

Forgiveness
Parashat Ki Tissa
February 23, 2019
Rabbi Leslie Gordon
Temple Aliyah, Needham

I want to speak today about forgiveness. The first thing I want to say is that forgiveness is hard. Forgiveness feels especially in short supply in our current political climate. Gerard Baker of the Wall Street Journal writes, “It seems to have been decreed that high public office is now out if you’ve done anything to be ashamed of since the age of about 15....Today’s climate has little room for frailty, penance and forgiveness.”

Forgiveness is hard. It may be discomfoting to realize that there is no forgiveness in today’s parsha. After the debacle of the golden calf, punishment is swift and painfully harsh. Moshe is hopeful that he will win a pardon for the people. He says to the Israelites, “ You have been guilty of a great sin. Yet I will now go up to the Lord; perhaps I may win forgiveness for your sin.” And in a passage that we discussed last week, “Moses went back to the Lord and said, ‘Alas, this people is guilty of a great sin in making for themselves a god of gold. Now if You will forgive their sin [well and good]; but if not, erase me from the record You have written!’”

We might expect Av HaRachaman, the Father of mercy to be merciful here, but instead we read, “the Lord said to Moses, ‘He who has sinned against Me, him only will I erase from My record. Go now, lead the people where I told you. See, My angel shall go before you. But when I make an accounting, I will bring them to account for their sins. Then the Lord sent a plague upon the people....”

Thousands die for their sin. Now it might seem obvious, but let’s first consider what exactly *is* the sin that God cannot or will not forgive? Well on the one hand they did build and worship that idol. The ten commandments have been revealed, and there can be no mistaking the second one: You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image or any likeness of what is in the heavens above or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall now bow down to them or serve them.”



And yet... That is not what God references as the reason for God's anger, "I see now that this is a stiff-necked people. Now let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them that I may destroy them..." {Lots we could say here. Lots to unpack, why does G. say, "Let Me be..." to give Moshe an opportunity to talk G. out of this rage. But for now... let's look at what God says is unforgivable.} Rabbi Shai Held expresses his surprise: "The Israelites are guilty of the ultimate theological transgression: they have engaged in the crudest form of idol worship. And yet God's desire to smite them is rooted in their stubbornness?" Held quotes Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel who asks, 'if someone did something truly awful, why would we discipline that person for a far smaller, seemingly insignificant offense? After the worst breach of the covenant imaginable how can G. want to punish the Israelites for something other than the sin itself? There is something deeply odd, he insists, about the Israelites committing idolatry and being condemned to death on account of their stiff-neckedness. From here we see that a defect in character is even worse than a defect in action....A transgression, Finkel explains, is at bottom just a mistake, and the reality of human free will is that one who sins today can choose to behave differently tomorrow. But a character flaw is far more insidious: It alters who we are at the deepest level...'"

To be sure, God is angry about that golden calf. But what is unforgivable, what triggers the lethal punishment, is the stubbornness that reveals the character flaw. *It's not just what the Israelites did. It's who they are.*

In our day it feels that line, between misdeed and character flaw is increasingly blurred, particularly in the political realm. We've been asking this lately about elected officials on the left and on the right. If a politician makes a statement derogatory to Jews, is he or she an anti-Semite? Does one racially insensitive remark mean someone is a racist? The danger is painting too broadly -- when every misdeed becomes an indictment of character rather than a mistake.

Further, the danger in determining character based on an isolated wrong act is that we take t'shuvah out of the equation. We do not allow for contrition, sincere apology and growth. The glory of humanity is the ability to learn from our mistakes and right the wrongs we have committed. When we determine character by a single act we negate that most glorious aspect of humanity.

There are plenty of politicians on both sides of the aisle who have said or done something to which I take exception. Most of them. If we vote only for politicians who have never offended us, who have not misspoken or demonstrated a lapse in judgment, who have never *gotten it wrong* -- who will we vote for?

There's an even greater danger, but before I mention that I feel I have to make clear a giant caveat. Giant. Some acts, even in isolation, are intolerable. Violence or cruelty may be unpardonable even if perpetrated only one time. A person who rapes one time is a rapist and is rightly judged as such. Additionally, a *pattern* of malicious or hateful speech, even if punctuated by hollow apologies, may indeed reflect more than a misstep but rather a character flaw.

To be sure, some lapses are hard to forgive; some acts of violence are unpardonable. But our sense of injustice in the political realm is often fired up by words and deeds that are not gross acts of violence or patterns of despicable behavior.

It's no great hiddush (new insight) to note that politics have become bitter, divisive, seemingly always right on the edge of breaking into a fight. But here's the thing. Here's the greater danger: Forgiveness is an exercise that requires a certain type of muscle. We have for too long not exercised that forgiveness muscle in the public domain. More troubling still, those forgiveness muscles that we have neglected in the political domain are the same muscles we need to forgive and heal in the private domain.

I have on occasion been inattentive to my husband's feelings. I count it to my great good fortune that he understands those incidents as the bone-headed lapses that they are, not an indictment of my ability to be a loving partner. They are acts he does not like but is able to forgive, not a character flaw that is unpardonable.

Forgiveness is hard. In today's parsha even God seems unable to forgive. And so, God has to come up with a plan. Because, it seems, once God has gotten to know us a little better; it becomes clear that the golden calf will not be our last sin and we will need forgiveness in the future.

According to the Midrash based on God passing before Moshe's face and calling out the divine name, (Talmud Bavli Rosh HaShanah 17b.) R. Yohanan said: Were this verse not written, it would be impossible to say.⁵ It teaches that God wrapped Himself [in a *tallit*] like a prayer leader and showed Moshe the order of prayer, a special siddur. God said to [Moshe]: Every time the people of Israel sin, they should enact this order (that is, pray according to this siddur) and I will forgive them. **HaShem HaShem**—I am the Lord from before a person sins, and I am the Lord after the person sins and repents. Kel rachum v'chanun ... Merciful and compassionate God. These are the 13 middot, God's attributes we recite on Yom

Kippur as we ask for forgiveness. And, every year it seems, God forgives us. Not because we are deserving; we might not be deserving. God forgives us because that is consistent with the way that God is. As the biblical scholar Dena Weiss writes, “We inspire God to be this merciful version of Himself; which He may have forgotten in His moment of rage. When we tell God that He is compassionate, it reminds Him that He is compassionate.”

What is our siddur of forgiveness? What will remind us to forgive, even when forgiveness is hard?

Well first we have to remember that an act or remark, even if hurtful or cruel is not an immutable character flaw. We have to distinguish between what a person *did*, and who that person *is*.

We have to remember that we are gifted with the ability to do t’shuvah, to learn from our mistakes and to right our wrongs. And finally we should allow our own self-interest to guide us toward forgiveness.

Rava teaches (Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashana 17a) “one who overcomes his natural tendency to hold a grudge and instead forgives – all his sins are forgiven.” One who forgives...all his sins are forgiven. This is not a Talmudic/karma mash-up and the rabbis were too sophisticated to believe that life unfolds in a simple quid pro quo formula.

Rabbi Deborah Orenstein explains: this teaching is based not so much on reward as it is on transformation. When you do what it takes to forgive another person’s trespasses against you, you change as a person. You become more empathic, more understanding of human flaws—in short, easier to forgive.

I think it’s even more than that. You transform the world. When you forgive, you create a world in which forgiving is not absurd. You create a reality of forgiving as a means of kindness to others as well as self-healing. And once forgiveness exists in the world; once forgiveness is not absurd, you, too, can be forgiven.