

**“Forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement”**

***Parashat Shelach Lecha***

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There’s a piyyut, a liturgical poem, in the Yom Kippur liturgy that I am sure is familiar to many of us. It is called the long confessional, or the “Al Het.” In it, we recite sin after sin after sin, and the prayer concludes with a refrain that goes like this: “For all these, O God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.” We usually chant it in Hebrew. Please join me if you know the melody: “*V’al kulam, eloha selichot, slach lanu, m’chal lanu, kaper lanu.*”

“Forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.”

Now, don’t worry. I haven’t lost my mind. I know that Yom Kippur is not for a few months. But I’ve been thinking a lot about Yom Kippur lately.

The reason has to do with twitter.

I don’t usually follow twitter, but a particular tweet caught my attention this week. It was a tweet by our President. As we know, he tweets a lot, about all sorts of things. This one was about pardoning. It went like this:

**“As has been stated by numerous legal scholars,  
I have the absolute right to PARDON myself ...”**

(See: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1003616210922147841>)

When I first heard about this tweet, I was perplexed. It seems absurd, right? How could you pardon yourself? But in fact, there are those who say that, *technically*, the President *could* pardon himself. This was an issue back in 1974, when some of President Nixon’s attorneys argued just that. (This was prior to Mr. Nixon’s



resignation on August 9th, 1974. Shortly thereafter, on September 8th, 1974, Mr. Nixon was pardoned by his successor, President Gerald Ford. See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pardon\\_of\\_Richard\\_Nixon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pardon_of_Richard_Nixon) .) And in the last few months, several contemporary legal scholars have said the same thing about the legality of a President pardoning him or herself. See, for example, <https://tinyurl.com/ydcntc5l> .)

Well, maybe so. But let's leave that question aside. Whether the President can or can't legally pardon himself, I wanted to look at this question from a **religious** perspective.

We Jews know -- or *should* know -- a lot about pardoning. After all, we have an entire day each year devoted to it. It's called Yom Kippur. So perhaps by looking at the notion of pardoning in a **religious** context, we can learn something that can help us understand it in our national **political** context.

As most of us know, on Yom Kippur, we repeatedly and continually ask God for forgiveness. But in fact, it isn't just on Yom Kippur that we focus on pardoning. *Each and every weekday, three times a day*, we ask God to pardon us. It's in the weekday Amidah that we say:

סְלַח לָנוּ אֱבִיבֵנוּ כִּי חָטְאֵנוּ. מְחַל לָנוּ מִלִּבְנוּ כִּי פָשַׁעְנוּ. כִּי מוֹחֵל וְנוֹסֵלֵחַ אַתָּה. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', חַנוּן הַמְרַבֵּה לְסִלַּח:

*Pardon us our Father for we have sinned, forgive us our King for we have transgressed, for You pardon and forgive. Praised are You, O Lord, Who is gracious and ever willing to pardon.*

In the Bible, the notion of pardoning comes up in situations where one person has committed a sin or a transgression of some kind, and another person (or God) forgives or pardons that person, mitigating or eliminating the punishment.

This comes up very early in the Bible, when Cain murders Abel. It seems as though Cain is going to pay for his crime with his life, but he beseeches God to pardon him. Bearing his sin or his punishment, he says, is too great. And so God

*pardons* him; that is, he reduces his punishment. Note that God *reduces* but he doesn't entirely remove Cain's punishment. Cain isn't put to death, as we would have expected. Instead Cain is condemned to be an eternal wanderer. So Cain doesn't have to pay for his offense immediately; instead, one could say that he pays for it over time.

The idea of a pardon comes up again in this week's *parashah*. The people of Israel complain and rebel against God and Moses and, in response, God announces God's intention to wipe them out. But Moses petitions God on the people's behalf, and God relents. He **pardons** them. That precise word is used in our *parashah*. Moses says:

סְלַח-נָא לְעֲוֹן הָעָם הַזֶּה כְּגִדְלֵי חַסְדֶּךָ וְכַאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁאַתָּה לְעַם הַזֶּה מִמִּצְרַיִם וְעַד-הַנּוֹה:

*“Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt.”*

And, lo and behold, God pardons them:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה סְלַחְתִּי כְדַבְּרְךָ:

*And the LORD said, “I pardon, just as you have asked.”*

Incidentally, these two verses are at the heart of our liturgy on Yom Kippur. On Kol Nidre night, we chant these lines three times right after the Kol Nidre. This is the passage that the rabbis would have us focus on when we're thinking about seeking atonement.

