The Power of Forgiving
Dvar Torah Yom Kippur 5776
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman - Temple Beth Zion

“I forgive you,” Nadine Collier, the daughter of 70-year-old Ethel Lance, said at the hearing, her voice breaking with emotion. “You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her again. I will never, ever hold her again. But I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul.”

“We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with welcome arms,” said Felicia Sanders, her voice trembling. “Tywanza Sanders was my son. But Tywanza Sanders was my hero. Tywanza was my hero….May God have mercy on you.”

The shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, happened only five days after I gave birth to my second daughter this summer. I was in baby land, enjoying the newest arrival to my family and feeling blessed (and sleep deprived). The news of the shooting broke my heart, and I looked at my baby and thought about the brokenness of the world she was born into, brokenness she doesn’t know about yet and that I am terrified of her discovering.

“I forgive you”. Hearing those words from a daughter and a mother moved me to tears. Their capacity to forgive and to find compassion, grace and love in the midst of so much pain touched me deeply. Their capacity to forgive – particularly so soon after the traumatic event – is hard for many of us to understand. What can we learn from their forgiveness?

On Yom Kippur, we come together as a community and spend twenty-five hours asking for forgiveness. We beat our chest as we list sins, both those we have committed and those we haven’t, and we pray that God will forgive us. We come individually and as a community. We are here to ask for forgiveness because we believe that people can change, and because we believe in second and third chances.

"עברות שבין אדם למקום, יום העומר מכפר; عبرות שבין אדם לחברו, אין יום העומר מכפר, עד שירצה את חברו."
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For transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones, for transgressions against one's neighbor, Yom Kippur cannot atone, until one appeases one's neighbor. ¹

The Mishna teaches that Yom Kippur gives us an opportunity to ask for forgiveness—and also an opportunity to forgive. Usually at this time of the year, we focus our attention on asking for forgiveness. But there is always another side, and part of the work we need to do, and learn to do, is to forgive.

This summer I read a book called Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy. On Monday morning, October 2, 2006, almost nine years ago, a gunman entered a one-room Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. In front of twenty-five horrified pupils, thirty-two-year-old Charles Roberts ordered the boys and the teacher to leave. Roberts prepared to shoot the remaining girls with an automatic rifle and four hundred rounds of ammunition. The oldest hostage, a thirteen-year-old, begged Roberts to "shoot me first and let the little ones go." Refusing her, he opened fire on all the girls, killing five and leaving the rest critically wounded. He shot himself as police stormed the building. His motivation? "I'm angry at God for taking my little daughter," he told the children before the massacre.

The blood was barely dry on the schoolhouse floor when Amish parents brought words of forgiveness to the family of the one who had slain their children. The outside world was incredulous that forgiveness could be offered so quickly for such a heinous crime. Fresh from the funerals where they had buried their own children, grieving Amish families accounted for half of the seventy-five people who attended the killer's burial. Roberts' widow was deeply moved by their presence as Amish families greeted her and her three children. The forgiveness went beyond talk and graveside presence: the Amish also supported a fund for the shooter's family.

How could the Amish do this? What did this act mean to them?

Philosopher Joanna North defines forgiveness as follows: "When unjustly hurt by another, we forgive when we overcome the resentment toward the offender, not by

¹ Mishna Yoma 8:9
denying our right to the resentment, but instead by trying to offer the wrongdoer compassion, benevolence, and love”.  

The Amish community differentiates between Forgiveness, Pardon and Reconciliation, a distinction that I found helpful.

From the *Amish Grace* book: “forgiveness advocates have developed a long list of things that forgiveness is not: it is not pretending that a wrong did not occur, it is not forgetting that it happened, and it is not condoning or excusing it. “Forgiveness means admitting that what was done was wrong and should not be repeated.” Similarly, forgiveness is not the same thing as pardon, and does not mean that the wrongdoer is now free from suffering the disciplinary consequences of his or her behavior. Forgiveness should not be confused with reconciliation- the restoring of a relationship - because reconciliation requires a renewal of trust, and sometimes that is not possible”. Forgiveness may open the door to reconciliation, and in some ways is a prerequisite for reconciliation, but a victim may forgive an offender without reconciliation taking place” (end of quote).  

