

YOM KIPPUR EVE SERMON

FORGIVENESS

5776

Forgiveness. (PAUSE) That's a tall order.

Someone has wronged you and you feel absolute

righteous indignation and an almost God-given right to be angry.

Anne Lamott, a wonderful writer, who recently published an

exquisite collection of essays called "Small Victories"

describes the problem so well – keep in mind that

some of this is tongue-in-cheek. She writes:

"No one can prove that God does or doesn't exist,

but tough acts of forgiveness are pretty convincing for me.

It is not my strong suit, and I naturally prefer the company of people

who hold grudges, as long as they are not held against me.

Forgiveness is the hardest work we do. When, against all odds,

over time, your heart softens toward truly heinous behavior

on the part of parents, children, siblings, and everyone's exes,

you almost have to believe that something not of this earth

snuck into your stone-cold heart. Left to my own devices,
I'm a forgiveness denier – I'll start to think that there are hurts
so deep that nothing can heal them. Time alone won't necessarily
do the trick...[But a] lack of forgiveness is like leprosy of the insides,
and left untreated, it can take out tissue, equilibrium, soul,
sense of self.¹...forgiveness sure doesn't begin with reason.
The rational insists that it is right, that we are right.
It is about attacking and defending,
which means there can be no peace. It loves the bedtime story of
how we've been injured...The choice is whether
you want to stay stuck in being right but not being free
or admit you're...possibly available for a long, deep breath,
which is as big as the universe...maybe opens a window."²

Sound familiar? It certainly does to me. I come from a family

¹ Pp. 105-6

² P. 114.

whose members were masters at holding grudges,
beginning with my grandmother.

Now my grandmother, to all outward appearances, was a generous,
caring individual, who believed in giving people second chances.

She spent most of her waking hours helping those less fortunate
than she. Her central activity was fighting for prison reform –
yes, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree – many of you know
that this is a cause I believe in and have worked for as well.

My grandmother lived to be 94 – and almost to her last day,
she made monthly visits to the New York City jails,
bringing comfort to incarcerated women.

Aside from the many awards and diplomas she received
for her efforts, the women's prison on Rikers' Island
was named in her honor. If you watch "Law and Order,"
you will occasionally see that their location is
the Rose M. Singer Center. The inmates apparently call it "Rosie"
for short. Well, Rosie is my grandmother.

Funny about life's ironies. There was real poetic significance in the naming of that prison. Because, much as my grandmother tried to make the inmates' lives more bearable, she had trapped herself inside a prison of her own making. This was the private side of my grandmother that only her family could see.

Expecting a perfect display of love and affection from every single one of us, she kept a close tally of all the slights and hurts for which we were guilty.

"You haven't called me in two weeks!"

"You always kiss your aunt more than you kiss me."

"You were awfully fresh when you were a kid."

This sounds almost funny in retrospect. But these matters kept my grandmother up at night as she stabbed herself, over and over again, with the pain of each one of these incidents. By your next visit with her, she had so pumped up her bitterness that it was hard to feel anything but immensely guilty -- and resentful.

I loved my grandmother, but she barely knew it. She bemoaned the fact that she was unloved, but there was no reasoning with her. She had locked her cell so tightly that she could no longer find the key. It was a shame because the key was really within her reach. If my grandmother had just been able to forgive, her life would have been filled with so much more joy and love. But my grandmother stubbornly refused to yield. She harbored anger; she nursed wounds. As a result, my grandmother was mostly bitter and unhappy. What a painful way to live! What a waste of precious time on earth.

The Torah warns us against refusing to forgive.

In this afternoon's reading, we read the verse in Leviticus:

"You shall not...bear a grudge against your kinfolk."

In other words, you must forgive your neighbor.

On Yom Kippur we devote quite some time begging God to forgive our transgressions.

Surely, if we hope that God will forgive us, we should be willing to forgive our fellow human beings. Our tradition recognizes that anger is a natural response to hurt. But so is forgiveness.

Even God gets angry, as we see all too often in the Bible.

But God's anger passes. How long does it last, asks the Talmud?

Only "a moment." According to the Talmud, God prays.

And what is the subject of God's prayer?

"May it be My will that My mercy crush My anger;

and may My mercy 'steam roll' over My other characteristics;

And may I conduct Myself with My children

with the characteristic of mercy; and may I deal with them

beyond the strict line of the law."³

We no longer practice Yom Kippur the way it was practiced

in the Bible. In those days, the High Priest selected two goats.

One was sacrificed for the people's sins and the other was sent off

into the wilderness to carry the people's sins on its head
as far away as possible.

Can we take the occasion of the High Holy Days to cast
our grudges far away?

So how do we forgive?

Anne Lamott quotes the poet Rumi who wrote,

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field.

