

RH Eve 5779 TO FORGIVE OR NOT TO FORGIVE Rabbi Suzanne Singer

Forgive You? Trisha Arlin

You say to me,
"If I have hurt you in any way this past year,
I apologize and hope that you can pardon me,
forgive me, let me atone for my sins against you."
If? If you have hurt me?
Of course you have hurt me!

Remember that time in the car, in the living room,
on the road, in the back yard, on the stoop?
In that email, on the phone, to my parents,
with my friends, next to my spouse, in front of my kids,
when we were alone?

Overtly, covertly, passive-aggressively, inadvertantly, officially, slowly,
abruptly, shockingly, repeatedly, mistakenly, knowingly?

Oh my God yes, you have hurt me!

"I know," you say, "I know.
Pardon me, forgive me, let me atone for my sins against you."
Forgive you? Should I forgive you?
when should I forgive you?
Immediately, before you even know what you did?
Now, as soon as you ask for forgiveness?
Eventually, but only after making you feel bad for years?
What about never?

How should I forgive you?
Miraculously, without you having to ask?
Simply, by just saying, apology accepted?
Grudgingly, and only after you've groveled
for a really long time?
Or what about, not at all?

Why should I forgive you?

Because you are really truly sorry and you will never do it again?

Because it cleanses us both and helps me move on?

Because it's Elul and the Rabbi says I have to?

Because nothing, screw this, you're evil and I hate you.

"Yes," you say, "you're right.

All true.

Pardon me, forgive me, let me atone for my sins against you."

Forgive you?

I imagine saying, No.

Forgive you?

I imagine saying, Maybe.

Forgive you?

I imagine saying, Yes.

Amen.

As you know, forgiveness is a key theme during the High Holidays. Some of you attended Selichot and heard my friend, psychiatrist Dr. Sylvia Fletcher, speak about her exploration of forgiveness -- how to apologize so that the person you are apologizing to is able to forgive you, and how important forgiveness is to our mental health. We know that forgiveness plays a key role in our life, especially at this time of year.

But what if we cannot forgive? Is it OK NOT to forgive?

Does that make us less of a person?

Does it make us a bad person?

Is there ever a justification for not forgiving?

The Torah portion we will be reading tomorrow might offer some insight. It is one of the most difficult, yet one of the most profound in our Bible. God commands Abraham to take his son, Isaac, and to sacrifice him on the altar. Abraham, all too anxious to prove his piety,

rushes to obey God. It is only at the very last minute, right as Abraham is about to plunge the knife into Isaac's chest, that an angel tells him to stop. Following this episode, we never see Abraham and Isaac together again.

This is the reading for the first day of Rosh Hashana in the Reform movement. In a traditional synagogue, it is the reading for the second day.

On the first day, traditional shuls read about Abraham's other son, Ishmael, whose mother is Sarah's maidservant, Hagar.

In this story, Sarah is displeased with Ishmael and orders Abraham to banish him and his mother. Abraham is as quick to obey Sarah as he is to obey God in the story of Isaac's near sacrifice.

He gets up early in the morning, takes Ishmael and Hagar out to the desert, and leaves them there to nearly die.

Abraham and Ishmael are never together again either.

Clearly, both of Abraham's sons have been traumatized by their father's murderous behavior and this results in their estrangement from him. Now, interestingly, both Isaac and Ishmael attend Abraham's funeral. Is this reconciliation? Is it forgiveness?

To forgive, or not, is actually a very Jewish dilemma.

Because, in Judaism, we are constantly struggling to weigh judgement or justice -- against compassion. It is a delicate balance that even God must contend with. Remember the story of Sodom and Gomorrah? God wants to annihilate these two cities because of their great sins. But Abraham argues with God: what if there are

50 righteous people in these cities? If so, Abraham says, God should have mercy on all of them. Abraham argues that if God judges the world strictly according to justice, the world cannot survive.

The same is true if God only judges according to compassion. Of course, ultimately, no righteous people are found and the cities do not survive. But God does learn compassion from Abraham.

On the other hand, think about Jonah, which we will read at Yom Kippur. He demands that the Ninevites be punished for their sins and is really upset when God relents and has compassion on them.

In this case, God needs to teach Jonah about compassion.

A midrash compares this to a king who has very thin drinking glasses. The king says: "If I put hot water in them, they will expand and break, and if I put cold water in them, they will contract and shatter." What does the king do? He mixes hot water with the cold and puts them in the glasses which do not break. So too, God created humankind with both the attributes of compassion and judgement. With the attribute of compassion alone, people's sins would go unchecked and the world would be destroyed. With the attribute of judgement alone, the world would also shatter from the harshness of justice. So this is our challenge: how to achieve the correct combination.

My colleague in the Pacific Palisades, Rabbi Amy Bernstein, recently gave a provocative and very personal talk on this subject. She grew up with a very beautiful, talented, intelligent and charismatic mother who was also diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and extreme narcissism. Her mother could be warm and loving but also incredibly abusive -- blaming and shaming her daughter, causing her a great deal of long-lasting pain. Rabbi Bernstein admitted that forgiveness was not a paradigm that worked for her. After all, can you forgive someone who has not asked for forgiveness and who, even more importantly, is not sorry?

