

Life is too Short to be Unforgiving or Unforgiven

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In 1922, three right-wing German anti-semites assassinated Walter Rathenau, Germany's Jewish Foreign Minister. The driver of the get-away car was Ernst Werner Techow. Three days after Rathenau's death, Mathilde Rathenau, the victim's mother, sent a letter to Techow's mother.

She wrote, "In grief unspeakable, I give you my hand – you of all women are the most pitiable. Say to your son that, in the name and spirit of him he has murdered, I forgive, even as God may forgive, if before an earthly judge your son makes a full and frank confession of his guilt...and before a heavenly judge repents. Had he known my son, the noblest man earth bore, he would have rather turned the weapon on himself. May these words give peace to your soul. Mathilde Rathenau."

Sentenced to 15 years in prison, Techow was released after 5 years for good behavior. In 1940, when France surrendered to Nazi Germany, Techow smuggled himself into Marseilles where he helped over 700 Jews escape to Spain with Moroccan permits. While some had money, most were penniless, and Techow arranged their escapes for nothing.

Shortly before his activities in Marseilles, Techow met a nephew of Rathenau. He confided that his transformation had been triggered by Mathilde Rathenau's letter. He said, "Just as Frau Rathenau conquered herself when she wrote that letter of pardon, I have tried to master myself. I only wished that I would get an opportunity to right the wrong I've done."

Every High Holy Days, we annually revisit our own issues of forgiveness, guilt, and atonement. We revisit it all: the times we forgave and shouldn't have. The times we didn't forgive, but should have, and the anguish we still feel about it. The times we really screwed up and the guilt we still feel.

What wisdom can Judaism, our wisdom tradition, share with us about these matters? Judaism recognizes that forgiveness is not always easy. Nevertheless, Judaism teaches us to predispose ourselves to forgive and to be forgiven by others.

Forgiveness is one of the 13 core attributes of the God we worship. Forgiveness is, after all, the message of the book of Jonah which we read every year on Yom Kippur afternoon. As God forgave the Hebrews for worshipping the golden calf, so we are

challenged to imitate God's forgiving example. The Torah makes it quite plain: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge."

Does this mean that forgiveness is always appropriate? Some social psychologists say yes. They argue that the highest form of forgiveness is offered without preconditions, not even regret or a change of heart on the part of the wrongdoer. The act of forgiveness, they say, will inspire change in the wrongdoer. And even if it doesn't, it will help the victim to let go of hatred and to move on with life.

This philosophy of unconditional forgiveness underlies South Africa's famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and those of others around the world all believe that forgiveness and reconciliation are more important than justice or accountability.

Our Torah disagrees with this view. The Torah teaches that forgiveness must be earned. Telling the truth about one's crimes is not enough. Forgiveness requires the wrongdoer to change his/her ways now and for the future. For example, Joseph forgives his brothers only after his brothers pass on a second opportunity to cause pain to their father Jacob and to sell out another favored brother, Benjamin. After 20 years, Esau forgives Jacob only after Jacob wrestles with his own conscience and takes responsibility for his actions with Esau face to face.

For forgiveness, our rabbis require even more than the Torah. The Mishnah and the Talmud teach that forgiveness does not come free. The prerequisites for granting forgiveness are words of confession, sincere remorse, genuine apology, and acts of reparation.

The rabbis' preconditions for forgiveness are not intended to be punitive. Quite to the contrary, they are actually anchored in the rabbis' optimistic vision of human nature. Truly believing that humanity is created in the image of God, the rabbis insisted that humanity is capable of doing better, of behaving "little less than the angels." Therefore, the rabbis held humanity to a higher standard of accountability.

Our Torah also teaches us something very important about what to do with our feelings of guilt. After the Hebrews built and worshipped the golden calf, they felt horribly guilty and were quite upset with themselves. So what did God do? God commanded them to build the tabernacle, the portable desert sanctuary.

Having built something really bad with their own hands, God gave them another chance with their own hands to build something really good. Not only did God forgive the Hebrews. God helped the Hebrews to reclaim their self-esteem and to rediscover their own worth.

Our rabbis certainly believed in the healthy value of guilt. But they did not want to see the transformation of guilt into unhealthy shame. The rabbis especially emphasize the

importance of making amends before granting forgiveness, not only for the sake of the victim, but also for the sake of the wrongdoer as well.

I think our rabbis intuitively understood the internal connection between guilt and being unforgiving. Those who are highly unforgiving tend to be people who won't forgive themselves and won't engage in acts of atonement. They are truly stuck. They have converted their own guilt into toxic shame. If you find yourself being very unforgiving, it may have less to do with what someone actually did to you and more to do with your own inner feelings of guilt. The founder of Chassidism, the Baal Shem Tov, said, "If a man has beheld evil, it was shown to him in order that he learn his own guilt and repent; for what is shown to him is also within him."

My friends, **life is too short to be unforgiving or unforgiven.** On this first day of our magnificent New Year, let us make a New Year's resolution: to give people a chance to atone, a chance to make amends for whatever wrong they did you. And for those who we have wronged, let us surely ask to be given the opportunity to make things right.

Let us also resolve for this New Year to be more forgiving. While some acts are truly unforgivable, we can surely forgive more than we do. If we truly want to become a more forgiving person, it begins by addressing our own issues of shame, and continues by striving to become more empathetic. And we can apologize far more often than we do as well.

Dear God, "Teach us humility that we may perceive our own faults, and grant us the wisdom to be forgiving of others. Give us the courage to be true to our highest selves, and the charity to see the best in those around us."

We ask this of you, dear God, because we know only too well that **life is too short to be unforgiving or unforgiven.**