

On Forgiveness – Yom Kippur 5781

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*Selah lanu avinu ki hatanu*, Forgive us, our loving parent, for we have sinned.  
Pardon us, our Sovereign, for we have transgressed – for You, Adonai, are  
kind and forgiving; You act generously to all who call you.

Rabbi Yohanan was a very beautiful man. “One who wishes to see something resembling the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan,” says the Talmud, “should bring a new, shiny silver goblet from the smithy and fill it with red pomegranate seeds, and place a crown of red roses upon the lip of the goblet, and position it between the sunlight and shade. That luster would be but a semblance of Rabbi Yohanan’s beauty.” There’s some imagery you wouldn’t expect from the Talmud.

One day, Rabbi Yohanan was bathing in the Jordan when he was spotted by a famous bandit named Resh Lakish. Attracted by this beautiful figure, Resh Lakish jumped into the river. Rabbi Yohanan took one look at this bandit and remarked: “Your strength is fit for Torah study.” Resh Lakish looked at the Torah scholar and responded, “Your beauty is fit for women.” And then they made a deal. Rabbi Yohanan told Resh Lakish that if he would change his ways, if he would agree to study Torah, Rabbi Yohanan would introduce him to his sister, “who is more beautiful than I am.” Resh Lakish accepted the offer, and the Talmud describes how he immersed himself in his studies and became one of the outstanding Torah scholars of his generation.

But that’s not the end of the story. This is not a sermon about how a lying cheat can change his ways and earn renown in upstanding society. That might sound political. This is a sermon about forgiveness.

One day, Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish were engaged in a debate about the susceptibility of certain knives and sickles and daggers to impurity. And it got personal. Rabbi Yohanan blurted out to Resh Lakish in a mocking tone, “Maybe you *are* right; after all, a bandit knows his trade!” Resh Lakish was embarrassed by his teacher and retorted, “What good have you done for me by bringing me close to Torah? When I was a marauder, the other bandits called me Leader of the Bandits; and now that I have become a Torah scholar, you still call me Leader of the Bandits?”

Rabbi Yohanan was offended. Resh Lakish was distressed and he fell ill. Rabbi Yohanan’s sister, the one who married Resh Lakish, went to Rabbi Yohanan and begged him. “Can you please pray for Resh Lakish? Can you forgive him for his insolent comment ... for the sake of my children? Can you repair the relationship, that I might not become a widow?” But Rabbi Yohanan refused. Ultimately, Resh Lakish succumbed to his illness and died.

The episode haunted Rabbi Yohanan for the rest of his life. He never found another study partner of Resh Lakish's stature. All his other partners just wanted to agree with him all the time; they were afraid to engage in debate. Rabbi Yohanan became depressed until eventually he died.

It's a sad story; and, unfortunately, a little too familiar to many of us. Friends have a dispute. One offends the other. They are stubborn. And we are left asking: when, and under what circumstances, is it appropriate to forgive?

Fast forward 2000 years to June 2015. Days after Dylan Roof shot and killed nine people in cold blood during Bible Study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, members of the victims' families confronted the murderer in court. One by one, these individuals whose lives had been upended by this monster rose to offer forgiveness. As but one example, Nadine Collier, who lost her 70-year-old mother, Ethel Lance, said "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."

Now, this murderer did not repent. Months later, he would write "I do not regret what I did. I am not sorry. I have not shed a tear for the innocent people I killed." So how could this group forgive a person who took everything precious, while a great rabbi could not bring himself to forgive a sarcastic, insolent comment? Is it a difference between Christianity and Judaism, or, perhaps, a different understanding of what forgiveness means and who deserves it?

In his book on forgiveness, Solomon Schimmel tells the story of a rabbi who attended a forum for the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A white police officer described how he had ordered two houses in a black township be set on fire, killing twelve people. South African amnesty rules freed the officer from any legal obligation for restitution or punishment. The man described how he regretted his actions, and the assembled crowd responded with a standing ovation. But not this rabbi. He stood up and shouted, "I'm sorry, but this is ridiculous. You can't sadistically murder twelve innocent people by burning them alive and just say 'I'm sorry.'" And a Christian participant attacked the rabbi: "That's because you Jews don't know how to forgive," she said.

