

Forgiveness
Kol Nidrei 2016
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A rabbi, in his Saturday sermon, used "Forgive Your Enemies" as his subject. After a long sermon, he asked, "How many of you are willing to forgive their enemies?" About half held up their hands. Not satisfied he harangued for another twenty minutes and repeated his question. "How many of you are willing to forgive their enemies?" This time he received a response of about 80 percent. Still unsatisfied, he lectured for another 15 minutes and repeated his question. "How many of you are willing to forgive their enemies?" With all thoughts now on lunch, all responded except one elderly lady in the rear. "Mrs. Cohen, are you not willing to forgive your enemies?" "I don't have any." She replied. "Mrs. Cohen, that is very unusual. How old are you?" "Ninety three." "Mrs. Cohen, please come down in front and tell the congregation how a person can live to be ninety-three, and not have an enemy in the world." The little sweetheart of a lady tottered down the aisle, very slowly turned around and said: "It's easy, I just outlived the bastards."¹

Forgiveness is hard. Selichot is the Hebrew for forgiveness and this concept is at the core of Yom Kippur. Today we confess our sins and transgressions and ask God to forgive us. Prior to this day, we were supposed to go to anyone we hurt and ask them to forgive us. We in turn are supposed to forgive others. Easier said than done to be sure.

Maimonides, in the Middle Ages wrote these words in his Mishneh Torah. *Asur laadam lehiyot achzari*- "It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and refuse to be appeased. Rather, he should be easily pacified, but hard to anger. When the person who wronged him asks for forgiveness, he should forgive him with a complete heart and a willing spirit. Even if he aggravated and wronged him severely, he should not seek revenge or bear a grudge."²

Maimonides instructs us to open our hearts, be willing to forgive those who have wronged us. And even if someone really did a number on us, we shouldn't seek to 'even the score.' I think we can all agree with this but we also know that it is hard to do. It's difficult because we don't think our ex friend or spouse deserves our forgiveness. Our brother, sister, mother or father said or did something so hurtful that we just can't let it go. We still feel angry when we think of them. Our heart beats faster. Our pulse races. These strong reactions are usually towards people who were once close to us. We remember the good times, laughter, and shared experience. This is what makes it all the harder to forgive. This is why the betrayal feels so awful. We struggle to forgive because the wound is too deep. We don't want to relive or even

try to remember. It feels better, it's more comfortable, to sweep our pain under the rug, and move on with our lives.

To be sure, there are times when we shouldn't forgive a person. There can be something so egregious that there is no turning back. How about Hitler? Should we forgive Hitler? No, of course not. Even Maimonides acknowledges that there are sins so great that one can no longer make teshuva or repent. He writes Pharaoh "began to sin on his own initiative and caused hardships to the Israelites who dwelled in his land." Because Pharaoh made our people slaves and murdered Israelite baby boys, he crossed a line and God decreed that he could no longer repent from his actions. Therefore God hardened his heart so he would face the consequences of his acts. (Hilchut Teshuva 6:3)

Now, as angry as we may be, it is highly unlikely our ex-husband/wife, friend, mother/father is akin to Hitler or Pharaoh. And yet, I will concede that there can be wrongs so great that they are unforgiveable. What if our parent is a criminal or our partner committed abuse? There are things for which no one can or should forgive. But if we are to be honest, these are the exceptions. Our family and friends are usually not guilty of transgressions of that magnitude.

Even if we admit, okay, they didn't murder anyone or rape a person, we still may struggle to forgive our relative. Many times, this is because we think our friend, wife, or child will continue to wrong us. We don't trust them with our money, home, or love. And maybe we are justified. There is nothing in Judaism that teaches that we should turn the other cheek and have a relative continue to defraud or harm us. We don't have to be the door mat for their feet or the dog they kick in anger. We can't be expected to put ourselves or our loved ones in a perilous situation. There are sadly times when we are better off without certain people in our lives.

So these are extreme situations I'm describing, but what about the rest of occurrences?

Once upon a time in their marriage, Saul Rosenberg did something really stupid. Ethel Rosenberg chewed him out for it. He apologized, they made up.

However, from time to time, Ethel would mention what he had done.

"Honey," Saul finally said one day, "Why do you keep bringing that up? I thought your policy was 'forgive and forget.'"

"It is," Ethel said. "I just don't want you to forget that I've forgiven and forgotten."²

Many of the things that irk us, irritate us, or upset us are really quite minor with a little bit of perspective. It doesn't make it right. But with any relationship we have with others, there are going to be disagreements, divergent points of view, and various ways of expressing ourselves. And there are times when a friend or relative expresses remorse that we should indeed forgive them. There are many reasons to do so.

We, as adults, are very aware of the cost of holding on to anger. We know it's not good for us. The stress can consume us. In order to avoid someone who hurts us, we may forgo certain places. We may decline invitations to family gatherings or friend's simchas. How sad to feel that you can't go somewhere because you might run into a certain person. And then missing out on experiences only heightens our betrayal. We are aware that from divorce, children can experience great stress when their parents use them as pawns to get back at their ex. There is a high cost to holding on to resentment, to not forgiving.

