

At the beginning of June I was in New Jersey and got a cup of coffee with two of my oldest friends, Lauren and Karen. We sat at a Starbucks in Millburn and caught up. Karen asked if we had heard about her dad. "No, what's up?" She excitedly told us this story about her father, Peter Hirschmann.

A few weeks prior, Peter, 92, sat in his office and opened the mail. It was an ordinary day for Hirschmann, a real estate broker and soft-spoken husband, father and grandfather. That is, until he came across a hand-addressed envelope penned meticulously & marked by a European postmark. Inside he found a letter signed by a woman named Doris Schott-Neuse, no one he had ever met or even heard of.

He opened the envelope and began to read:

Dear Mr. Hirschmann & Family: I was in Israel [at the] end of February...where I learned to Google professionally. Also [I wanted] to contact the family who owned the house in Nuremberg, Eichendorffstrasse 15...where my Mum Karin and my aunt Helga...grew up...All I knew was that this house had been owned by a Jewish family and that the owner was able to make it to the USA on the last ship that made it there during the 2nd World War. My aunt had told me that after the war the two sons of the family visited and that the house...had to be bought for a second time for a realistic price.

I am 45 years old now and it is a shame that I never looked into the Nazi-past of my family. I should have realized earlier that there is a Nazi-past of course. We were all taught at school about Hitler's Germany and the horrific crimes which were committed...and we all

felt that all this was something which was awful but that it happened in a far-away past. And I did not connect these history lessons to my family.

I am deeply ashamed for what us Germans did to [you], your family and to your friends and relatives...it is hardly bearable to start thinking about the details – what a horror and nightmare it must have been to live through this.

It seems to be only now that we – the grandchildren of the generation of the men and women who became criminals – start to ask tough questions of the degree and [ways our families were] involved and actively contributed not only to a war but to the Shoah.

Schott-Neuse explained that she did not know about the role of her grandfather, but she had come to doubt the narrative given...by her family. She researched the history of her family home in the Nuremberg archives and then, coming across the Hirschmann name in the home-ownership records, looked on the internet to find Hirschmanns.

She continued, “The more I think about family history and all those immeasurable and ungraspable crimes committed against the Jews... there is no way to say ‘[it is all in the past. We Germans need to remember]. I do think that this is the task for my generation, handed down from the grandparents ‘we did not know’-generation, via the parents ‘we were not allowed to know’-generation to us... [We have] the obligation to remember and not to shy away any longer from tough questions.”ⁱ

This letter was unexpected. Hirschmann had been back to Nuremberg only once since his parents sent him at age 14 to

safety in London in early 1939. No one had had any contact with the people who had taken over his family's home when it was claimed by the Nazis.

Peter Hirschmann grew up in Nuremberg with his older brother, Henry, and his parents, Julius & Claire. The family survived Kristallnacht because the Nazis "buying" his father's business wanted the transaction to go through without event. After their time in London, Peter and Henry were reunited with their parents in Newark, New Jersey in November, 1939.

In 1943, at the age of 18, Peter received a draft notice. Not yet a U.S. citizen, he was asked if he wanted to serve, and joined the United States Army. He was sent to Europe in 1944. Overrun in a surprise attack at Battle of the bulge, Peter and most of his regiment were taken prisoner. Hirschman spent the rest of the war as a German POW, liberated by the British in 1945.ⁱⁱ

Karen and I talked. She was struck by the letter. What Doris did was rare. She explored her past and claimed responsibility for actions of her forebears. She was not passive. Doris took the time and effort to search her soul and make herself accountable, a powerful and much needed example in a world abounding in hatred. Really what she did was *teshuvah* – *repentance*.

Repentance is precisely what the 10-day period we start today, on Rosh Hashanah, is about: searching our souls, looking at our past, owning our actions, however terrible, and actively seeking repentance – that is, asking for forgiveness verbally and through a change in our behavior. This is *teshuvah*, turning back and returning to act differently. Doris set an example for all of us. If she can do it, so can we!

Easy to talk about, and easy for me or for any of us to intellectualize. But then there's the doing. How difficult is it to

seek forgiveness? And how difficult is it to forgive? Curious what people were thinking, I did a little non-statistical research recently. I posted on Facebook and more than 50 people responded, and quickly. Here's what they said: Asking for forgiveness and giving forgiveness both involve soul-searching, and both, when taken seriously, are difficult. Think about why.ⁱⁱⁱ

First, asking for forgiveness. Who wants to admit they were wrong? It requires humility and being honest with yourself. Admitting you are wrong is difficult & brave. We don't want to be perceived as weak, having bad judgment, or lacking in principles or values.^{iv} And it can be intimidating to ask for forgiveness because we don't know how the person we asked is going to.^v

Giving forgiveness is about vulnerability as well. It takes great strength and maturity.^{vi} Think about how difficult it is to let go of your hurt and anger. And forgiving means letting your defenses down; there is protection in carrying a grudge, as funny as that might sound...