Is that true? The Day of Atonement is a good time to ask. What does it mean to forgive? What steps are required to earn forgiveness? We believe that God forgives, but when is a person obligated to forgive? What if we can't do it?

The Holocaust survivor Simon Wiesenthal was haunted by these questions for most of his life. In his book, *The Sunflower*, Wiesenthal describes how he was working as a slave laborer when he was asked to speak with a twenty-something year-old Nazi on his deathbed. The dying man told Wiesenthal how, as a commander in a forest, he had loaded truckloads of Jews into a small house and, together with his men, had set the building on fire. Now he was looking for a Jew. He wanted to apologize. The victims were all gone, but maybe Simon Wiesenthal, a token Jew, could grant forgiveness. Wiesenthal responded with silence.

And the episode continued to haunt him. Every one of Wiesenthal's fellow inmates agreed he had done the right thing. Such heinous acts do not deserve forgiveness. And, to quote one peer, "You would have had no right to do this in the name of people who had not authorized you to do so. What

people have done to you yourself, you can, if you like, forgive and forget. ... But it would have been a terrible sin to burden your conscience with other people's sufferings."

Still, the doubts lingered. Years later, a man studying for the Catholic priesthood suggested that maybe Wiesenthal should have offered forgiveness after all. "Here was a dying man and you failed to grant his last request." But Wiesenthal held his ground. "There are requests that one simply cannot grant." He concludes his monograph by asking, "You, who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life, ... change places with me and ask yourself ... 'What would I have done?'"

We can meditate on the question. It is pretty hard for me to imagine forgiving a Nazi. But is every one of our grievances the same as our people's claims against the Nazis?

Dr. Rachel Naomi Reman tells the story of a rabbi preaching about forgiveness on Yom Kippur. He took his infant daughter from his wife and carried her in his arms as he approached the *bima*. And sure enough, as he began to deliver the sermon, the adorable little girl began patting her father on the cheek. At one point, she reached forward and grabbed his nose; and the rabbi gently freed himself and continued with his sermon. When the little girl took his tie and put it in her mouth, the entire congregation chuckled; the rabbi rescued his tie, smiled, and continued to talk. When she grabbed his glasses, the congregants laughed again and the rabbi stopped.

"Think about it," he said. "Is there anything she can do that you could not forgive her for?" The congregation nodded in agreement and the rabbi continued. "And when does that stop? When does it get hard to forgive? At three? At seven? At fourteen? At thirty-five? How old does someone have to be before you forget that everyone is a child of God?" Perhaps *that* rabbi could have taught stubborn Rabbi Yohanan a thing or two.

In his Laws of Repentance, Maimonides counsels that we should not be too stubborn when the opportunity to forgive presents itself. "אסור לאדם להיות אכזרי, A person may not be cruel and not accept an apology. One should imitate God as "נוח לרצות וקשה לכעוס", easily appeased and slow to anger," eager to forgive and reconcile.

When a person refuses to forgive, Maimonides suggests that the one seeking forgiveness should ask a second and third time; but after that, he should stop. The sin transfers from the one who committed the act to the one who refuses to accept the apology.

But still, that doesn't mean that forgiveness is automatic. Forgiveness comes after sincere repentance, not before. There is a story of the rabbi of Brisk, that he was travelling home on a train, dressed unassumingly because he didn't want to get into a deep rabbinic conversation with another passenger; he just wanted to go home. Anyway, there was a group of unruly Jews playing cards in his car, and they wanted the unassuming rabbi join their game. When he refused, one of the card players got physical and forced the rabbi from the car.

When the train arrived at Brisk, the fellow who had assaulted the rabbi was surprised to see throngs of people waiting on the platform to greet him. The man realized what he had done – this

passenger was not just anybody. And so the offender quickly ran over to seek forgiveness. But the rabbi of Brisk refused. The man tried again and again, and he was repeatedly rebuffed.

