**Forgiveness is the Hardest Thing to Do**

**Kol Nidre Sermon**

**Rabbi Lawrence R. Sernovitz**

**Sunday, September 27, 2020/10 Tishri 5781**

One year ago today, the nation followed closely the trial of Amber Guyger, the former Dallas Police officer who was on trial for the killing of her neighbor Botham Jean on September 6 of last year. As NPR reported, “Amber Guyger was coming off a long police duty shift, 13 hours. It was just about 10 o'clock at night when she got to her apartment complex. She was somewhat distracted. She'd been talking on the phone with her partner with whom she was also having a romantic relationship. And she parked on the fourth floor instead of the third. So that meant she walked down the hallway to Botham Jean's door. She put her key in the lock, but the door was not locked. She says the door pushed open. She actually testified that she heard Jean inside while she was still out in the hallway. She pulled her weapon. She says she yelled at him to show his hands, and then she shot him through the heart. Guyger was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison. She is eligible for parole in 5.

During the trial, much of the evidence was not contested. The defense focused on Guyger’s remorse. In her words, “I felt like a piece of crap. And I asked God for forgiveness. And I hate myself every single day. I wish he was the one with the gun and he killed me. I never wanted to take an innocent person's life.” As the nation fixated on the trial and its conclusion, it was what happened after the verdict was read that captured America’s attention, and her heart. Jean's 18-year-old brother, Brandt Jean, took the witness stand and spoke to Guyger, saying, "I know if you go to God and ask him, he will forgive you…I love you just like anyone else and I'm not going to hope you rot and die.” He continued by saying, ”I personally want the best for you. I wasn't going to say this in front of my family, I don't even want you to go to jail. I want the best for you because I know that's exactly what Botham would want for you. Give your life to Christ. I think giving your life to Christ is the best thing Botham would want for you.” He then asked the judge to hug Guyger, which she gave him permission to do. They have an emotional embrace and Guyger breaks into tears.  Judge Kemp, the presiding judge, then walked over to them and used a tissue to wipe tears from Guyger’s eyes. She then hugged Mr. Jean’s family and emerged from her chambers carrying a Bible. She approached Ms. Guyger and handed her the Bible. “You can have mine,” she said. “I’ve got three or four more at home. This is the one I use every day.” Afterward, Ms. Guyger stood up and reached her arms toward Judge Kemp. The judge briefly shook her head, before returning the hug.

Many people who watched this moment couldn’t help but be moved by this act of forgiveness. Brandt Jean taught the world what compassion and forgiveness looks like, sounds like, and feels like. His words. His embrace. Her tears. While Jean’s family was clearly disappointed with Guyger’s 10 year sentence, which should be the topic of another sermon, this act of love should make us all pause and think about our own lives. The timing couldn’t be much better for the Jewish community. All year long, we get upset about so many petty issues, accompanied with anger, sadness, and disappointment among other emotions. We have watched as friendships have been destroyed, marriages broken, and families torn apart. The people whom we thought were our closest friends, those we could depend upon the most, let us down and failed to meet our expectations. Another let down and another moment to lose faith in humankind. We have let our egos and our pride get in the way of keeping people in our lives, people we have cherished and loved, while at the same time getting upset with others for not forgiving us when we miss the mark and fail to meet their expectations. While Amber Guyger and Brandt Jean might never be best of friends, they did what many of us don’t have the courage to do. Even more so, they did it right at the moment when one was convicted of killing the other’s flesh and blood. If we can’t even muster up enough strength and courage to forgive a loved one, a friend, or a colleague for slighting us or being insensitive, what have we become? Are we so stiff-necked and prideful that we can’t check our ego’s for a few minutes at the door while we work to sustain a relationship that we will regret losing?