Ultimately, forgiveness is about stepping back and seeing that we are not compromising our principles. Maybe it's not about being right, but going against our instincts and letting go, realizing that doing so frees you.^{vii} Forgiving means that we no longer let someone else live rent-free in our heads.^{viii} Forgiving requires acceptance. And fully forgiving is quite difficult.^{ix}

As I read the surprising number of responses, I realized how much this topic is on everyone's mind. And I thought about forgiveness with new eyes. In some ways I – and maybe you – have held onto a simplistic notion of forgiveness, even when I knew it wasn't real. You know, that playground assumption that adults have for children – that forgiving means all is hunky dory and the relationship returns to where it was. In real time, I know that that

is not true. Similarly, I know that assessing the sincerity of another person's apology is not simple, nor is waiting for someone to forgive us. And then there is that other reality of forgiveness – there are times we are just not ready to forgive.

Yes, I know that this forgiveness stuff is not simple or clear cut. I know it as a regular person, if you would, and as a rabbi. Still, in reading what others – including many of you – wrote, I thought about the nuances of forgiveness differently. And I considered that, as we come together in community tonight, as different as we are, we have all hurt others, and we have all been hurt. Chances are, we all carry around some unresolved forgiveness.

So, what does a rabbi do? I turned to Jewish text. Maimonides and other sages have written pages and books to give us a how-to on the forgiveness front:

1. Determine in your heart & mind that you have done wrong & feel badly about it
2. Agree to not commit the same wrong again
3. Provide restitution where possible, AND
4. Verbally confess what you have done wrong

Clarifying this “how,” Mishnah tells us how to proceed: For sins between man and God, Yom Kippur atones. But for sins between people, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases the other person.^x In other words, if we have wronged another person, we are to approach them directly to apologize and make amends.^{xi} Internal reflection and just showing up on Yom Kippur don't cut it.

We even have a test as to the success of our *teshuvah*. We need to do more than talk. We have to take responsibility and change our behavior.

So we have clear directions about how to ask for forgiveness. What about the other side of the equation: giving forgiveness? Jewish tradition really doesn't really tell us what to do. We have three categories of forgiveness which are steps of a sort, and helpful in terms of naming where we are, but not a how-to instruction. We have actually referenced all three in our Yom

Kippur prayer over the years, when we pray at the end of *Al Chet – V'al kulam Eloah s'lichot, s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu* – for all these sins, God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.^{xii} These three types of forgiveness are *mechilah, selichah & kappara*.

The first is *mechilah* or “forgoing the other's [debt]” – when we “relinquish [our] claim against the offender. This is not a reconciliation of heart or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that [they no longer owe me] anything for [what they did].”^{xiii} We are not forgetting what they did, but no longer looking to collect on it.

And while we are generally supposed to be open to forgive the one who hurt us, we do not have to accept their request if we think they are not sincere – or if they have not changed their behavior.^{xiv} Another words, if *mechila* is not deserved, don't grant it! This is “the great Jewish “No” to easy forgiveness. It is core of the Jewish take on forgiveness – namely, you've got to work for it. Conversely, if there are good grounds to [grant *mechila*]...[we are] morally bound to do so. This is the great Jewish “Yes” to the possibility of repentance.”^{xv}

The second Jewish category of forgiveness is [*selicha*]. “It is an act of the heart...reaching a deeper understanding of the sinner, [even empathy].” *Selicha*, depends on *teshuvah* and “*selicha*, too, is not a reconciliation or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender, too, is human and deserving of sympathy.”^{xvi}

And while there is a third step or kind of forgiveness, atonement or *kappara*, it's not ours to give. *Kappara* is an ideal, a total cleaning of the slate, but is only granted by God.”^{xvii} So, for our human purposes today, we will put it aside.

Terrific, we have a description of stages of forgiveness, but no real how-to's. What do we take from that? Well, for one thing, there is no one way to forgive. It's complicated and messy and utterly personal. Each of us knows this. Right now, each of us is sitting in this sanctuary with some unresolved matter of forgiveness. Perhaps we want to be forgiven. Or, maybe we are struggling with how to forgive. As one of my rabbinic teachers explains, forgiveness is “the single most difficult mitzvah” – there are no standards; you have to figure it out yourself.^{xviii}

To that end, the Talmud gives us a powerful message of forgiveness in a story about a man who continues to sin, and does not seek forgiveness. He turns to the mountains and hills and to the sun, moon and stars and asks them to plead his case for forgiveness, to do the work for him. He fails to find anyone to assist him and then he has an epiphany. He calls out: The matter depends solely on me – *ein hadavar talui ela bi*. He realizes that no one can seek forgiveness for him. Only he can seek his own forgiveness. From the depths of his soul he does...and he is forgiven.^{xix}

We here in this sanctuary this Rosh Hashanah may have engaged in terrible behavior, or not-so-terrible behavior. But the message is the same for us, too – *ein hadavar talui ela bi*. The matter – the request for forgiveness – depends only on me, on you, on each of us individually. No one can do it for us. No one can tell us how to do it either. Each of us must understand: *ein hadavar talui ela bi*. The matter depends only on me. We are it! The good news? Since tonight we begin a 10-day period of soul-searching and *teshuvah* that culminates on Yom Kippur, the timing is just right.