I'll meet you there.” In other words, we first need to let go

of our righteous indignation. Lamott explains that in order to forgive,

“You have to leave your...comfort zone...if you can make a break

for that field, you might forget all the whys, the nuance, details and

colors about the story that you're sure you've gotten right,

that doom you. ...[Y]ou sacrifice the need to be right,

because you have been wronged, and you put down the abacus

that has always helped you keep track of things. This jiggles you free

³ Rav Zutra bar Tuvia answered in the name of Rav.

from clutch and quiver. You can unfurl your fingers,
hold out your palm, openhanded.⁴ Forgiving people
doesn't necessarily mean you want to meet them for lunch.

It means you try to undo the Velcro hook. Lewis Smedes said it best:

'To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover
that the prisoner is you.'⁵ Or my grandmother.

A beautiful example of forgiveness in the Bible

is that of the twins, Jacob and Esau, who fight with each other
beginning in the womb. Esau is the older twin and
is entitled to the blessing of the first-born.

But his brother Jacob steals the blessing from him.

Esau is furious, as well he should be. When he finds out
what Jacob has done, he bursts into wild and bitter sobbing.

And he harbors such a strong grudge that he plans to kill Jacob.

⁴ P. 115.

⁵ P. 117.

Jacob is warned so he runs away. Many years later,

Jacob encounters his brother Esau again.

Afraid lest Esau try to harm him or his family,

he offers him many gifts. But Esau runs to greet his brother,

embracing him. The two weep. Jacob tells Esau that

seeing his brother's face is like seeing the face of God.

In other words, Jacob has seen the grace that has touched his brother,

the grace that has allowed him to let go of his anger and his grudges,

and has enabled him to encounter his twin as a child of God.

Esau seems to have achieved what Lamott describes:

“Forgiveness is release from me; somehow, finally, I am returned

to my better, dopier self, so much lighter when I don't have to drag

the toxic chatter, wrangle, and pinch around with me anymore.

Not that I don't get it out every so often, for old time's sake.

But the trapped cloud is no longer nearly so dark and dense.

It was blown into wisps, of smoke, of snow, of ocean spray.”⁶

Think about how much time we have all wasted being bogged down
in petty anger when we could have forgiven someone and moved on.

There could have been so many more hours of connection
with spouses and siblings and neighbors. All that energy

we’ve tied up in grievances could have been put to such good use:
building, creating, helping, consoling, laughing, enjoying.

We want lives that are more spiritually fulfilled yet we throw away
so many chances to experience that fulfillment
in our various relationships.

So how do we begin? The Talmud tells us that we must give people

⁶ P. 118

the opportunity to ask for our forgiveness,

we must provide them with an opening to make amends.

Here's a little wisdom from the Talmud:

"When Rav Zera had any complaint against any man,

he would repeatedly pass by him, showing himself to this other man,

so that he could come forth to make peace with Rav Zera."

There are incredible benefits to forgiveness for our own well-being.

Dr. Amit Sood of the Mayo Clinic notes:

"Unlike all the other organs of the body, our minds

have no natural system for getting rid of waste.

Hurts pile up as open files and black holes.

Gratitude for what is right, compassion for suffering,

accepting imperfections and focusing on life's higher meaning

can all soften life's hurts. But there's one cure that can dissolve

all hurts for good: forgiveness."⁷

⁷ P. 154 *The Mayo Clinic Handbook for Happiness*.

“Anger, holding a grudge and hostility can all lead to anxiety, depression, irritation, disturbed sleep. Higher blood pressure, irregular heart rhythm and a higher risk of hearty attack.

Forgiveness, on the other hand, has many benefits. By forgiving, you enjoy improved health, save energy, have better relationships and set an example for others...”⁸

Think about it. You asked your good friend for a favor.

She was unable to accommodate you.

You are hurt and upset. If you cut yourself off from this friend, either literally or emotionally, she will feel that she has no chance to apologize, perhaps she will feel that you would not accept an apology. So years might go by without either one of you taking the first step. In the end, you may very well forget what it was that bothered you in the first place.

But the pile-up of time aggravates the situation to the point

⁸ P. 155.

where a small offense has become a big deal.

My grandmother never gave anyone that opening.

You were condemned before you had an opportunity to speak.

So my grandmother remained in her prison of pain to her dying day,
cut off from interactions that allow us to glimpse and
experience the divine.

Let's not make the same mistake my grandmother and
so many others have made. It is time to free ourselves
from this same prison of grievances.

We must provide our loved ones with openings into our hearts.

We must let go of the past and reach for the future.

Dr. Ira Byock, author of *The Four Things That Matter Most*

believes that four simple phrases can help us through

the unpredictability of daily life. They are: **"Please forgive me,"**

"I forgive you," "Thank you," and "I love you."

Let us make this New Year a time for embracing and celebrating our connections with one another. Let us forgive each other so that, we too, can see God in the face of the Other.⁹

PLEASE RISE AND TURN TO PAGE 82 – Avinu Malkeinu.

⁹ This sermon was inspired by the CCAR seminar on HH sermons 8/22/00.