Let me step back for a moment. There is another way to look at the Guyger-Jean reconciliation. As [Anne Branigin](https://kinja.com/annebranigin), a writer for the Root, an online magazine focusing on Black News, Opinions, Politics and Culture, shared this week, “The presentation of Jean’s act of forgiveness and the ensuing reaction was immediately reminiscent of when the survivors of the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C., publicly forgave Dylann Roof. Then, as now, many correctly pointed out the complications with glorifying that act of forgiveness: That it shouldn’t invalidate the value and necessity of [black rage](http://religiondispatches.org/a-theology-of-anger-forgiveness-for-white-supremacy-derails-action-and-alienates-young-black-activists/). That it shouldn’t be taken as representative of what an entire race of people feels or ought to feel. That their act of forgiveness did not then and does not now absolve the country from dealing with white supremacy or systemic racism. Roxane Gay wrote in [the New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/24/opinion/why-i-cant-forgive-dylann-roof.html) after the Charleston shooting, ”What white people are really asking for when they demand forgiveness from a traumatized community is absolution. They want absolution from the racism that infects us all even though forgiveness cannot reconcile America’s racist sins. They want absolution from their silence in the face of all manner of racism, great and small.” I, for one, am done forgiving.” Brandt and Botham Jean’s mom Allison said on the Today show, “I think what Brandt did this afternoon was to heal himself, and to free himself from what has been wrapped up within him for the last year. And so we forgive. But I don’t want forgiveness to be mistaken with a total relinquishing of responsibility.”

Allison Brandt makes an important point. While forgiveness frees us from living with an anger that can eat us alive, it doesn’t relieve us from the responsibility to deal with the core issues that plague our society. By forgiving, we are not saying that we condone the actions done to us. In fact, it is the opposite. We are saying that while something heinous was done to us, it won’t destroy us and we will rise up. Are we saying that whatever was done to us didn’t really matter? Are we giving the action our stamp of approval? Are we letting the offender get off easy? Think about those people in your life who have offended you. Which people have you still not forgiven, whose names and faces still fill you with anger and hatred? Forgiveness is the hardest thing to do.

Tonight brings in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Ten days ago we celebrated Rosh Hashanah, also known as Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgement. From Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur, from Judgment day to Atonement day, our job is to look inward and conduct what is known as a *chesbon hanfesh*, an accounting of the soul. It is sort of like spring cleaning for humanity. Sins against God are forgiven but the sins against other human beings, we must do the work of repentance and atonement. We are obligated to apologize and change our ways.

While many might think what Brandt Jean said seems crazy, especially to a woman who was just convicted of killing his brother. But, this is not so foreign to what Jewish tradition teaches. We learn in the Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 10a:2-5, that, “There were some lawless men living in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir, and they used to cause him much suffering. Once R' Meir prayed that they should die. His wife, Beruriah, exclaimed, "Why would you pray for them to die?... Rather you should pray for mercy on them that they should do teshuva and turn from their evil ways--and then the wicked shall be no more." R' Meir followed his wife's advice and offered prayers on their behalf so they did teshuva. Forgiveness is the hardest thing to do.

This time of year is the season of forgiveness. The ten days in between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are known as the Aseret Yamei T’shuvah, the Ten Days of Repentance. Our job during this period is to look within and identify where we missed the mark, where we need to apologize to others and begin to change our ways. Jewish tradition has a built in system for repentance that goes back all the way to the Torah and was built upon heavily during the rabbinic period, especially by Rambam, Maimonides. In his major work, the Mishnah Torah, he asks, “What is teshuvah? It is when a person abandons the sin that he sinned and removes it from his thoughts and commits in his heart that he will not do it again…And also that he regrets sinning…And the One Who Knows Hidden Things testifies about him that he will never return to this sin. And he must confess verbally and say these things that he has committed in his heart.” “[Who has reached] complete Teshuvah? Rambam states it is a person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit [the sin again], and, nevertheless, abstains and does not commit it again because of his Teshuvah alone and not because of fear or a lack of strength.

