהוֹן יְהוֹן שְׁרֹן... שְׁבִיקוּן, שְׁבִיתוּן... בְּטָלִין וּמְבַטְלִין

May they all be undone, cancelled, voided, annulled, and regarded as neither valid nor binding.

May they not hold us back. May they not fossilize us. May our shortcomings not silently persuade us to internalize that the past is our only destiny.

Kol Nidre is, if nothing else, a grand act of self-forgiveness.

Alan Lew, author of *This is real and you are completely unprepared*, wrote: "The Kol Nidre is calling us. It is saying, Speak. Speak the shadow. Speak and let go. Speak and be human. Speak and be healed."

I recently realized that although the Torah doesn't provide explicit language for self-forgiveness, it does provide language for self-love.

Three times does the Torah command outward-facing love :

	וְאַהֲבַתְּ, אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ,
You shall Love the Lord your God.	
	וְאַהֲבַתְּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ:
You shall love your fellow as yourself.	
	כְּאֶזְרַח מִמֶּם יִהְיֶה לָכֶם הַגֵּר הַגֵּר אִתְּכֶם, וְאַהֲבַתְּ לוֹ כְּמוֹךָ--כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם, בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: אֲנִי, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
The stranger among you shall be as one of you. You shall love him or her as you love your self, for you, too were strangers in the land of Egypt.	

Love God. Love your neighbor. Love the stranger. Love yourself. Except the "love yourself" bit isn't actually commanded like the others--anywhere. Love them like you love yourself.

An assumption, such that other relationships are contingent upon it. To love another is to first understand how it is you love your self.

Self-forgiveness, I want to suggest, is akin self-love, and why it is absent as a distinct obligation. It is assumed, like love, to be an essential component of what it means to forgive another, or be forgiven.

Forgive others as you forgive yourself.

It's not self-indulgent. Hardly. It's just human. **And it is very, very Jewish.**

My last conversation with my mom wasn't a good one. In fact, it was pretty awful. I still haven't fully let this go. I barely remember what it was about. She probably told me I should parent more like one of my siblings. I was stubborn and proud and couldn't drop it.

It's possible she'd already been stricken by the Brain Cancer that would quickly incapacitate her, and take her life, but I didn't know that then, nor will I ever know for sure, based on the timing.

It's haunts me--our last real conversation--negative. That we both said things we'd regret. I would often look back at the unpleasant texts that followed the conversation--trying to relive what it was I was thinking--if only we both could have seen the future.

A few months ago, for first time in almost 3 years, I replaced my iphone. I wanted to preserve the content, the old messages, the voice mail, and texts--as so many of us do. What a gift technology can be sometimes. A geniza for our lives.

Maybe a day or two after replacing the phone, dwelling, once again on that last conversation as I so often do, I went to go look for the text thread--my searing reminder to just maybe not make the same mistake again--as if that ever works.

Except--the transfer didn't take. Years of conversations--gone. Her birthday messages, gone. I should have backed them up, I know. My way of conjuring her up, bringing her back--healthy or not--suddenly erased.

But something else happened too. I could intensely feel a burden lift off my shoulders--an anvil float off of my heart. Shame, embarrassment, anger, resentment--stealthily intertwined between my conscious and unconscious self--quickly dissipating.

But also, in the same moment that my ability sit with that last conversation vanished... a part of me returned, I returned, awakened.

It was time for me to *forgive myself*. For a past I couldn't really change, but every single day was determining my present--holding me back, darkening the more meaningful memories--the beautiful memories, and influencing all of my relationships.

"Aaron, I forgive you," I said aloud, ritualizing the moment. "And you know damn well that she did too."

Though my loved ones didn't know precisely why, they felt an immediate change. A skip in my step. Slower to frustration. More patience. The words "I'm sorry" flowing more often and more freely from my mouth.

Maybe that's what Yom Kippur is, after all. Perhaps that's what it means to have our sins expiated, absorbed, by God and the day. Maybe self-forgiveness on Yom Kippur is an offering to God, who is big enough, expansive enough, to hold all of it.

Face inward, with honesty & compassion, forgiveness on your lips.

Unclog the pathways to living more authentically, outward.

Today, I'd like to invite you into this practice, this gift of self-forgiveness.

Amidst your community, under God's tender shade and abundant mercy, say to yourself--I. forgive. me.

"The Kol Nidre is still calling us. It is saying, Speak. Speak the shadow. Speak and let go. Speak and be human. Speak and be healed."

And then face them, and yourself, once more.