Now many of us, myself included, have had someone in our lives who has been abusive: a parent, a spouse, a sibling, a friend. Or maybe it was not a specific person. It might have been a larger social or economic ill: poverty, prejudice, sex discrimination. And for some of us, not all, forgiving is NOT a helpful option. As Rabbi Bernstein said, it can feel disempowering to forgive someone or something that has been cruel, particularly when the source of the cruelty is unrepentant or unreformed. And, by the way, Jewish law does not obligate us to forgive in such cases.

I will confess that my father also suffered from psychological issues. He was also a narcissist. That means that he could not see beyond his own point of view. In addition, it means that everything revolved around him and his feelings. And whatever happened to him was someone else's fault. He was immensely judgmental, critical, and very demanding of attention. I definitely have scars from my years

with him, not only growing up under his authority when I was a child, but also living independently as an adult. He NEVER said he was sorry, never apologized, never recognized any harm that he had inflicted on me and on various members of my family.

Some of you know that he lived in Lima, Peru for many years, but that my siblings and I brought him back to California after he turned 90. He lived in Riverside for a year before moving to Ventura and finally, to West Los Angeles. He died at 94 this past March. Many of you also know that I spent a great deal of time visiting him and taking care of him, despite the emotional abuse which pretty much continued until the end. How was I able to do this? And did I forgive him?

Rabbi Bernstein said that the goal for her was not forgiveness but healing. And I suppose that was my goal as well. In order to heal, I needed to place myself in situations and relationships where I was nurtured and loved, so I could see myself and the world in a healthier way. And that took many, many years, and I am not all the way there, and will probably never be. To some extent, the pain will always be with me, but I am able to manage it better, and I am better able to not let it run my life.

The experience with my father actually had some unintended benefits. Like my colleague, Rabbi Bernstein, the pain helped me to understand other people's pain. And healing allowed me to understand my father's pain -- surely, he behaved as he did out of his own experiences of abuse. I was able to transform my feelings of fear, anger, and depression into compassion for him. And I was able to take care of him when he became a lonely old man because I had achieved a certain distance from which he could not hurt me anymore. But I don't think that equals forgiveness because he and I never had that conversation. That would surely have been redemptive, but it was not what our relationship was about.

A biblical example that has really spoken to me is that of Judah, one of Jacob's sons. You recall that, when Jacob returns to Canaan after a twenty year absence, he has 11 sons. Joseph, his youngest, is his favorite, and Jacob makes this very obvious. He gives Joseph a special multicolored coat, and lets him get away with

being a spoiled braggart and a tattle-tale. Joseph's 10 brothers hate him, so they decide to kill him. But, instead, they throw him into a pit and sell him into slavery. They tell their father that Joseph is dead, and Jacob is devastated. Unaware of the harm he has caused, and unrepentant, Jacob replaces Joseph with a new favorite, his 12th son, Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin.

Twenty years later, Joseph is the vizier -- or prime minister -- of Egypt. When a famine hits the land of Canaan, Joseph's brothers journey to Egypt to ask for food. When they appear before Joseph, they do not recognize their brother. So Joseph decides to put them to the test. Are they the same brothers who threw him in the pit? Or have they changed? Joseph tells them he will supply them with food if they return to Canaan to fetch their father. But Joseph imposes one condition: they must leave Benjamin behind as a pledge. The big question is: Will the brothers abandon their father's new favorite just like they did Joseph? This is the test. One of the brothers, Judah, recognizes that leaving Benjamin behind will break their father Jacob's heart, so he offers to be the pledge instead of Benjamin. Judah is willing to put himself in danger, rather than Benjamin, in order to spare his father's feelings. This, despite the fact that his father still loves him less than both Benjamin and Joseph. Indeed, despite the fact that Jacob barely recognizes that he has other sons. It seems to me that Judah has been able to move beyond his own hurt, beyond his jealousy of his brother, and can now behave with compassion towards his father.

Now compassion may not be the step you are ready for. Perhaps you are still unable to forgive and unable to offer compassion. And that is OK. The reason I am being this open with you tonight, baring my soul to you, is because, like Rabbi Bernstein, I want to give you permission not to forgive, if that is where you are now, or may always be. Of course, that does not mean that you should hold onto anger, resentment, recrimination, and hurt, because that is toxic for you. You do need to heal and to move out from under the shadow of the abuser. But it just may be that you cannot forgive - particularly if the abuser has not taken responsibility for his or her actions.

On the other hand, like Judah, you may have come to an acceptance of who this other person truly is. Not forgiveness, but acceptance.

And maybe, compassion. I think that's where Isaac and Ishmael arrived with regard to the abuse they suffered at the hands of their father, Abraham. I don't think they forgave Abraham. After all, he never said he was sorry. But, clearly, they made some sort of peace with him. And maybe that's the best we can hope for in some situations. We do that and we focus on the love and beauty in our lives rather than on the agony. And that takes us to a healthier place. We move to gratitude and, in the words of Anne Lamott, we sing Hallelujah anyway.