In this sense, forgiveness is not about the perpetrator but about oneself. We forgive so we can liberate ourselves of the burden that we carry when hurt. We forgive so we can move forward. We forgive because we want to believe deeply that there is hope. This act of forgiveness from the Amish community was met with a certain measure of criticism. In an op-ed in the Boston Globe, Jeff Jacoby asked, "How many of us would really want to live in a society in which no one gets angry when children are slaughtered?" Another opinion piece called the Amish community response to their daughter’s killer “disturbing”. “Hatred is not always wrong, and forgiveness is not always deserved.” Important questions regarding the limits of forgiveness were raised, although they failed to understand the way in which forgiveness functions as a kind of spiritual practice for the Amish community.

In another well-known case, an Israeli filmmaker, Yulie Cohen, was wounded in 1978 in a terrorist attack by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. A stewardess for

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2 *Amish Grace*, page 126  
3 *Amish Grace*, Page 127
the Israeli airline El Al, she was attacked along with other crewmembers when getting off the bus to the hotel in London. In a remarkable change of heart, twenty-three years later Cohen began questioning the causes of violence between Israelis and Palestinians and started to consider supporting the release of the man who almost killed her, Fahad Mihyi. It was her goal to stand up as a survivor and call for reconciliation on each side. One of her letters read: “I wish to share with you my dream: if we can forgive each other, if we can talk sincerely, if we can look at each other in the eyes, this is a story I want to tell to other people”. Yulie Cohen’s story is an inspiring story of forgiveness, a moving testimony of human compassion and a call for peace. Her capacity to approach the perpetrator of the attack against her and hear his story allows not only her, but both of them, to find healing, repentance and forgiveness.

Oshea Israel, a teenager in Minneapolis, got into a fight one night at a party in 1993. The fight ended with him shooting and killing Laramiun Byrd. Now 34, Oshea has finished serving his prison sentence for second-degree murder. I learned of his story, and the story of the mother of the man he killed, on StoryCorps. Mary Johnson, the mother of the man Oshea killed, met Oshea when he was in prison. She wanted to know if, and how, he had changed since they had first glimpsed each other in court many years ago. Mary said that he was no longer the same 16 year old she had first met – he was a grown man, who had changed. Through Mary’s sharing of her story and the story of her son, Oshea said Laramiun became human to him. Let me quote a few sentences of the conversation between Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel: "After you left the room - said Mary- I began to say: "I just hugged the man that murdered my son." And I instantly knew that all that anger and the animosity, all the stuff I had in my heart for 12 years for you--I knew it was over, that I had totally forgiven you. As far as receiving forgiveness from you- said Oshea -sometimes I still don't know how to take it because I haven't totally forgiven myself yet. It's something that I'm learning from you – I won't say that I have learned yet – because it's still a process that I'm going through (...) Just to hear you say those things and to be in my life in the

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4 My Terrorist, A film by Yuli Cohen, 2002
5 https://storycorps.org/listen/mary-johnson-and-oshea-israel/
manner that which [sic] you are is my motivation. It motivates me to make sure that I stay on the right path. You still believe in me. And the fact that you can do it despite how much pain I caused you--it's like amazing (...) I love you, lady. To which Mary Johnson responds: I love you too, son”.

These stories reminded me of a text that I have shared with you in the past from Rabbi Nahman of Breslav called “Torat Azamra”, from Liqquatey Moharan, and beautifully translated by Rabbi Art Green. I will quote just a few of sentences of it:

You have to judge every person generously.
Even if you have reason to think that a person is completely wicked,
It’s your job to look hard and seek out some bit of goodness,
Some place in that person where he is not evil.
When you find that bit of goodness
And judge the person that way,
You may really raise her up to goodness.
Treating people this way allows them to be restored,
To come to teshuva.\(^6\)
This text teaches us that no one is entirely evil and to look at those who hurt us and recognize their potential for good. It is perhaps, through forgiving that this can be achieved.

