

Right to Forgive
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*“Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past”
–George Orwell*

Allow me to ask you a question: Have you noticed something strange happening on the internet recently? (No, not that...)

I'm thinking about the odd trend of “Dog-Shaming” whereby dog owners post pictures of their cute pets holding up signs that read “I lick the water off the clean plates” or “I killed the mean sofa for you. You're welcome.” Many of these posts garner thousands of ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ because there is something endearing about a guilty-looking puppy sitting amidst the wreckage and ruin they caused. What's more, it is unlikely to cause long-term reputational harm to the pet in question, so we might feel less guilty indulging in a laugh at their expense. Besides, who can really tell one Rex apart from another online. It is doubtful that someone will be searching the web for your dog by his name.

The situation is quite different when it comes to people. Online shaming and cyberbullying campaigns have become a reprehensible byproduct of the anonymity afforded by the dark corners of the web. Their malicious intent and mean spirit have had terrible repercussions on people's lives, and particularly, on younger people whose social life is lived more through the medium of the online world than in real-life. It's become so pervasive that schools have to educate kids as early as fifth grade about how to handle themselves online, and even the Disney Channel has joined the effort to equip children with the tools to navigate this ever-changing digital landscape.

Indeed, the Disney Channel has partnered with a consumer advocacy organization called Common Sense Media to produce Public Service Announcements about cyberbullying and safe use of digital media among other things. This multifaceted effort to educate our kids about the risks of online culture and behavior has become a growing necessity because of the frequent revelations of privacy violations that occur when information about us is hacked from online databases, but also because of the long-term implications of things they post in the public domain that may impact them down the road.

As a Common Sense Media parenting blog aptly warns, “sharing fun stuff from your life with friends is fine. But oversharing is never a good idea. When kids post inappropriate material—whether it's a sexy selfie, an explicit photo session with a friend, an overly revealing rant, or cruel

comments about others—the results can be humiliating if those posts become public or shared widely... To protect yourself, talk to your kids about keeping private things private, considering how far information can travel and how long it can last, and how they can talk to their friends about respecting one another's personal privacy.”¹

This is a hard lesson that we are learning as adults, and as a society as well. In fact, this challenge is hardly limited to the realm of social media rants and indiscreet photos. In the course of everyday life our names and identities are tied to myriad points of data that are largely out of our control. The internet has evolved from the information superhighway, to the repository of all human knowledge and information, all at our fingertips. Nothing is forgotten.

I was particularly struck by the magnitude of the challenges we face in this regard when I was listening to one of my favorite podcasts, called RadioLab. This summer they featured a story called “Right to be Forgotten,” about the pioneering work of the editorial board at the Cleveland Plain Dealer newspaper online called Cleveland.com. The paper’s editor had seen a surge in requests from people who wanted the newspaper to remove the information about them from the website.

Chris Quinn, editor, and president of Cleveland.com explained his thought process and announced a new policy the company would employ in an article last summer. He explained: “...consider the drunken teenager who breaks a monument in a cemetery or the errant driver who hits the gas instead of the brakes and drives through a storefront. These are mildly interesting bits of news because they happened, not because of who was involved. But if the names are included and the stories stay on cleveland.com for years or decades, the embarrassment never ends for those involved.”

He continued, saying, “In the old days, stories such as those appeared in print and were promptly forgotten. You could find them only by sifting through microfilm at your library. Today, through the Internet, the stories are at your fingertips, anytime, anywhere. Because our platform at cleveland.com is so huge, our stories often are the first to appear in Google searches. Thus, our stories about mistakes made long ago become the first thing people see when they search on people's names, causing them no end of distress.”

Quinn concluded his article, saying: “So, here's our plan: We will stop naming most people accused of most minor crimes. And we will consider requests for removal of names from dated stories about minor crimes from people who have had their records expunged. This is an

¹ <https://www.common sense media.org/blog/real-world-reasons-parents-should-care-about-kids-and-online-privacy>

experiment for us. We don't know what to expect or how it might affect our resources. We might have to adjust the process based on experience.”²

In the podcast I was listening to, a reporter visited the special group known as the “right to be forgotten” team, consisting of journalists and editors, which meets once a month to discuss these cases. They deliberate over each submitted request, reviewing the original articles, and deciding whether the individual indeed merited the right to be forgotten, and whether that could be achieved simply by removing their name from the article, or whether the entire original piece should be deleted from the online archive.

