

## ***Forgiving God***

Yom Kippur 5776

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Bet Mispachah

Once, on the eve of Yom Kippur, a student asked the great Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk what a pious Jew should do on Erev Yom Kippur. “If you want to know,” the rabbi replied, “go to the tailor living on the outskirts of town.” So a group of Hasidim traveled to the tailor’s house, and peered through his window. At first, they were bored watching the usual holiday preparations and rituals. But late that night, once the house was quiet, the tailor went to the closet and took out a notebook. Holding the book high over his head, the tailor declared, “Master of the Universe, now the time has come for You and me to reckon our accounts, to tally our sins for the past year.” And so the tailor began to list each and every sin he had committed the previous year, each of which was recorded in the notebook. Then he went back to the closet, put the notebook away, and took out a much larger, heavier, thicker notebook. Struggling, trying to hold up the notebook, the tailor declared, “Oh God, first I recounted all my sins. Now I list yours.” And the tailor began to list all the suffering, all the tragedy in the world. A few pages in to the list, the tailor stopped. He looked up, sighed, and whispered, “it’s too long a list my God. It’s too terrible a list.” And then the tailor continued, Master of the Universe, in truth it appears you owe me more than I owe you. But I’d rather not keep strict accounts. This is a time of forgiveness. So why don’t I just forgive you, and you forgive me.”

I have often identified with the tailor in this story. Sometimes, I feel we are not the only ones in need of forgiveness. Sometimes I wonder how the world can be allowed to remain in its tragic state. Yes, we are partners with God in fixing the world, but shouldn’t both halves of this partnership share the blame. Shouldn’t God be asking our forgiveness as well?

God is a tricky word. We often use it as if we all know what it means, but none of us can really define it, and if we could, we would quickly discover that all mean something different by this word. God has been so misused and abused throughout history that many of us have good reason to feel uncomfortable with this word, God, or even to reject the idea entirely. So rest assured that when I say God, I do not mean any cause of suffering. But if the word, God, is difficult for you, feel free to substitute fate, conscience, the cause of the big bang, or whatever resonates with you.

Personally, a God who completely controls every little thing that happens, that God died for me a long time ago. I believe in a God who is the source of all being, and the source of the Big Bang. I believe in a God who unites all that was and all that is and all that will be. I believe in a God who is present in all of creation but bigger than this world. I believe there is something more than what we can experience with our senses and our telescopes. I believe that God is the word we give to our conscience, our goodness, our purpose. I believe there is a reason why each of us are here on this planet, right now. I believe that we will never understand, and that is all part of the great mystery of life.

But wait, you might say, Rabbi, if you don't believe in a wizard in the sky who makes things happen, than what is there to forgive? If God doesn't cause earthquakes or car accidents, what has god done wrong?

Theology doesn't make sense. It's not logical. I sense it in my spirit. I feel it in my heart. My rational mind has nothing to do with is, except for a rational understanding that there are things my rational mind cannot understand. But I'm angry and who else am I supposed to be angry at, if not God?

What good is a force for goodness that is powerless against such evil? What use is the cause of the big bang, if it creates a universe full of suffering and pain?

Whatever God you may or may not believe in, most of us at some time, will struggle with these questions.

I reject all apologetics!

God only tests those strong enough to withstand the test. – gee thanks!

God “needs them more” up in heaven. Really! I don’t want a relationship with that kind of God.

I reject any suggestion that we should not be angry at God. For everything there is a season, and sometimes the season is bitter.

Perhaps I am a heretic for saying this. But if I am a heretic, I am in good company. Our biblical and rabbinic traditions are full of anger at god, and forgiveness of god.

Moses, for starters, rages against God and makes peace with god in a most intimate way.

And then there is the prophet Jeremiah who is so pained, in the Rosh Hashanah haftarah, he declares that he would rather have never been born.

Job has good reason to rage at God, and never does get a good answer.

