

Rabbi Laurie Zimmerman  
Congregation Shaarei Shamayim  
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The first jetliner smashed into the north tower just before 9:00 in the morning. The second smashed into the south tower eighteen minutes later. At 9:50 the south tower collapsed on itself and crashed to the ground. Forty minutes later, the north tower followed. Pandemonium swept New York City, and a huge gray cloud enveloped the sky. The smoke and dust were unbearable. The image of people jumping to their deaths was ghastly. A third jetliner crashed into the Pentagon and the fourth into a field in Pennsylvania.

It was a time of shock, devastation, and grief. Almost 3,000 dead. Countless people traumatized. The world was forever changed.

The U.S. response was swift and severe. President Bush launched the War on Terror, and less than a month later our military had begun dropping bombs on Afghanistan. The desire for revenge hung thickly in the air.

A wave of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab violence swept through this country. In Dallas, Texas, a white supremacist by the name of Mark Stroman sought to settle the score on his own. In retaliation for the attacks, he walked into a gas station on September 21, pulled out a gun, and asked the man behind the counter, a Bangladeshi Muslim immigrant by the name of Rais Bhuiyan, "Where are you from?" Bhuiyan answered, "Excuse me?" As soon as he spoke Stroman shot him in the face at close range. Bhuiyan survived, but Stroman's other victims, Waqar Hasan, a Pakistani Muslim shot on September 15, and Vasudev Patel, an Indian Hindu shot on October 4, did not.

Stroman was apprehended and arrested, and on April 4, 2002 he was found guilty and sentenced to death.

This might have been a simple story of vengeance and retaliation, but the story does not end there. Bhuiyan, the only survivor of Stroman's shooting spree, decided not only to forgive Stroman but to launch an effort to save his life by appealing to the State of Texas requesting that his death sentence be commuted to life in prison without parole. Bhuiyan cites three reasons:

First, out of the principle his parents taught him that "he is best who can forgive easily." Second, because of what he believes as a Muslim, "that human lives are precious and that no one has the right to take another human's life." Third, for the widows of Waqar Hasan and Vasudev Patel, who joined his fight against Stroman's death sentence: "Executing Stroman," he writes, "is not what they want, either. They have already suffered so much; it will only cause more suffering if he is executed."

The story of Bhuiyan and Stroman present us with important insights into the nature of revenge and forgiveness. But this is not just an account about people we do not know. This is a story about us. The September 11 attacks, ten years ago, had a profound impact on so many

Americans. We may have known people who were killed or who had loved ones who were lost. We may have been moved by stories of heroic acts of bravery, devastated by the destruction, and outraged that the terrorists could do this to our country. We may have protested against the war in Afghanistan or we may have supported it. Ten years after the attacks, it is worth remembering the past, reflecting on the present, and looking to the future.

The September 11 attacks and their aftermath called into question issues that we revisit every year on Yom Kippur, both on a societal and on a personal level. Why is the desire for revenge so seductive? Why is forgiveness so difficult? And how can forgiveness lead to such a profound transformation of human relationships?

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, many Americans desperately wanted revenge for the carnage inflicted on the United States. They wanted the terrorists to be held accountable for the crimes they had committed, for the pain they had caused. Some wished to teach the terrorists a lesson that no one messes with the United States. Others hoped to satisfy their unrelenting desire to get even.

In the ten years that have passed, many Americans' desire for revenge, both for the terrorist attacks and for ordinary yet devastating domestic crimes, has not lessened. Witness the jubilation following the assassination of Osama bin Laden with the chants of "USA! USA!" in the streets. Or the Republican presidential candidate debate last month when Brian Williams was interrupted with applause when he said to Governor Rick Perry, "Your state has executed 234 death row inmates, more than any other governor in modern times."

Jewish tradition teaches us that it is natural to crave revenge, yet it is our responsibility not to act on that yearning. Unleashing vengeance on the perpetrator of an injustice too often results in a spiraling cycle of retaliation and violence; soon it is impossible to tell the victim apart from the perpetrator. The initial satisfaction that revenge can bring does not last. Instead of providing closure, it prevents the wound from healing.

