

I Beg Your Pardon

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Since, as part of our High Holy Day services, we are to proclaim out loud a list of our sins, an Al Chet, I want to publicly confess a sin of which I am guilty. Sometimes, not all the times, but sometimes, when I am going home in wall-to-wall traffic, and a particularly thoughtless driver cuts me off, I am guilty of wanting a giant hand to come out of the heavens, and crush him and his car, like a bug! Other times, I'll settle for a huge bolt of lightning to come out of the heavens, blasting him and his car to smithereens, leaving a gigantic pothole in the road warning other drivers not to mess with me.

Now, I suspect I'm not alone in this, am I? Sometimes, the atavistic, reptilian part of our brain kicks in, and we want the other to suffer for what they've done to us. Fortunately, these are only our fantasies. For the most part, they exist in novels and in all sorts of Hollywood movies, as we cheer on the hero who wrecks vengeance on those who have hurt him.

Sometimes, we know of real-life episodes in which revenge has been played out, such as when Israel's secret service, the Mossad, hunted down and killed the terrorists responsible for the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics in Munich. But, for most of us, we do not carry around with us plans for revenge and vengeance.

It would be great if the story were to end, here, but it turns out that we do carry something around with us, when we have been cheated or embarrassed or our heart has been bruised, in essence, whenever we have been badly treated. We carry grudges against others, and we carry hurt from wounds that we have received, we carry shame for how we have treated others. And these aren't feelings from last week or last month. No, these are feelings from years ago!

Over the summer, a friend of mine, whom I've known for almost fifty years, said to me: "I'm going to a party this coming weekend, and guess whom I heard will be there? Your old girlfriend!" Instantly, I was nineteen years old, again. I could picture her in front of my eyes but then her memory was immediately replaced by another. Was it one of the great times that we had together? No! It was how she eventually dumped me for someone else! Fifty years later, and I can still recall that crushing disappointment.

The hurts that we can still feel from those who rejected us or ignored us or embarrassed us; our feelings of worthlessness from the jobs we didn't get, from the business that failed; the anger that we still can summon towards those who lied to us or cheated us, all of these still-present emotions are like miniature PTSD. We have failed to pack our emotions away properly, and we still carry the initial trauma around with us, as though it was yesterday.

I remember, many years ago, that I sat with a congregant who was terminally ill, and he said to me: "Rabbi, I've given explicit instructions to my children, and have had them swear that when I die, they won't allow my brother, who hurt me so badly years ago, to come to my funeral." How sad, when we will soon be gone from this life and this earth, that jousting for room among our last thoughts and emotions are old wounds from the past.

Too many of us still carry around resentments towards a parent. I'm not talking here of the horrifically abusing parent; I'm talking of the mother or father who didn't give us the love that we wanted or the praise and encouragement we needed or in other ways, failed us as parents.

Too many of us still carry around resentments towards former spouses. Worse, some of us are carrying around resentments towards our current spouse and partner: slights, and failures, from years ago, which are always close at hand to be thrown up to the other as evidence of their selfishness or perceived hurtful behavior. Some of us harbor resentments towards our children for missing our birthdays or our anniversaries, for being too wrapped up in their own lives to pay attention to ours, for always seeming to take and not to give. Some of us carry resentments toward fellow workers who were underhanded in their methods of getting promoted or to bosses who failed to see our merits. There remain resentments towards those we thought were our friends, for not being there when they should have been.

And, with each passing year, these resentments calcify, harden, and turn into this weight, called a grudge. We carry them around, like pet rocks, unwilling to give them up. Some of them are not that jagged either; they have smooth parts from our taking them out and handling them again and again. The Torah portion for tomorrow afternoon, specifically warns us against this: “Lo titor: you shall not carry a grudge.”

It’s not all anger that we carry around; sometimes, it’s the emotional hurt. The disappointment that, years ago, someone whom we trusted, made critical comments about us to others, and the sadness that came with the loss of that friendship. The breakup of a relationship, the loss of a home, an unwanted move to a new place away from family and friends... These too, though they may have occurred a long time ago, still give us pain when we recall them.

There is also the secret shame that each one of us has about our previous behaviors. Some occurred when we were teens or young adults, still others have occurred over the decades. We recall them in the Al Chet litany: “we have cheated, defrauded, gossiped, hurt, lied, dissembled and ignored. We have been selfish, obstinate, argumentative, cruel, withholding...” We carry these failures around with us, as well. How I wish that Bruce Springsteen’s song was true about “glory days.” He wrote: “I hope when I get old, I don’t sit around thinking about it, but I probably will, just sitting back trying to recapture a little of the glory.” Nope. What actually goes on in our heart of hearts, is that we spend more of our time on our regrets, sorrows, hurts and embarrassments than on our triumphs and successes.

This can’t be good! Neuroscientists tell us that there is a vital mind/body connection. The emotions that our memories bring forth - the anger, the self-recrimination, the guilt, the hurt - send hormones throughout our body, affects our nervous systems, and our hearts. For others, the weight of our memories and emotions feeds depression, increases inflammation, affects our digestive systems and disrupts our sleep.