But this being Yom Kippur, I want to focus on Jonah, who also gets angry at God, and I believe forgives God. Jonah is going about his business when God commands him to go to Nineveh to tell the people to repent. So Jonah tries to run away from God, getting on a ship headed in the exact opposite direction. Enter the whale you may have heard of as children. In the end, Jonah goes to

Nineveh and the Ninevites do repent. God forgives them, and Jonah is angry. To teach Jonah a lesson, God causes a plant to grow, and then God causes the plant to die. Jonah mourns for the plant.

Now I was taught that this lesson was to teach Jonah to forgive the Ninevites for the evils they did. And this is surely part of the lesson. But Rabbi David Fass wrote a fascinating article suggesting that we are missing a bigger point. Rabbi Fass claims that God is asking Jonah for forgiveness. In a nutshell, Rabbi Fass combs the Book of Jonah for references to the Garden of Eden and other topics referring to forgiveness. He writes:

The Book of Jonah is, indeed, about divine forgiveness, but not God's, ours....It is about our anger at a God who made a universe in which all humans, even the righteous, must die. It is about our need to forgive, lest we drown in a lonely sea of rage.

At the end of the book, it is God who asks for... Jonah's forgiveness. Just as you cared about that plant, says God, and wanted it "forgiven" the ultimate ending of its life, just as I cared about Nineveh and forgave its people...you must forgive Me. I have created a universe in which everything is mortal. Do not run from this truth. Do not be angry at the shortcomings of my universe, says God. Forgive me, says God, and also each other, and no longer remain apart and alone....<sup>i</sup>

This year has been a year of blessings and curses.

This year, we witnessed the miracle of marriage equality in all 50 states, and yet that doesn't stop the rampant murder of trans women of color.

This year, we celebrate our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a congregation. We welcome new members, and celebrate with old friends, and embark on the third edition of our beautiful siddur, and yet, despite an African American President, black men are shot dead...just because.

This year, we remember how quickly we forget, as we watch European countries direct the people they don't like onto trains, lie to them about where the trains will take them, and then leave them all, even little children, trapped in hot train cars without food or water or decency. And we all close our borders – from the US, to Saudi Arabia, to Hungary, and so on. It is not the Holocaust all over again, but it is terrifying.

In conclusion, I want to read for you an excerpt from a letter to God written by the famous author and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, and published in the *New York Times* well over a decade ago. Dr. Wiesel writes:

Master of the Universe, let us make up. It is time. How long can we go on being angry?

More than fifty years have passed since the nightmare was lifted...[for] those who survived it...[g]ratitude has replaced bitterness in their hearts...

Oh, they do not forgive the killers and their accomplices, nor should they. Nor should you, Master of the Universe. But they no longer look at every passer-by with suspicion...

What about my faith in you Master of the Universe? I now realize I never lost it, not even over there, during the darkest hours...I don't know why I kept on whispering my daily prayers, but I did recite them...But my faith was not really pure. How could it be?

...on the Days of Awe...my traditional prayers were directed to you, as well as against you...

In my testimony I have written harsh words, burning words about your role in our tragedy. I would not repeat them today, but I felt them then...

In my childhood I did not expect much from human beings. But I expected everything from you...

As we Jews now enter the High Holidays again...Let us make up, Master of the Universe. In spite of everything that happened? Yes, in spite. Let us make up: for the child in me, it is unbearable to be divorced from you so long.”<sup>ii</sup>

My soul needs to forgive God. My heart aches for it. If I do not forgive God, how can I have a relationship with God? How can I have a year of blessings if I am harboring anger and vengeance?

Maybe God doesn't need my forgiveness, but I need to forgive God.

Let us truly make a fresh start. Let us offer God our forgiveness, as God forgives us. Let us cry out – ‘Forgive us, God, and help us to do better. And help us to forgive you God, if not for your sake, then for ours.’

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<sup>i</sup> Fass, David. “Jonah’s Forgiveness of God,” *Journal of Reform Judaism* Spring 1989.

<sup>ii</sup> Wiesel, Elie. “A Prayer for the Days of Awe,” *The New York Times* 10/2/97.