But, let’s ask the question that many of us are thinking. This is the process of Teshuva for the sinner, of what we must go through during this time to achieve repentance. What about the one who was the victim of the sin? What is our obligation to accept an apology? Rambam anticipated this question and responds by saying, “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 aggravated and wronged him severely, he should not seek revenge or bear a grudge.” He goes on to say that if after three times the offender asks for forgiveness and is rejected, the sin is no longer on them but the other party who refused to forgive. Forgiveness is the hardest thing to do.

John Ortberg is a teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, in Illinois. He tells the story of how he and his wife once traded in their old Volkswagen Super Beetle for their first piece of new furniture: a mauve sofa.

The man at the furniture store warned them not to get it when he found out they had small children. “You don’t want a mauve sofa” he advised. “Get something the color of dirt.” But with the naive optimism of young parenthood they said “We know how to handle our children. Give us the mauve sofa.”

From that moment on everyone knew the number one rule in the house. Don’t sit on the mauve sofa. Don’t touch the mauve sofa. Don’t play around the mauve sofa. Don’t eat on, breathe on, look at, or think about the mauve sofa. It was like the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. “On every other chair in the house you may freely sit, but upon this sofa, the mauve sofa, you may not sit, for in the day you sit thereupon, you shall surely die.”

Then, one day there appeared on the mauve sofa a stain. A red stain. A red jelly stain.

So John’s wife, who had chosen the mauve sofa and adored it, lined up their three children in front of it: Laura, age four, Mallory, two and a half, and Johnny, six months.

“Do you see that, children?” she asked. “That’s a stain. A red stain. A red jelly stain. The man at the sofa store says it is not coming out. Not forever. Do you know how long forever is children? That’s how long we’re going to stand here until one of you tells me who put the stain on the mauve sofa.”

Mallory, the 2 and half year old, was the first to break. With trembling lips and tear-filled eyes she said “Laura did it.” Laura passionately denied it. Then there was silence, for the longest time. No one said a word. John knew they wouldn’t, for they had never seen their mother so upset. He knew they wouldn’t because they knew that if they did they would spend eternity in the time-out chair. He knew they wouldn’t because he was the one who put the red jelly stain on the sofa, and he wasn’t saying anything!

So, John’s story leaves him sitting with guilt. Guilt that not only had he been the one to make the jelly stain on th mauve sofa, but he wasn’t confessing and therefore allowed his kids to be the victims of his wife’s wrath. While a jelly stain isn’t murder, it puts this into perspective for us. John, or his kids, will not receive life in prison for the staining of the sofa. But, what should the consequence be? When John is found out, which he probably will be, what will help John turn from his ways and be better, especially owning up to moments where he falls short? Is staining the sofa grounds enough for his wife to end their marriage?

Judaism teaches that there are three components to think about when we contemplate forgiveness, and they all have to do with choice: 1) Recognizing forgiveness is a free choice that reflects who you want to be: how you choose to behave and how you choose to treat other people (independent of their behavior toward you). 2. Seeing forgiveness as a choice about how to handle your anger and how long to hold onto anger. 3. Choosing to think about the situation from the perspective of the wrongdoer – allowing empathy to help direct your response. By choosing to be empathetic, we are able to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes and respond in a way that we would someone to respond to us if the situation were reversed. None of us live guilt free lives. And, if we were the wrongdoer, wouldn’t we want someone to be empathic to us as well? Forgiveness is the hardest thing to do.

A flash of silver. That’s all Nettie, a mental-health counselor, recalls about driving to work on the morning of August 10, 2011, when another car swerved into her lane, hitting Nettie’s sedan head-on. With her right leg pinned between the dashboard and the front seat, Nettie drifted in and out of consciousness for almost an hour before firefighters rescued her. In the emergency room, convinced that she was going to die, Nettie asked a nurse to pen a good-bye letter to her 13-year-old son, Dominic. “I told him how proud I was of him,” she says, “and how sad I was to leave him.”