Desmond Tutu, Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, titled his book about South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission No future without Forgiveness. The public nature of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the enactment of the belief that healing can only come through publicly facing the truth made the Commission’s work so powerful.

Amy Biehl, a young white anti-apartheid activist from the U.S., was murdered by black Cape Town residents, while a black mob shouted anti-white slurs. The four men convicted of her murder were released as part of the Truth and Reconciliation process.

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\(^6\) Liqquatey MoHaRaN 1:283. Translation: EHYEH, Rabbi Art Green, page 127

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Just two months before she died, Amy wrote in a letter to the Cape Times editor: “Racism in South Africa has been a painful experience for blacks and whites and reconciliation may be especially painful. However, the most important vehicle for reconciliation is open and honest dialogue”.7

Forgiveness is meaningful in three different ways:

To the person doing the forgiving: By doing so, one is not poisoned by resentment, anger and desire for revenge. This is what we learn from the Amish community and from the Charleston response to the shooting.

To the person being forgiven it holds the possibility for real transformation, as we learn from the story of Mary Johnson and Oshea.

And to society in general, especially when it is torn by conflict and violence, and is trying to heal and find a way forward, as we learn from Yulie Cohen’s and Amy Biehl’s stories.

The most important ideas of Yom Kippur, Selichot (forgiveness) and Vidui (confession), are expressed in two parts of our liturgy, and are repeated in each of the five Yom Kippur services. Rabbinic theology teaches us that confession is indispensable for atonement to happen. Without confession of wrongdoing, repentance cannot be delivered.

This, we know! About this, we speak!

Today I want to emphasize that “there would be no point in confession (...), without the assurance that forgiveness is possible. Judaism teaches that God is a God of forgiveness and mercy.8

And I ask, if God is capable of forgiving, can we also strive to be forgiving creatures?

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8 Entering the High Holidays, Reuven Hammer, page 125

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Some of the stories I just shared did not require the perpetrator to do Vidui to be forgiven. The act of forgiving brought healing and closure to those hurt, and in some ways to those who committed the sin.

I want to invite you to think about forgiving as a practice, and to work on our capacity to be forgiving creatures. Our ability to be forgiving doesn’t just happen because we believe and have faith, but because we work on it. In the words of Sister Helen Prejean to Matthew Poncelet in the movie Dead Man Walking: “It’s not faith. It's work”

Our liturgy includes this practice in a daily basis! The ritual of the Bedtime Shema, in one if its versions begins with forgiving.

“Ribono Shel Olam, behold I now forgive whoever has provoked my anger or annoyance, whoever has done wrong to me, whether to my body or my spirit, or to my honor, or to all that may belong to me, whether willingly, or inadvertently, or by design, whether by speech or deed---let no one suffer punishment on my account”

I know this is challenging for me. Can I truly forgive those who have hurt me and my family the most? Can I forgive when I look at the history of my birth country and know of the terrible deeds of dictatorship? Can I forgive loved ones that are not alive anymore,

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9 Edot Hamizrach
10 Translation from Kol Haneshamah Prayerbook, Reconstructionist movement, page 346

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who disappointed me and hurt me in the past? Can I truly forgive people throughout my life that have hurt me, intentionally or unintentionally?

**Forgiving is a practice.**
Forgiving our loved ones. Forgiving those who have hurt us in small and big ways. Forgiving those who are not alive, but who we still carry the burden of anger and disappointment towards. And, teaching our children the value of being forgiving creatures.

- Because sometimes we need it for our own healing.
- Because sometimes it opens the door to real change in another person.
- Because sometimes it is the only path to reconciliation and an end to the cycles of violence that we are part of.

This is our work.