

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman
Congregation Shaarei Shamayim
Kol Nidrei Sermon 5771
September 18, 2010

The friends gathered together for dinner, deeply engaged in conversation. They talked about their jobs, their work, new loves, old loves, friendship, heartbreaks, and divorces. As they sat down, one woman interrupted the conversation. "I should have said this earlier, but please don't tweet this." The others nodded seriously in agreement. "Or blog this," piped someone else. For a moment, there was an uncomfortable silence, as the group pondered their conversations being divulged to hundreds of Facebook friends.

Indeed – at least in New York – social norms seem to be changing. Conversations that we think are just innocent conversations, photos that we think are just innocent photos, now can be sent far and wide, tweeted or blogged, posted, recorded, and stored forever. Nothing is forgotten. As Jeffrey Rosen, author of the New York Times article, "The Web Means the End of Forgetting," writes,

The fact that the Internet never seems to forget is threatening, at an almost existential level, our ability to control our identities; to preserve the option of reinventing ourselves and starting anew; to overcome our checkered pasts.

Rosen posits that in a world of no forgetting, forgiveness is a challenging endeavor. He cites cyberscholar Viktor Mayer-Schönberger who writes that a society in which everything is recorded "will forever tether us to all our past actions, making it impossible, in practice, to escape them." Strangers, acquaintances, or friends who discover information about us may not give us the benefit of the doubt. They may not wish to simply forget, contextualize, or ignore what they see.

Many offer technological, legislative, or judicial solutions to the daunting problem of the Internet never forgetting our digital pasts. Michael Ross, in a letter to the editor regarding this article, offers a different solution. He states bluntly, "The possible solutions to an indelible checkered past listed by the article are all very interesting. There is also this one: behave better."

Behave better. This is a very Jewish response and a very un-Jewish response. We should be cognizant of our behavior – in the wild world of the Internet and in everyday life – and work to continually act with integrity. We should take responsibility for our actions and not post stupid things that we will regret later. But Jewish tradition recognizes that we all make mistakes. It's part of human nature. The problem is that when everything is recorded and nothing is forgotten, there is little possibility for

forgiveness. As Mayer-Schönberger writes, “without some form of forgetting, forgiving becomes a difficult undertaking.”

We gather tonight for Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, not so much to ponder the digital world but to reflect on the nature of forgiveness and to ask whether some sort of forgetting is necessary for forgiveness. We come together to ask difficult questions and to examine our own lives so that we can challenge ourselves to be more forgiving in the coming year.

Our Yom Kippur liturgy focuses our attention on doing *teshuvah*, on making amends, on turning towards our best selves. Through our prayers we ask for forgiveness for wrongdoings committed against God, and the tradition teaches us that if we commit wrongdoings against our fellow humans we must ask them directly for forgiveness.

Yet we spend very little time thinking about how to forgive others. It’s strange, for our texts and liturgy focus much more on doing *teshuvah* than on granting forgiveness to others. That’s not to say that Jewish tradition is silent on forgiveness. To the contrary. As Moses Maimonides writes,

It is forbidden for one to be harsh and non-appeasing. One should rather be forgiving and slow to anger, and whenever a sinner asks one for forgiveness one should grant it wholeheartedly...One should not take revenge or bear a grudge (Hilchot Teshuvah 2:10).

If a person confesses the sin, apologizes sincerely three times, makes restitution, and desists from repeating the wrongdoing, we are *obligated* to forgive.

Nevertheless, most discussions of forgiveness almost always return to issues of repentance. Perhaps the focus on *teshuvah*, on examining the flaws in ourselves and in considering the mistakes we have made, makes us more able to forgive others. If we see ourselves as imperfect and recognize that we are guilty of wronging others, then we may be more compassionate, not holding them to impossible standards. We can understand them – and even accept them – in their wholeness, with all of their flaws. It may not make our wounds any easier to bear, but if we step back from our own hurt we might see that in different circumstances we would have behaved in a similar fashion. As is written in the Book of Ecclesiastes, “There is no one so righteous that he does only good and never sins” (Ecclesiastes 7:1).

Of course, we all know that human beings are capable of terrible transgressions. There are some things that we know we would not do, some lines that we would not cross. And so when others do those things or cross those lines, when they hurt us so deeply, forgiveness becomes much harder. But too often we take the easy way out, closing our hearts and not forgiving others for their sins. Cultivating empathy is an important

practice. We do not have to agree with the choices that others make or remain in a close relationship with someone who hurts us, but we should try to understand, from their perspective, the reasons for their actions. This understanding is one component on the path towards forgiveness, which ultimately frees us as much or more than it frees the one who has wronged us.

Yes, there are limits to forgiveness. We can easily think of situations when forgiveness is too difficult or even impossible – the one who harmed us is unrepentant or insincere, the one who harmed us continually repeats the offense, the crime was too heinous, the victim is no longer living. We cringe when we are told, “Just turn the other cheek,” and, “Forgive and forget.”