Stroman not only wanted revenge against the September 11 terrorists but against anyone who was an Arab or Muslim. It did not matter whether they wished harm – or perpetrated harm – on the United States. He was a committed white supremacist, and according to the Texas Attorney General, he lacked remorse for any of the crimes he had committed, claiming that he had performed his patriotic duty.

So how could Rais Bhuiyan, a Bangladeshi Muslim immigrant who had been shot in the face by Stroman, which partially blinded him and resulted in numerous painful surgeries for years after the attack, forgive him? He explains:

I was raised very well by my parents and teachers. They raised me with good morals and strong faith. They taught me to put yourself in others' shoes. Even if they hurt you, don't take revenge. Forgive them. Move on. It will bring something good to you and them.  
([Article link](#))

There is an important difference between not taking revenge against a person who harms us and forgiving that person if he or she is unrepentant. Jewish tradition maintains that if a person

who harms us takes responsibility for his or her actions, sincerely apologizes, makes restitution, and pledges never to repeat the offense, then we are obligated to forgive. However, when a person has not repented, we are not required to forgive. We might ask, "How can we forgive someone who does not take responsibility for the harm that his or her actions have caused?"

This does not seem to be an issue for Bhuiyan, and he sincerely – or perhaps naively – sees the best in Stroman: "I believe he was ignorant," he writes, "and not capable of distinguishing between right and wrong, otherwise he wouldn't have done what he did."

Stroman may have been able to distinguish between right and wrong and he could still have chosen to shoot three men he thought were Arabs. We do things even though we know they are wrong. Sometimes we are not ignorant, we are hateful. To forgive someone who does not take responsibility for his or her actions can feel, perhaps to some of us, like a denigration of justice, cheapening the very nature of forgiveness.

Yet we have something important to learn from Bhuiyan. Even though some of us may believe it is problematic to forgive when the offender has not repented, Bhuiyan's forgiveness and work to fight Stroman's death sentence *caused* Stroman to repent. Israeli filmmaker Ilan Ziv, who is producing the Execution Chronicles, a documentary on Stroman, Bhuiyan, and the families of the victims, allows us a glimpse of Stroman's evolution. Stroman wrote the following in his blog, which is posted on the website of the Execution Chronicles:

Not only do I have all My friends and supporters trying to Save my Life, but now I have The Islamic Community Joining in...Spearheaded by one Very Remarkable man Named Rais Bhuiyan, Who is a Survivor of My Hate. His deep Islamic Beliefs Have gave him the strength to Forgive the Un-forgiveable...that is truly Inspiring to me, and should be an Example for us all. The Hate, has to stop, we are all in this world together.

Bhuiyan rejected revenge and instead chose love and compassion. The relationship that developed between Bhuiyan and Stroman is striking, though difficult to fully comprehend. When interviewed this past July about whether he would like to meet Stroman, Bhuiyan responded:

I requested a meeting with Mr. Stroman. I'm eagerly awaiting to see him in person and exchange ideas. I would talk about love and compassion. We all make mistakes. He's another human being, like me...I strongly believe he should get a second chance...Thinking about what is going to happen makes me very emotional. I can't sleep. Once I go to bed I feel there is another person that I know who is in his bed thinking about what is going to happen to him — that he is going to be tied to a bed and killed. It makes me very emotional and very sad and makes me want to do more.  
(<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/19/us/19questions.html?pagewanted=all>)

That meeting never happened. Mark Stroman was executed on July 20. Ziv was present for the execution and describes Bhuiyan's desperate last attempts to save Stroman's life. He writes:

Hundreds of Miles away Rais was struggling in various State and Federal courts in Austin to get Mark a stay of execution. He was using a novel legal tactic: suing the State of

Texas because it had violated his rights as a victim under the Texas law. The State refused Rais's request even to see Mark. The time was 4.35 and Rais legal suit was rejected by the District Court in Austin and by the Federal 5th circuit Court. It was now before the Supreme Court. Execution was scheduled to 6pm...

Around 4.40pm he called me on my cell phone to let me know that the Prison authorities will not let him speak to Mark. He was upset and did not understand why he could not talk to Mark in his last hours. Mark was at that very moment on a speakerphone with all of us. I put the cell phone on speaker and put it near the house phone, which was on a speaker too...