I found the story of this “right to be forgotten” team in Cleveland incredibly compelling. Not only because I went to school in Cleveland, but because I recognized how remarkable it was to have a group of journalists who were willing to challenge their own assumptions and experience in order to tackle the messy implications of the internet-age; the sheer audacity and grandeur of spirit required to sit in a room and decide that not every single thing that was ever published should remain online in perpetuity.

Incidentally, it turns out that I was not the only rabbi who listened to this podcast over the summer and was instantly inspired to write a High Holy Day sermon about it. Imagine my surprise and delight on Rosh HaShanah morning, to read a beautiful sermon delivered in New York the night before, which basically plagiarized the sermon that I had not yet typed up for this Yom Kippur! In the spirit of this holy day, I’ve decided to forgive Rabbi Joel Mosbacher for his indiscretion, if only because I found his own response to this story so very inspiring.

When I first heard the podcast, my mind immediately went to the broader societal questions inherent within it, but for Rabbi Mosbacher it struck a very personal note, as he explained in the opening words of his own sermon, where he asked, “In this, the season of forgiveness, should I forgive the person who murdered my father?”³

I recommend that you read his own writing to see how his deliberation unfolds, but for the moment, suffice to say that his searing personal reaction demonstrates the broader issue that I wanted us all to have the opportunity to explore.

What is at stake is not just the right to be forgotten, but the opportunity and the right to forgive and be forgiven. Although the work of the team in Cleveland is inspiring, it is also fleetingly rare in the digital landscape, as one of the individuals interviewed for the story candidly explained

² https://www.cleveland.com/opinion/2018/07/right_to_be_forgotten_cleveland.html

³ <https://shaaraytefilanyc.org/article/rabbi-joel-mosbacher-rosh-hashanah-5780/>

after his request for a sordid infraction “to-be-forgotten” was granted. He said, “[Cleveland.com] was not the only outlet that this stuff appeared in. So I still have a Google problem. But again, like the records [of my case] being sealed [in court], like every little step and every day that passes, every bit of time, you leave a mistake in the past. And you’re one step closer to a new life, a second chance, something better. And this was a big milestone” he concluded.⁴

This story made me think of an old quote attributed to actress and comedian Lily Tomlin, who said, “to forgive is to give up all hope for a better past.” In fact, what I would like us to consider is the question I found to be implicit in this whole story—how do we practice forgiveness in a world that now rarely affords us the possibility to truly forget; in a world where our own indiscretions, or the stories of our pain are forever just one click away.

In his book, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*, Dr. Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, professor of internet governance and regulation at the University of Oxford's Internet Institute, writes: “Since the early days of humankind, we have tried to remember, to preserve our knowledge, to hold on to our memories and we have devised numerous devices and mechanisms to aid us. Yet through millennia, forgetting has remained just a bit easier and cheaper than remembering.”⁵

Indeed, the Torah goes out of its way to command us to remember things just a handful of times, and each in order to leave an indelible lesson in the mind of the Jewish people. The most poignant of these is a commandment from the Book of Deuteronomy that is read each year on the Shabbat before Purim, known as *Shabbat Zachor*, or the Shabbat of Remembering. In that portion we read this strict and puzzling commandment:

“זָכוֹר אֵת אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה לְךָ עַמְלֵק בְּדַרְךָ בְּצֵאתְךָ מִמִּצְרָיִם - Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear.”⁶

This text is striking not only because we are commanded to carry a grudge for eternity, but because the biblical author recognized that even the most heinous acts committed against our people might fade from our memory over time if we were not instructed to memorialize it.

Even if we are not prone to forgetfulness, we are often subject to the burnishing impact of time and retrospection, which can sometimes smooth away the rough edges of pain and injuries in our past.

What, then, should we do when our trauma is never allowed to fade from our immediate recollection? Dr. Fred Luskin, Director of the Stanford Forgiveness Projects writes that

⁴ <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/radiolab-right-be-forgotten>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/jun/30/remember-delete-forget-digital-age>.

⁶ Deuteronomy 25:17-18.