The best example of forgiveness in the Bible is Joseph. You know the story. Joseph was sold as a slave by his brothers, worked for Potiphar in Egypt, and ended up spending an untold amount of time in an Egyptian prison. While in jail, he was recognized as having the ability to interpret dreams and for being a hard worker. With these abilities, Joseph became Pharaoh's number one officer who oversaw the economy of Egypt. It was years later, when his brothers stood before him that he had the opportunity to settle the score. He had them at his mercy. He could've put them all in prison, tortured them, and more. But instead, as Joseph revealed his identity, he told them, "Do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me; it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you." (Gen. 45:5)

Even after time passes, the whole family is in Egypt living in the region of Goshen. Their father Jacob passes away. Once again the brothers are scared that Joseph may take revenge on them. They send a message to Joseph. "Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly." (Gen. 50:17) Joseph responds, "Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the survival of many people. Fear not, I will sustain you and your children." (50:19-20) If Joseph who was sold as a slave can forgive his brothers, then maybe, maybe we can consider forgiving others.

I think one of the things that can lessen the rage is to try to understand why the person said or did the things he/she did. Were they under stress? Were they scared? Are they ill? Is this just part of family pattern of behavior? Is this all they know? My grandmother, whom I called Graful, because I combined her name Ethel with Grandma as a young child, struggled with many things. I was close to her and was aware of the tension between her and my mother. As we ate butter balls and drank tea, I asked my Graful about my mom. And she said with a defiant gaze, "I did the best I knew how." Delving in her history, I knew that my grandmother was an unwanted daughter whose parents desperately were trying for a son. She was a disappointment to her parents. When her little brother was born, she was punished whenever he did wrong. Uncle Harv confessed that he felt guilty about this after her death. My Graful was raised by parents who experienced starvation in Poland and relayed what it was like to go to bed hungry.

These immigrants hardened by poverty and war raised my Graful who truly tried to do the best she knew how.

Unfortunately she and her side of the family were exceptionally good at keeping grudges. They didn't talk to family members for decades. Growing up, my brothers and I just sort of accepted that my mom didn't have a relationship with her sister or cousins. It wasn't until my husband pointed out that this is not the norm that I began to reflect on it more. I found understanding her, helped me understand my mother. And helped me in many ways to be forgiving.

For some of us, we struggle with forgiving ourselves. We may have screwed up. We have made mistakes. Things didn't turn out as we had planned. Now, in Judaism there is no easy out on this. Confession doesn't make it all better. We are have to go through the process of Teshuvah. Maimonides tells us that a person has truly repented when he "confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit [the sin again], and, nevertheless, abstains and does not commit it because of his Teshuvah alone and not because of fear or a lack of strength."

There does come a time though when we have done all we can to right a wrong, we acknowledge it and apologize, and then we must forgive ourselves. I remember a rabbi I worked with who was racked with guilt that he wasn't there for his daughters when they were young. He felt terrible that he let work get in the way of him being a loving father to them. Well, even though they were already adolescents, he resolved to do things differently. He changed his schedule. Made them a priority. He was there for them. Today, he is very close with them as they are starting their own families. He made Teshuva, forgave himself, and changed the dynamic of his relationship with them. It is not too late.

We have to forgive ourselves for mistakes we have made. We can learn from them. We can learn how to do and be better. Just because we screwed up in our past, doesn't mean we are always a screw up. We can have a very different life and an even better future when we make the changes we must and move on.

Nachman of Bratzlav offers help to those who are hardest on themselves. He says, "A person's soul should find rejuvenation and joy in me'at hatov- that little bit of good-that he finds within himself, some mitzvah or davar tov- some good thing-that he has done in his days. And in that same way, he has to continue to search within himself and find yet another bit of good." Bratzlav pushes those of us who have already made Teshuva to then forgive ourselves. Look deep within. There is a little bit of goodness that we can recognize. Did we do something nice at one point? Do we have even a little something to be proud of? Bratzlav counsels for us to focus

on even a little bit of goodness. He knows the depths of depression and he found that this can help one focus on the positive.

It is along these same lines that Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav offer great council on how to look at someone else more favorably. He teaches that we should look for a *nekudah tovah*, a little point of goodness, in them. Is there anything good or alright about this person? Even something small. Maybe the person has a decent smile or does one little thing right. I think this perspective is excellent because we have the tendency to focus on the negative. Can we find one good trait, one good deed, or one thing nice about a person? Nachman teaches that we should identify even this little bit of good. We should focus on this when we think of this person and when we see and interact with them. I have found this personally and professionally very helpful when people who annoy, irritate, or anger me. When I focus on something good about them, I find my interactions with them are more positive.

So here we are at Yom Kippur. I'm not going to ask you, "How many of you are willing to forgive your enemies." I will ask though that we consider it. We consider it for the sake of our health and wellbeing. We consider it for the sake of our families and friendship circle. And even if we can't forgive, we will try to focus on even a dot, a small point of goodness, when we think of them. If we can identify even a small speck of goodness, it is easier to be civil or polite to them at an event, grocery store, or neighborhood. Selichah, forgiveness, is hard. It's hard to let go but often we have to. We can't wait to outlive them, instead we can try to live and let live. Forgive and even if we can't forget, we can move on with our lives. With an open heart, an openness for selicha, we can move on to a new stage of relating to others and living our lives fully.

¹ <http://mistupid.com/jokes/page028.htm>

² Hilchot Teshuvah that hilchot teshuva 2:10

³ <http://www.aish.com/j/j/169591136.html>