Turning back to Doris. She realized that, and she wrote to Peter Hirschmann. As for Peter, he read Doris Schott-Neuse's letter and he responded within days:

I have lived a long life and you are one of the finest human beings that I have ever encountered. Your letter brought tears to my eyes for many reasons. First, because it called to mind the undeserved suffering of my family and so many other families like mine, and the loss of my beloved childhood home. But it saddened me also because it is obvious that you, too, are suffering, and it pains me to think that of you, who are blameless.

You had the option to ignore [what you learned in school] and instead you confronted it. My tears reflect the fervent hope that the humanity, dignity, and compassion you have shown is shared by others of your generation and the generations to follow.

I want you to know that you are completely absolved of any responsibility and that you should not let the past haunt you. While I would never disregard the lessons of the past, I have lived my life by looking forward, not backward. I hope you will do likewise.

As we start this new year, we have before us 10 days of *teshuvah*, 10 days to seek forgiveness, 10 days to be open to others who seek forgiveness from us. To do this, we start with searching our souls, listening to Doris: “[We have] the obligation to remember and not to shy away ...from tough questions.” And listening to Peter: “You confronted [your history]. My tears reflect the fervent hope that the humanity, dignity, and compassion you have shown is shared by others of your generation and the generations to follow.”

Doris encourages us to look honestly at our past and dig deep, even when it's uncomfortable. Peter encourages us to look to our past, learn, and from there, move forward. As we begin this new year let us, too, turn to our past and recall. May we remember our history, confront tough questions, and take responsibility, with humanity, dignity and compassion.

Shanah tovah.

I am grateful...

to Peter Hirschmann for first sharing his story, his history to Mrs. Bernstein's 6th grade religious school class at Temple B'nai Jeshurun when Karen Hirschmann and I were in 6th grade
Peter's story has inspired me in the many years since, and this new portion challenged me to challenge others to consider forgiveness as we begin this new year

to Rabbi Michael Balinsky & Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, ever my teachers, who brought me to text and teachings that deepened my thinking and brought me to crystallize the message of this sermon

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to my father, Rabbi Barry H. Greene z"l, who is ever editing with a red Flair pen, reminding me that High Holy Day sermons are different, and telling me that my ending could be stronger

ⁱ Doris Schott-Neuse's letter excerpted with small changes made for ease of understanding by American listeners, as printed in "Correspondence of suffering and absolution," Joanna Ginsberg, *NJ Jewish News*: <http://njewishnews.com/article/34514/correspondence-of-suffering-and-absolution#.WcgUxLKGnNl>.

ⁱⁱ Peter Hirschmann's history from personal conversation & two articles: "Correspondence of Suffering & Absolution" & "On battle's anniversary, a veteran looks back," Joanna Ginsberg, *NJ Jewish News*: <http://njewishnews.com/article/576/on-battles-anniversary-a-veteran-looks-back?source=njinrelated#.WcgYgrKGNl>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Response to September 7 Facebook post.

^{iv} TED Radio Hour "Forgiveness," May 12, 2017: <http://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/526949840/forgiveness>.

^v Response to September 7 Facebook post.

^{vi} Response to September 7 Facebook post.

^{vii} TED Radio Hour "Forgiveness," May 12, 2017: <http://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/526949840/forgiveness>.

^{viii} Response to September 7 Facebook post.

^{ix} Response to September 7 Facebook.

^x Mishnah *Yoma* 8.9.

^{xi} Deepening thinking of the personal encounter needed for repentance inspired by "At the Threshold of Forgiveness: A Study of Law and Narrative in the Talmud," Moshe Halbertal, *The Jewish Review of Books*, Fall 2011: <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/74/at-the-threshold-of-forgiveness-a-study-of-law-and-narrative-in-the-talmud/>.

^{xii} Yom Kippur liturgy, translations in *Gates of Repentance & Mishkan Hanefesh*, CCAR Press.

^{xiii} "Repentance and Forgiveness," *Crosscurrents*, David R. Blumenthal <http://www.crosscurrents.org/blumenthal.htm>.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} Ibid – general concept.

^{xviii} Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, in conversation on the topic.

^{xix} Babylonian Talmud, *Avoda Zara* 17a.