“[F]orgiveness is about healing.” He continues, “In every class I teach I have to make the distinction between justice, reconciliation, condoning, and forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean you condone the action. It doesn't mean you have to reconcile with or like the person who did it. You are perfectly able to say, ‘This was such a heinous act, I sever my relationship with them.’ And it doesn't mean you don't seek justice. These are separate acts from the inner healing that occurs.” Dr. Luskin ultimately argues that, “Forgiveness means that you don't take what happened as just personal, that you see it as a part of the bigger, ongoing human experience of hurt, resolution, conflict and negotiation.”⁷

Similarly, Dr. Everett L. Worthington Jr., a professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University and the author of *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Theory and Applications*, divides forgiveness into two types: **Decisional forgiveness**, which involves choosing to let go of angry thoughts about the person you feel has wronged you; and **emotional forgiveness**, in which negative emotions such as resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, anger, and fear, are replaced with love, compassion, sympathy, and empathy.⁸

In both of these approaches we can see that forgiveness requires making a decision and acting on it over time. Forgiveness does not erase the memory but allows us to begin to step past it and incorporate it into our lives in a different way.

Inspired by our Yom Kippur liturgy, I would like to suggest another possible model for us to consider. Earlier in our service, in the section of *Vidui* or confession, we enumerated our sins and personal failings, and concluded with these words of entreaty to God:

!ַפְּרָ לָנוּ! – וְעַל כּוֹלֵם אֱלֹהֵי סְלִיחוֹת. סְלַח לָנוּ. מְחַל לָנוּ. כְּפָר לָנוּ!
God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, lead us to atonement!

S'lach lanu, m'chat lanu, kaper lanu—These are not merely synonyms for forgiveness, but important categories and mechanisms from our tradition. As Rabbi David Blumenthal, an author and professor of Judaic studies at Emory University explains, “Sin disrupts our lives on the human level; it distorts our relationships with other persons, social institutions, and our selves. Sin also disrupts our spiritual lives; it distorts our relationship with God and our deepest inner spiritual being. Because sin alienates us from humanity and from God, there is more than one kind of forgiveness.”

Rabbi Blumenthal goes on to explain the three Jewish categories of forgiveness: The most basic kind of is *m'chilah*, "forgoing the other's indebtedness". If the offender has done *t'shuvah*, and is sincere in his or her repentance, the offended person should offer *m'chilah*; that is, the offended person should forgo the debt of the offender, relinquish his or her claim against the offender. This is not a reconciliation of heart or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender no longer owes me anything for whatever it was that he or she did. *M'chilah* is like a pardon granted to a criminal by the modern state. The crime remains; only the debt is forgiven.

⁷ <https://www.pbs.org/kqed/onenight/stories/forgive/index.html>

⁸ <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/features/forgive-forget#1>

The second kind of forgiveness is *s'lichah*. It is an act of the heart. It is reaching a deeper understanding of the person who hurt us. It is achieving an empathy for the troubledness of the other. *S'lichah*, too, is not a reconciliation or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender, too, is human, frail, and deserving of sympathy.

The third kind of forgiveness is "atonement" (*kapparah*). This is a total wiping away of all sinfulness. It is an existential cleansing. *Kapparah* is the ultimate form of forgiveness, but it is only granted by God.⁹

We are living in a time that increasingly deprives us of the ability to forget and move past our worst moments, whether we were victims or committed them ourselves. As the world comes to grapple with the thorny implications of this ever-present external memory and record of our lives, I pray that we hold up not only the right to-be-forgotten, but the right to-be-forgiven.

Perhaps also, we will be mindful of the restorative obligation inherent in our tradition, which commands us to take note and welcome the *t'shuvah* or true repentance of those who harmed us. Not in order to erase their sins from memory, but in order to forgive and heal, each in our own way.

The world continues to change, but the prayer in our heart remains the same:

וְעַל כּוֹלֵם אֱלֹהֵי סְלִיחוֹת. סְלַח לָנוּ. מְחַל לָנוּ. כִּפֵּר לָנוּ! – For all these failures of judgment and will, God of forgiveness, forgive us and inspire us to forgive. Pardon us and allow us to pardon. Lead us to atonement, wholeness, and peace.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah – May we be inscribed in the Book of Life and Goodness.

Shanah Tovah!

⁹ Rabbi David Blumenthal, *Cross Currents*,
http://www.crosscurrents.org/blumenthal.htm?fbclid=IwAR0KcWicwtVrOp1sZVQzmvLYEFJKEQm4ZdWhIHamy4cJTr_mrkfXaYvdGHE