What follows is their conversation, transcribed by Ziv:

Mark: Rais ...how you are doing Rais?

Rais: Hey Mark how are you buddy?

Mark: How are you doing man? ...Hey man thank you for everything you have been trying to do for me ... you are inspiring. Thank you from my heart dude.

Rais: Mark you should know that I am praying for God the most compassionate and gracious... I forgive you and I do not hate you! I never hated you!

Mark: You are inspired Rais!

Rais: ...and this is from the bottom of my heart...

Mark: You are a remarkable person thank you from my heart! I love you bro! I love you with whole my heart... thank you for being such an awesome person...I mean it

Rais: You will always be there...

Mark: You touched my heart... I would have never expected this.

Rais: You touched mine too.

Mark: Hey Rais they are telling me to hang up now I will try to call in a minute.

He never did. Ten minutes later at 5pm his phone was cut and we moved to the administrative building to wait for the 6pm execution.

The execution ultimately took place at around 8.40 pm.

At 8.53 Mark Stroman was pronounced dead. This conversation was the first and the last one he had with Rais. ([www.executionchronicles.org](http://www.executionchronicles.org))

I feel differently about this story every time I read it. I applaud Bhuiyan's capacity to reconcile with Stroman. I am inspired by his fight against the death penalty. But sometimes I just don't relate to his sense of obligation to forgive Stroman. I do not understand how it is possible that he never hated him.

But mostly I wonder what this story means for us. Bhuiyan was shot on September 21, 2001, just after the September 11 attacks, and Stroman was executed on July 20, 2011, just before the ten-year anniversary. It beckons us to grapple, as a nation, with where we have been, where we are in the present, and where we are headed. When considering the terrorist attacks, the ensuing violence against Muslims or Arabs in the U.S., the War on Terror abroad, the jubilant reaction to the killing of Osama bin Laden, and the death penalty, we should ask ourselves what path we want to walk on, what kind of society we want to live in, what values we want to teach our children. We should ask ourselves what is an appropriate reaction when an injustice has been perpetrated against us, against our loved ones, or against anyone else.

Not only do we reflect on who we are as a nation but also on who we are as individuals. Most of us have never been confronted with a moral challenge as extreme as Bhuiyan's, of whether to forgive an unrepentant assailant. But we have dealt with our own desire for revenge and our own difficulty in forgiving others.

On this Yom Kippur we think about the moments in our lives when we really struggled with others who have hurt us. Do we forgive a spouse who cheated on us, a parent who mistreated us, a sibling who betrayed us? Do we forgive a co-worker who lied to us or a friend who manipulated us? Do we retaliate? Try to even the score? What do we do with our anger?

We remind ourselves that revenge is not the only option, for nations or for individuals. We can instead seek justice and deliberately avoid a cycle of violence. Our actions can be rooted in a sense of fairness and decency. Our objectives can be based on a commitment to accountability, healing, and closure.

Refraining from unleashing vengeance is not the same thing as forgiveness. It does not entail condoning wrongful behavior. It does not deny real feelings. It means looking for another way out and finding constructive approaches for channeling our anger or even hatred. It means letting go of the bitterness and resentment and refusing to let it consume us.

And what about forgiveness? There are situations when forgiveness is not appropriate, but they are exceptional. Forgiveness is usually the right thing to do. Forgiving another person necessitates relinquishing the emotional satisfaction that comes when we maintain our victimhood. It requires us to reign in our pride and to refuse to succumb to our stubbornness.

Even if we believe we are right, we can acknowledge that we played some part in the conflict and we can initiate the forgiveness process even if we have legitimate grievances. Instead of waiting for an apology that does not come, instead of allowing ourselves to become estranged from others, mired in contempt, stuck in the past, we can find another way.

We can choose wholeness over righteousness. We can forgive others not for their sake but for ours, because we need to move on, because we need to let the anger go.

There is great power in turning away from revenge, letting go of the bitterness, and embarking on the path of forgiveness for it can lead to profound transformation. May each of us in this new year find ways to walk this path and may we choose wholeness, compassion, and healing.

Gmar chatimah tovah, may you be inscribed for good.