Her injuries were extensive, requiring 10 hours of emergency surgery: Her spleen, her appendix, and two-thirds of her colon and upper intestine had to be removed. Besides nearly losing her right foot, Nettie broke her right arm and shattered her right heel. “For days it hurt to breathe,” she says, “and even feel the hospital gown against my skin.”

Not until several weeks later, when Nettie began to recover, did her lawyer break the awful news to her: The 63-year-old woman who had caused the accident had had a blood-alcohol level well over the legal limit. “Before that I hadn’t been angry. Accidents happen,” says Nettie. “But who’s drunk at 8:15 in the morning and driving around?”

Her distress only increased upon learning that the driver had minimal auto insurance and that Nettie, who was separated from her husband, would be saddled with hefty medical bills. The last straw came the day before Thanksgiving, when her boss announced that Nettie was being let go.

“I was so depressed. For the next six months, I got Dominic off to school in the morning and then spent the rest of my day sleeping,” says Nettie. She despaired every time she thought of the drunk driver who had brought such hardship into her life.

All that devastation took a toll. The following spring, Nettie started taking antidepressants and seeing a therapist. “In our sessions, I worked on acknowledging my anger and hurt, then letting those feelings go. It was hard to do,” she admits. “But asking, ‘Why me?’ over and over was getting me nowhere.”

In August 2012, Nettie was in the courtroom when the woman who had caused the accident was sentenced to 8 to 16 months in jail. (She was ultimately released after serving just three months, due to a heart condition.) “The woman looked so scared,” she remembers. “I couldn’t imagine what was going through her head.” Afterward Nettie approached the public defender. “I said, ‘Please let [your client] know that I forgive her.’ ”

The gesture gave Nettie a huge sense of relief. “I wasn’t in control of her actions that morning,” she says. “But I am in complete control of how I respond from here on out, and I decided to choose forgiveness over hate and animosity.”

Today, while she focuses on rehab, Nettie is a public speaker for Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Slowly she is learning to walk again, and she looks forward to starting a job search soon. “Every day, I find something to be thankful for,” she says. “I couldn’t feel that gratitude without forgiveness.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

I want to conclude with one more story. There was once a very poor orphan who wanted nothing more in the world than to belong to a family. Finally, his opportunity came. He was eight years old and a family wanted to adopt him! Introductions were made, papers were signed, and just 6 days after his eighth birthday he left for his new home. He took with him his hope and his possessions – the old worn and torn clothes he was wearing and a single soft toy. His new parents were excited to have him with them, and wanted him to feel like one of the family. A special celebration dinner was held, he was given his own room, and he was introduced to the other kids in the street. His new parents took those old clothes, threw them away and bought him beautiful new clothes. They bought him a bike and more toys, and pretty soon he began to feel just like all the other kids in the neighborhood, loved and part of a family. One thing however was curious. The young boy’s old shoes, the ones with the big holes in them, weren’t tossed out with the rest of his clothes. His new father placed them on the mantelpiece. It wasn’t long before the newly adopted son found out why. Every time that boy did something wrong his father would go and get those shoes and say “Look at all we’ve done for you. We took you in when you had nothing, but look at how you’ve behaved.”

Unfortunately we do the same thing all too often in our relationships. We dredge up the past and throw it back in someone’s face, never letting them forget how much they’re in our debt. Forgiveness means throwing out the shoes as well as the clothes, refusing to dredge up the past and make it a reason for action in the present.

Think about it. What would it feel like to release the pain and hurt that you have been feeling for so long? What would be like to finally forgive that friend, that loved one, that colleague at work, a parent, or a sibling who had wronged you? What would it feel like to free yourself from the pain that sits in your soul every day of your life? What would freedom look like? Rabbi Brad Hirschfeld offers, “The number of apologies you seek should be proportional to the number you are willing to offer, because the doing of each nurtures the capacity for the other.” This High Holy Day season, let us both accept apologies from others and give them as well. Forgiveness is the hardest thing to do but the only thing that will set us free.

1. Real Simple, By Stephanie Booth August 29, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)