

Yom Kippur 5778 THE ART OF FORGIVENESS

“The Weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong” Mahatma Gandhi

Yom Kippur is all about seeking personal forgiveness. It is a moment when we stand before G-d, confess all our wrongdoings and vow never to do them again. Although this is a personal quest for forgiveness, we recite the prayers in the plural and not as an individual, we say them as a community, as a whole ‘We have sinned. Forgive us’. Sara Esther Crispe (Co-Director of Interinclusion.org, writer and motivational speaker), explains. “The fact that we apologise as a whole, ask to be forgiven as a whole and resolve to be better as a whole means we can accomplish so much more than we could ever do alone”.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks espouses that “the whole cycle of repentance and forgiveness plays no part in the early dramas of humankind. It does not appear in the story of Adam and Eve. As for Cain, Hashem mitigates his punishment but does not forgive him for his crime. There is no call to repentance to the generation of the flood, the builders of Babel or the people of Sodom and the cities of the plain”.

As mentioned above, there was sin in the early part of the Bible, but the first time G-d forgives occurs after the sin of the golden calf. Why does G-d forgive in the book of Shemot but not in the book of Bereshit? The answer, Lord Sacks feels lies in a ‘moment that changed the world’. In Vayigash Bereshit 45 4-8 we have the first recorded instance in which one human being forgives another. Yosef, after putting his brothers through tests and trials, finally cannot contain himself and reveals his identity to his brothers, who had long before sold him as a slave. He forgives them saying “It was not you, it was G-d” “Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that G-d sent me ahead of you”.

“G-d did not forgive human beings until human beings learned to forgive. It took Yosef to bring forgiveness into the world. That is what G-d was waiting for. Had G-d forgiven first, he would have made the human situation worse, not better. People would have said ‘Why should I not harm others? After all G-d forgives’. We have to forgive others before G-d can forgive us’. In his book Ceremony and Celebration, Lord Sacks argues “that Judaism’s concept of forgiveness, institutionalised through the story of Yosef’s reconciliation with his brothers, was an innovation within ancient culture”.

However, there are some who feel that forgiveness is not a Jewish virtue. Rabbi Zvi Hersh Weinreb, counters this misconception by finding the answer in a book called “The Sunflower” by Simon Wiesenthal. Wiesenthal relates his personal experience of

when he was brought to the bedside of a dying Nazi officer by the officer’s own mother, who pleaded with him to forgive her son for killing Jews. Wiesenthal had been an eyewitness to this officer’s murderous brutality. He found himself confronted with a moral dilemma. Could he deny a mother’s tearful entreaties? On the other hand, could he possibly forgive such unspeakable cruelty?

Thirty years after the event, Wiesenthal submitted his dilemma to several dozen philosophers, writers and political leaders, both Christian and Jewish, asking them what they would have done. By and large, the non-Jews were able to find justification for forgiveness. On the other hand, most of the Jews could not express forgiveness for this soldier’s heinous crimes, convinced that certain crimes were not subject to forgiveness.

Rabbi Weinreb feels that here is a lesson that Judaism teaches well. “Forgiveness must be earned. It must be deserved, it must be requested and above all, it can only be granted by the person who was offended. The only ones empowered to grant forgiveness to the officer were the victims and I cannot forgive you for a sin you have committed against my brother.

In a sense, Yosef went beyond the call of duty in expressing forgiveness to his brothers. They did not beg forgiveness from him. But he knew from close observation of their concern for each other that they had long transcended their previous petty jealousies and rivalries. He was convinced that forgiveness was in order”.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin explains why Ya’akov, on his deathbed, was so forgiving of his beloved Yosef for not having contacted the father who had lavished him with so much love and favour. He feels it was because “Ya’akov understood that through his favouritism he was an unwitting accomplice to – indeed, even the main cause of – the dysfunction of the family. At the very least, he would have to forgive his sons (even Reuven, whose immoral act could well be seen as a silent protest by the son who had been rejected as his father’s rightful heir in favour of the more beloved Yosef) if he would ever be able to forgive himself!

It was Ya’kov’s ability to repent and change himself which enabled him to believe that his sons could and would repent and change themselves. From repentance emerges forgiveness and forgiveness begets forgiveness. Even after Ya’akov died, the brothers were anxious that Yosef might take revenge and once again Yosef forgave”.

“Who is G-d like you, tolerating iniquity and forgiving transgression” (Micah 7:18)

“Whose iniquities does God tolerate? He who forgives the transgressions of another”

(Talmud Rosh Hashana 17a)

G'mar Hatima Tova