There’s the story told of two Buddhist monks who have taken a vow of chastity. One day, they set out on a journey and at the bank of a deep river, see a young woman, there, trying to cross. The first monk picks her up, puts her on his shoulders, carries her across the river, and set her down on the other side. As they continue their journey, the second monk starts to berate his friend: “How could you do this?! You have taken vows not to touch a woman!” On, and on he goes for the next mile, until the first monk turned to him and said: “I set her down by the river a half hour ago but I can see that you’re still carrying her.” We need to figure out a way not to carry our hurts, and grudges and shame.

Our liturgy for the High Holy Days is filled with references to Teshuva, repentance, apologizing to those whom we’ve wronged, and accepting the apologies of others. But there is another aspect of the High Holy Days that we often, too quickly, gloss over, and that is the concept of pardon. “Salach lanu!”, we cry out to God, “Pardon us!” I suggest to us this evening, that pardoning others and pardoning ourselves, is a way for us to lighten up.

To understand the concept of *slichah*, of pardon, I call to your memory the most famous case in our lifetime of pardoning, and that was the pardon that Gerald Ford extended to Richard Nixon in 1974 for crimes he may have committed as president. A pardon does not mean that we forget what someone has done. *Au contraire*, I would suggest that a pardon occurs only when offenses have truly occurred. A pardon means that while the other is, indeed, guilty; we will now let the matter drop. Not forgotten, simply not further pursued.

Think of the casual phrase we use sometimes, when we have inadvertently bumped into or was rude to another: “I beg your pardon,” we say. It doesn’t mean that we weren’t rude (we were). Rather, “I beg your pardon,” means: “I did something wrong, please let it go.” That’s what we are saying when we pray to God: “*Salach lanu*, pardon us!” Yes, we are truly guilty of these offenses, but please let there be no future punishment or Divine displeasure for them.”

What pardon means for us, in our memory of our relationships with others, is that, in essence, we state: “I will never forget what you did to me, and I will never forgive you for it; but I don’t want to carry it around with any emotion, any more. The offense occurred, but I’m done with it. I don’t need its weight, I don’t want your weight, I’m letting my anger go, I’m letting my resentments go, I’m letting my grudge go, I’m letting you go. I’m not wasting any more time and energy on your memory.”

“But Rabbi,” I hear some of you say: “What of the Holocaust? What of terrible abuse and trauma? What of a genuinely evil person who sought to harm me?” OK, you get to keep those. But what are you going to do about all the other stuff? The things that are cluttering up your life and weighing you down? You know the most important part of the Jonah story that we will tell tomorrow afternoon at services? It’s what the sailors do when their boat is going down in the waves. They heave stuff overboard. They jettison whatever they can. And, in the end, they throw Jonah overboard as well, for, if truth be told, he’s not only weighing them down but he’s the guilty one who has brought the storm upon them.

Us, too. Time to do some jettisoning. Time to make a list in your head during services or when you get home tonight of the people in your life who have hurt you. And, then, pick one, just one, to pardon, to release, and heave them overboard. Say good-bye and turn your back on them. Good riddance! I promise you that you’ll feel lighter. Think of it like the house organizing that Marie Kondo does. If it doesn’t give you pleasure, out it goes! Not forgetfulness - for you’ll never forget - but rather, jettisoning the energy you’re using to hold on to it. Pick up just one grudge rock in that sack that you’re lugging around inside of you and drop it away.

But there’s more. And, here, I’m going to engage in some political partisanship, as I declare to you that the current president of the United States is absolutely right on one account. He does, as he has proclaimed, have the right to pardon himself. He’s correct. We all do. Pardoning ourselves means cutting ourselves some slack for our bad behavior years ago. We can say to ourselves: “Boy was I a mess, then, but thank God, I’m better now.” Or, “how young and foolish and unconscious I was.” Again, later in the service, at home tonight, pick one of those memories you have about your bad behavior that still causes you to cringe, and laugh at yourself or sigh at what you did, but cut yourself a little slack and stop berating yourself about it.

There’s a terrific scene in a recent documentary called “Echo in the Canyon,” about early ‘60s rock groups who settled in Laurel Canyon. In the film, David Crosby, looks directly into the camera and states, “Ladies and gentlemen, you have heard a lot of rumors about why the Byrds broke up after many years together, and I, here, want you to know now the real story and the truth. It was because I was a fool.” That’s it. And it’s so clear he’s made his peace with some of

his past. Not forgetting it; recognizing his bad behavior; but making his peace with it. We need to do some of the same.

Eloheinu vei'lohei avotaynu: Our God, and God of our ancestors, salach lanu, pardon our transgressions. Give us the strength to, in turn, pardon those who have offended and hurt us over the years, to let our hardened grudges go, to quiet the hurtful memories of their offense. Give us the understanding to pardon ourselves, give us the gift of lighter memories, of more joyous lives, as we enter into this New Year to come.