Forgiveness: Don’t Let Me Die While I Am Still Alive
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Once at Bethlehem Baptist Church, where I feel so comfortable, I heard Pastor Quann get up and offer this prayer: “O Lord, please do not let me die before I am dead.” It is one of the shortest prayers I have ever heard, but I have to say, it stayed with me. How can we die before we are dead? Well, we see it all the time. Too many live on their phones. Too many are mired in depression and far too many are merely existing, with little purpose to life. But today, I believe that we die before our time because of regret and our inability to forgive ourselves for sins committed.

Let me tell you about two stories that shook me. One is a small story that took place this past summer in the small town of Alfred, Maine. The other is about Sally Fields who recently released her memoir.

To refresh your memory. A Vietnam War veteran, who volunteered on the local baseball field was run over by a woman who drove her car across the baseball diamond trying to run over as many children as she could. She came out onto first base and barely missed a few players. Video shows the car driving around the infield, turning over home plate and then heading toward the stands behind third base.

She drove around frantically trying to run over the children until she quit and headed for the gate closest to her where she found Douglas Parkhurst, of West Newfield. He was trying to close the gate to keep her in the park, but she ran him over and broke through the fence. Parkhurst, according to the coach was the grandfather of one of the players. He died on the way to the hospital.

As it turns out, Parkhurst confessed five years ago to killing a 4-year-old girl in a 1968 hit-and-run. Parkhurst was never linked to the car accident that killed Carolee
Ashby on Halloween night in 1968. The statute of limitations had long run out when Parkhurst walked into a police station in 2013 and confessed after two interviews with investigators. Parkhurst had carried the guilt for 45 years and just couldn't bear the burden any longer. After his confession, Parkhurst wrote that he needed to find forgiveness for his crime that happened when he was driving drunk, after coming back from the war.

With Parkhurst's death on the baseball field, Ashby's sister, Darlene Ashby McCann expressed relief to the press, "Now I am relieved that he's dead. I truly am. The same thing that happened to my sister happened to him. It has made a complete circle. Now it is time to move on."

This story struck me because it is an example of one man seeking forgiveness for the unforgiveable and another story of one who refused to grant it to one who needed to find it. We so often, get caught up in a cycle of hate, revenge and self-loathing. It destroys our homes, robs us of intimacy with our closest family and deprives us of joy.

True, Parkhurst lived his life, but he always carried that burden with him wherever he went. And in the end, his own death won him the release that he yearned for. Yet, both the victim and perpetrator died before their death. One could not put down grief and anger and the other could not find acceptance and forgiveness. It is indeed a tragic Shakespearean story on so many levels.

Sally Fields in her recent memoir, "In Pieces" tells us about the abuse that she suffered as a young child at the hands of her step-father. She remarks that her shame is so complicated and that she had difficulty being intimate with others and understanding her own sexuality. She boldly reveals that her sexuality was always connected to a sense of danger, shame and loss.... The loss of self.” She also writes about her self-doubt. Now her well-worn statement at the Academy Awards, “You really like me,” that so many of us made fun of, makes sense. Because of her shame and guilt, she never truly felt worthy of being loved.
Sally Fields makes us all think about the difference between guilt and shame. She did not feel guilt for her abuse but shame. And that tarnished her sense of self for all of her 71 years.

Do we know the difference between guilt and shame? When we sin, when we make a moral mistake, we feel guilty, which is a good thing, in as much as it motivates us to change. Shame, on the other hand, is when we become our mistakes – not, “I did a bad thing” but rather, “I am bad” – and feel sullied and permanently marred by what we have done. Shame is a much more destructive emotion than guilt. And it can lead to the death of the spirit, which cycles back on itself, often leading to more sin and immorality. Pirke Avot teaches, “Aveira gorerreret Aveira,” “One sin not atoned for can lead to a life of sin.”

So what do we do with all this pain?

I learned recently from a colleague, Rabbi David Blumenthal of Emory University that our prayer service of atonement has the key to finding forgiveness after abuse and pain. He teaches that each phrase,

\[ \text{Selach Lanu - Forgive Us} \]
\[ \text{Mechal Lanu: Pardon Us} \]
\[ \text{Chapear Lanu: Grant us Atonement} \]

means something different. His wisdom so touched me that I need to share it with you today.

The first level is “Selichah” – which literally means to pardon and forgive the debt. Selichah is the base line of forgiveness. When an offense is committed and the offender is truly sorry, the offended person can agree that the debt is paid and nothing more needs to be said. But there is no rapprochement. Selichah is like a pardon granted to a criminal by the state. The crime remains; only the debt is forgiven. We all know this level, for its sometimes all we can get. A friend betrays us. We yearn to repair the broken friendship, but we just can’t say the words, “I’m sorry.” So we silently agree to put the hate away and just move on. There are no hugs, there are no “I love yous, there are no I’m sorrys.” We just agree to move on and not obsess on our anger. Sally Fields did not forgive her stepfather, but she agreed to move on and not
let her self-loathing possess her. Her story made me think of Proverbs, “If we can turn away from loss, then our personal kindness and honesty will bring us forgiveness.” (Proverbs 16:6)

The second deeper level of forgiveness is “Mechilah” and is an act of the heart, in which we empathize with the offender. We come to terms with the truth that the offender is human and can be deserving of sympathy. This lies somewhere in between mercy and the religious act of grace. This level of forgiveness is reflected in Proverbs, “Align yourself with Godliness and even your enemies will make peace with you.” (Proverbs 16:7)

At this level, we are still not hugging, but at least we empathize with the person who hurt us. We come to terms that the offender is human too and may be limited by his or her circumstances and personality, and is not capable of change or repairing the damage done. There may be mental illness, past histories of abuse, trauma that we may not even know about and we come to accept them and love them anyway.