At one point, the rebbe's son asked his father why he was being so stubborn about accepting this man's apology. And the rebbe explained, "This man did not offend me, the Rabbi of Brisk. He offended the simple Jew he took me to be. If he wants forgiveness, let him seek it from that simple man." Forgiveness is a complicated enterprise. An embarrassed "I'm sorry" is not enough.

Maimonides asserts that repentance is a multi-step process. It begins with identifying and abandoning sinful practices and resolving in one's heart not to continue acting in the same way. Next comes regret, and then restitution and a direct appeal for pardon from the victim. "The rituals and fasting of Yom Kippur bring atonement for transgressions between human beings and God. But for transgressions between one human being and another Yom Kippur brings no atonement until the injured party is reconciled."

To be considered complete, *teshuvah* requires that the next time a person has the opportunity to commit the same sinful transgression, the person acts differently. It is not so simple.

And what happens when it isn't possible – as was the case with the Nazi who appealed to Simon Wiesenthal? What if the victim is not able to ascertain the sincerity of the apology? Or if there is a disagreement as to who is the offending party and whether an apology is even appropriate? If there aren't two sides to *every* story, there certainly are two sides to many. Are there times when we should overcome our misgivings and just forgive?

In response to Wiesenthal's challenge, Rabbi Harold Kushner makes a distinction between "forgiveness," which is a miracle that can come only from God; and "forgiving," which is ultimately an exercise in self-cleansing. The dying Nazi sought forgiveness from a person who did not have the capacity or the right to grant it. The Nazi could not perform *complete* repentance. God could judge his sincerity and perhaps grant *forgiveness*, but not another person.

"But," Kushner asks, "what does it mean to *forgive*?" He gives the example of a single mother, divorced and struggling to support herself and her three children. Every day is difficult, and the woman is filled with anger and resentment. She goes to her rabbi for advice, and the rabbi suggests that she forgive her ex-husband. When pressed, the rabbi explains, "I'm not asking you to forgive because what he did was acceptable." I'm not asking you to grant forgiveness. "I'm asking you to forgive because he doesn't deserve the power to live in your head and turn you into a bitter, angry woman." To forgive. That's not something we do for another person. Forgiving happens inside us.

And maybe that is a distinction we need to make. Perhaps we can imagine a situation where it might be beneficial to forgive another person even if we do not know that *forgiveness* is warranted, even if we are concerned that complete repentance did not take place. Maybe there is a relationship in need of repair, and both parties are waiting on the other; neither is ready to grant forgiveness, but maybe they want to forgive.

In a few moments we will recite Yizkor, in part (say our legal codes) because even the deceased merit atonement on Yom Kippur. Many of the people we remember today were revered. We are grateful for the gifts of their lives and we strive to follow their examples and heed the lessons they imparted to us. But some memories are more confused. Our Mahzor includes a prayer for a parent who was hurtful. How do we remember individuals who did wrong? How do we manage the weight of the hurt when it seems impossible to forgive?

This particular prayer calls on God to liberate us “from the oppression of hurt and anger.” That’s not the same as forgiveness. Liberation is about me and my desire to move on. Only God grants forgiveness, but I determine what and how to remember. I have the ability to reshape the relationship for myself, while leaving the complicated parts of atonement for God to sort out.

The Torah tells us that forgiveness is difficult even for God. When the people of Israel constructed a Golden Calf in the wilderness, God was ready to destroy them all. It was only Moses’s courageous appeal that averted the divine decree. Moses’s entreaty was followed by an elongated process of *teshuvah*, culminating with Moses receiving a second set of tablets, the ultimate sign of forgiveness and reconciliation, on Yom Kippur. And here we are again.

As we appeal to God’s mercy and pray for forgiveness, we also contemplate the human relationships in need of repair. And we can ask ourselves: Do we have within us that divine capacity to forgive? Are there messy slates that we want to try to wipe clean? Is there one person, one relationship, one broken heart that might be worth the effort to mend? Is this the year when we might imitate God, or come closer to being able to say to someone we love: סלחתי כדברך, I forgive you as you have asked?

*Gemar Hatimah Tovah*, may all our fates be sealed for good in the Book of Life. Amen.