Shouldn't we focus, instead, on remembering? After all, Jewish tradition is full of exhortations to remember. We must remember what our enemies, Pharaoh, Amalek, and Haman, did to us. We must remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. We must remember that we were once slaves in the land of Egypt so that we do not pervert justice. Remembering is redemptive. As the Baal Shem Tov teaches, "Forgetfulness leads to exile, while remembrance is the secret of redemption." And in light of the Holocaust, in the sincere hope that genocide never be repeated, we proclaim, “Never forget!”

Tradition tells us that God remembers. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we chant the haunting words of the Unetaneh Tokef:

You alone can remember what we have forgotten; it is you who shall open the Book of Remembrance, but its contents shall speak for themselves, for it bears the imprint of us all, which our deeds and our lives have inscribed.

If God remembers, shouldn't we remember? If we are taught to emulate God's forgiveness by forgiving others, shouldn't we emulate God's remembering by keeping track of every offense done to us?

Remembering is important, certainly, but remembering too much can harden our hearts and corrode our souls. Holding on to memories can plague us, preventing us from moving on past the hurt. We get stuck in the past, we cling to grudges, we stew in anger. In the words of Job, “When I remember, I am terrified; my body is seized with trembling...Why do the wicked live on?” (Job 21:6-7) Job's memory brings him back, again and again, to his pain. He experiences his past hurts as if they are happening in the present, and he dwells on the impossible questions that each of us have, the questions that often have no answers.

Perhaps, instead of recording in our own personal Books of Remembrance every offense that others have committed against us, we should heed the words of Israeli novelist

Amos Oz, who writes, "Apart from the obligation to remember, is there also a right to forget?" (*The Slopes of Lebanon*, 123)

We do have a right to forget. Sometimes we need to forget. But what does it mean to forget, how do we erase our memories, wipe the slate clean like God does for us on Yom Kippur?

In the digital world, these questions are technological – how do we make data expire or vanish so that all is forgotten? If we cannot trust others to forget, contextualize, or ignore the posts and the photos, then we must find other ways to make them disappear.

In human relationships, however, forgetting has no technological fix – there is no delete button. Forgetting is a complex endeavor. Do we just move on as if no harm was ever done? If we forget, how do we ensure that the crime will not be committed again and again? And really, is forgetting even possible?

Judaism gives us interesting ideas for how to reconceptualize the nature of forgetting. It acknowledges that wiping the human slate clean is impossible, but that letting go is essential. In the Book of Ezekiel, God says:

If the wicked one turns from all his sins and keeps all My statutes, and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of his transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; because of his righteousness that he has done, he shall live (Ezekiel 18:21-22).

The text does not say that God will not remember, but that the mistakes will not be remembered against him. The actions and their ramifications are not erased, but the repentant one will not be forever reminded of his transgressions; nor will they be used to judge him anymore. Perhaps this is partly what we mean when we say that we need to let go of something in the past. We put it away so that we do not continually use it against someone who has hurt us.

The Talmud presents a similar idea in its discussion about the prohibition of *ona'at devarim*, the prohibition of hurting another person's feelings with harmful words, which is considered to be a very serious offense. One is forbidden from reminding a person who has repented of his past transgression. One may not recall the previous offense or question the person's integrity, because it may embarrass the person. To throw it back in his face is shaming. Underscoring the severity of this the Talmud states, "Whoever shames his fellow human in public is considered as if he has shed blood" (Bava Metzia 58b).

Forgetting means letting go of the past, of declaring that once someone has been forgiven, she has been forgiven. She has grown from her mistakes, and it is not only inappropriate but a serious offense to remind her of them.

Forgetting is not erasing what has happened, or pretending that we have some sort of amnesia, but rather putting the transgression in its proper place and deciding to live in the present. Full reconciliation may not be possible, and the relationship may be changed forever, but this type of forgetting allows for a different future for both parties, a future not beholden to the pain and anger fostered by grudges.

Such letting go can be more difficult in a digital age when so many of our actions are recorded and stored forever, when we cannot compartmentalize our different identities. We now live in a world where we learn on Facebook that our professor kicks back with a few drinks, our accountant attends clown conventions, and our doctor is getting a divorce. We will need to cultivate empathy even more and learn to recognize each other in our wholeness, to see each other as multifaceted and complex human beings. It may become commonplace for our conversations to be tweeted or blogged, but when we look at each other face to face and see each other with all of our flaws and all of our gifts, we can practice true forgiveness, both by remembering and forgetting, and seeing each other as the unique and holy beings that we are.

Gmar chatimah tovah. May we all be inscribed and sealed for a good year, a year of *teshuvah* and a year of forgiveness. May it be a year in which we can all say, "*Salachti kidvarecha* – I have forgiven as you have asked."