The Third level of forgiveness is “Kapparah” which means atonement or purification. This is a total wiping away of all sinfulness. It is the ultimate form of forgiveness and our tradition teaches that it is only granted by God. No human can “atone” the sin of another or “purify” the spiritual taint of another. For those of us who have done terrible things, it is only forgiveness from God that is possible. The Bible says, “Hide your wrongdoings and you will be exposed; repent your mistakes and you will be forgiven.” (Proverbs 28:13)  Another Biblical verse is instructive for us tonight:

Those who forgive insults - keep their friends;
Those who harp on faults - are lonely. (Proverbs 17:9)

How about this one from Proverbs 27:3? “A stone is heavy and sand is weighty, but anger that remains without forgiveness - is heavier than them both.” Isn’t that a wonderful sentiment?  Sally Fields, the Ashbys and Douglass Parkhurst slavishly carried around their overwhelming weights and in two of the three cases, it destroyed them, even as they were alive.
Do you know that I have given sermons on almost every topic imaginable, but I have never sermonized on forgiveness. Maybe because it’s so common a Yom Kippur sermon topic, or maybe because it is so hard to confront. Sally Fields struggled it with it her entire life and it took her years to discuss openly.

Let today be our wake-up call. May it be my personal wake up call. Let us today reflect on our actions and ourselves. As we yearn for Kapparah, atonement with God, we may at least be able to find Mechilah or Selichah. Let us agree that we need to move on and put down the self-loathing and hatred.

So, where are we in the process of forgiveness?

- Have we been able to grant forgiveness to ourselves? To others?
- Or are we stuck?
- If we can’t forgive, how do we stop the pain?
- How do we rebuild our lives?
- Where have we caused pain?
- Where can we right a wrong?
- In what ways can we change?

Forgiveness has been called the ‘life force that yearns to break through the darkness.’ It is a spiritual state that prevents us from dying before we are dead.

There is a wonderful story by Ernest Hemingway. I shared it with you many years ago, but I love it so much, I need to tell it again. The story is of a Spanish father who wants to reconcile with his son who has run away to Madrid.

In order to locate the boy, the father takes out an ad in the El Liberal newspaper:

"Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday.
All is forgiven. Love, Papa."

Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father goes to the hotel square he finds 800 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers.

What drew them to the hotel? As Hemingway tells it, it was the words "All is forgiven." Notice that the father did not say, "All WILL BE forgiven IF you do this or that." Or, "All WILL BE forgiven WHEN you do such and such."
He simply says, “All is forgiven.” **No strings attached.**

Not forgiving has been compared to drinking poison in the hope that another person will die! I firmly believe that Bitterness imprisons life; forgiveness releases it. Bitterness paralyzes life; forgiveness empowers it. Bitterness sours life; forgiveness sweetens it. Bitterness sickens life; forgiveness heals it. Bitterness blinds life; forgiveness allows us to see and love.

My message is a simple and difficult one. Goodness can triumph over evil. Forgiveness can vanquish death. Love can win over hate.

Let us forgive each other and ourselves, not because we believe that what was done was unimportant, but because we are prepared to put aside our anger long enough to hear words which reflect remorse, long enough to believe that people have the potential to grow, long enough because we want to move on with our lives.

Where Kapparah is not possible, let there be Mechilah, empathy to accept the person with their weaknesses and a desire to re-engage. Where Mechilah is not possible, let there be Slichah, a pardoning of the debt. A willingness to put down the rage and move on.

During the last 10 days, we asked family members and friends to forgive us. If we have not yet done so, here are some words to use:

“If I have harmed you in any way, either knowingly or unknowingly, I ask forgiveness. If anyone has harmed me in any way either knowingly or unknowingly through their own confusions, I forgive them. And if there is a situation I am not yet ready to forgive, I forgive myself for that.”

“For all the ways that I harm myself, negate, doubt, judge or be unkind, I forgive myself.”

So, let’s take a moment now; and, if you’re comfortable with this, I’d like you to close your eyes and picture a loved one in your mind’s eye and simply say to them, “May you have a sweet New Year. Let us clear the slate” If they’re sitting next to you, hold their hand and say it. Feels good doesn’t it. Now, imagine approaching someone you’re struggling with. Imagine starting the New Year with a heart ready to love even
those with whom you struggle. And if you cannot go there, may you do what Sally Fields courageously did. Confront the pain and then move on with self-acceptance.

Forgiveness is one of the antidotes for dying while we are still alive. Dear God, please don’t let me die, while I’m still alive. Let me live fully, love deeply and find forgiveness in the New Year.