As we've seen, the people are pardoned, but note they don't get off scot-free. Like Cain, they need to pay a price, and that price is, like that of Cain, to live out their lives as wanderers in the wilderness, never meriting the privilege of entering the Promised Land.

There's yet another example of a pardon in this week's *parashah*, which has much to teach us. Toward the end of chapter 15 (verse 22), we're told that should the nation of Israel unwittingly fail to observe any of God's commandments, then the nation shall offer a burnt offering and a meal offering and a sin offering, and seek

expiation. And “the entire community” we’re told, “shall be pardoned, for it happened inadvertently.” (That verse, incidentally, is also repeated three times after Kol Nidre. We can understand why: it gives us hope that God could similarly pardon us all in the future.)

We can see from this example that even in the case of inadvertent, unintentional sins, one must *petition* for a pardon, and only then may it be granted.

So that’s the first thing required: A petition, or a plea for forgiveness.

As this is developed in the rabbinic tradition, we come to learn that in order to obtain a **pardon**, one must fully **confess**. That is, one must **acknowledge** what one has done wrong. One must express **contrition** -- that is, **regret** for one’s action. One must **apologize**. And one must vow never to commit the offense ever again.

Finally, one must behave in such a way as to demonstrate one’s sincerity.

Only after all that has taken place, does the possibility of a pardon arise. And that pardon cannot come from oneself. In the Biblical cases we’ve considered, one is standing before God, and only God can offer us a pardon. Another way to put this, technically, is to say that in Jewish law and tradition, one cannot be a witness for or against oneself. Only **impartial witnesses** are permitted to offer testimony, and a relative is always considered **partial**. (And there’s no relative closer than the self.) And only an impartial judge can sit in judgment. Therefore, one cannot possibly pardon oneself.

So, within the Jewish tradition, I think it’s fairly clear that the idea of pardoning oneself in the sense in which we’ve considered it is **nonsensical**. (As to whether such a step would be nonsensical in our national political context, I think we’ll have to wait and see. Some pretty nonsensical things have been happening lately; this might just be another.)

But there is one way, one particular way, in which the idea of pardoning oneself has arisen in Jewish literature, and I want to share that with you.

The great Jewish scholar, mystic and communal leader, Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel, focuses our attention not so much on the *legal* or *practical* implications of the notion of pardon, but on its psychological or spiritual implications. He once wrote as follows:

כתב מרן הרב קוק (מאורות הראיה, ירח האיתנים עמ' מח): "כשאדם שב בתשובה מאהבה, צריך הוא לסלוח לעצמו על כל עוונותיו כמו שצריך לפייס את חבריו על עבירות שבין אדם לחברו כדי להשיג סליחתו. ואחר שבעיני עצמו יהיה מכופר ונקי מחטא, יתעורר עליו הקודש של חלק גבוה שיתהפכו כל "עוונותיו לזכויות".

“When a person repents sincerely and wholeheartedly -- literally, ‘out of love [of God],’ that is, out of a desire to make things right, not out of any ulterior motives -- then, just like he must appease his fellow human beings on account of any interpersonal sins against them, in order to achieve and obtain their forgiveness, in the same way, he must also forgive or pardon himself.

“And afterwards, that is, after in his own eyes he is able to look upon himself as pure and free from sin, then the supernal forces shall be aroused, and his sins shall be accounted as merits.”

This is a beautiful prophecy. Note that Rav Kook invites us to forgive ourselves only after we have done the hard work of *teshuvah*, that is, only after we have **acknowledged** our misdeeds, **promised** to do better, **demonstrated** our commitment in various ways, and been pardoned by those whom we’ve wronged.

Let’s hope and pray that all of us will take the words of our liturgy to heart, and will do **wholehearted** teshuvah for all of our offenses -- that is, that we will seek and achieve atonement before God and before our fellow human beings. And let us hope that, having achieved that atonement, we will then -- and only then -- successfully pardon ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom.

Amen.