

The Enlightened Heart Is Predisposed to Forgive

For Yom Kippur

October 9, 2000

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The story is told of a man who was as wealthy as he was stingy. One day he went into a bakery and bought a delicious pastry. Then he quickly went back to his big, beautiful house, all the while imagining how good the pastry would taste. But on the way home, the man slipped and the pastry fell into the mud.

At that very moment, a poor beggar came by, hoping that this man dressed in such fine clothing might help him. Asking for tzedakah, the beggar extended his hand.

But instead of reaching into his pocket for some coins, the rich man handed him the pastry covered with mud. And the man actually felt pleased with himself: his purchase of the pastry had not been a total loss!

That night, the rich man had a dream. He was seated in a huge banquet hall with many, many people. They were being served all sorts of delicious food, including scrumptious pastries. The man asked for the waiter to bring him some food too. The waiter came back with a pastry covered with mud.

"What's this," screamed the wealthy man. "You bring me a dirty pastry? Why, I am a man of enormous means. I have enough money to make a delicious banquet for everyone seated in this huge banquet hall. Bring me what I deserve!"

"I am sorry, sir" replied the waiter. "But this is what you deserve. You see, you are now in the banquet hall of the world to come. Your wealth means nothing here! You are served in accordance with how many acts of loving kindness and deeds of tzedakah you fulfilled when you were on earth. Now we have searched your records and found that you did a righteous act only once in your entire life. You gave a beggar a pastry that had fallen in mud. So this is the reward we give you in the world to come."

The wealthy man woke up from his dream in a start. He knew exactly what he had to do. The very next day he sponsored a magnificent banquet for every poor person in the entire town. He spoke to each poor person personally, gently and respectfully. From that day on, the rich man became the most generous, kind, and righteous person that the village had ever known. The wealthy man sponsored this banquet for the poor people of his

village once a week every week for the rest of his life.

Now imagine yourself in such a dream. Where would you be seated? And what would you be served? On this Yom Kippur morning each of us must discover for ourselves exactly what deed of righteousness and acts of tzedakah we have to do! Today we wake up from sleep-walking our way through life. With eyes wide open and fully awake we take a turn in a new direction. This is what we mean by Yom Kippur.

From the beginning of these high holy days on Rosh Hashanah eve to the blowing of the shofar tonight at the close of Yom Kippur, there will be no spiritual task more frequently mentioned in our liturgy than that of forgiveness. *Veal kulam elohai selichot, selach lanu, mechal lanu, kaper lanu.* "For all these sins, o god of mercy, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement."

On this Yom Kippur morning, our God, the Source of love, the creator of forgiveness, lovingly urges us to re-examine all our relationships, to mend fences and build bridges to reconciliation and peace. But in order for this to happen, someone has to say, "I love you, I don't want to lose you -- please forgive me." And someone has to reply, "I forgive you."

Sometimes, it's terribly difficult to forgive. We don't want to forgive our "ex" with whom we had a loveless marriage and an even more acrimonious divorce. We don't want to forgive our neglectful parent who withheld love from us and criticized us and had no time for us. We don't want to forgive our family member who double-crossed us in business or our sibling who refused to accept our marriage partner. We don't want to forgive. We want to be angry. We want to bear a grudge.

But was that our highest and best self talking just now or our lowest and worst self? Our fixation on anger and hurt is like being in a prison. We don't think there is anyway out. But if you knew there was a path from estrangement to reconciliation and peace, wouldn't you take it?

Yes, I think most of us would. Because forgiveness saves. By granting forgiveness, we save ourselves from the inner turmoil that diminishes and poisons our lives. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes, "As the grudge anchors us to something long gone, it denies a part of us from being here in the present. It requires more and more psychic energy. It burrows deep into our personality, sapping our joy and our happiness."

In a tragic case of youth violence two years ago in Jonesboro, Arkansas, Sharon Wright, a teacher, was shot and killed trying to protect her students from two young boys with guns. She was survived by her husband, Mitchell, and one son.

Mitchell said, "If you let the hate and anger build in you, that's a very strong sin...my son's feelings toward those two will be what he gets from me. If all he hears is hate and anger, that's what he'll get. I don't want him to grow up with that.

Some of us might have watched the old TV show called "The Fugitive." It was based on the true family tragedy of the Sheppard family. Marilyn Sheppard was found murdered in 1954. Her husband, Dr. Sam Sheppard, was first convicted of the murder and later acquitted.

Now 52 years old, Sam Reese Sheppard writes, "I've had my rage. I still do, at times. Forgiveness is a daily process. I have to work at it. But I've learned that hatred is a cancerous emotion. I doubt that true closure is possible. But to live in anguish, pain, and anger is a horrible way to live."

Forgiving does not mean forgetting. Forgiving allows you to close an awful chapter and to begin a new one in your "book of life." Forgiveness is not a gift you give someone else. Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself.

What does our Jewish spiritual tradition teach about forgiveness? About pardon? About atonement? Can it help us negotiate the intricacies and complexities of human relating? Can it help us find a path to forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace?

On this Yom Kippur morning, let us take a quick journey of learning together. Let us study the Torah, the Talmud, and the medieval codes for a path to wholeness and peace in our lives and within the family constellation.

You already know what the Torah teaches about forgiveness. The mitzvot are well-known to you: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge." "You shall not hate" "You shall love your neighbor as yourself". You know that the biblical story of Jacob and Esau is a classic tale about the importance of forgiveness. You know that the book of Jonah, which we shall read during today's afternoon service, is a magnificent story about God's forgiveness of the Ninevites.

The Babylonian Talmud abounds in statements of esteem for the power of forgiveness. Recalling that our patriarch Abraham forgave Avimelekh and prayed to God for his recovery (B.T. Bava Kama 92a), the Talmud instructs that we too must not fail to be forgiving (B.T. Betzah 32b; B.T. Yevamot 79a) (cf. Also M.T. Laws of repentance 2:10 and Numbers Rabbah 8:4). The Talmud proudly declares that the Jewish people has always been distinguished by three characteristics. Jews "are merciful, sensitive to shame, and generous" (B.T. Yevamot 79a).

As we turn to the Medieval period of Jewish intellectual history, we find the striking statement of Maimonides, the towering Jewish sage of the middle ages. What characterizes Jews, says he, is that Jews "do not keep their anger forever." Then, in perhaps the most famous passage in all of Jewish sacred literature on the subject of forgiveness, Maimonides goes on to proclaim, "It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and refuse to be appeased. Rather, one should be easily pacified and difficult to anger. When the sinner asks for forgiveness, he should forgive him wholeheartedly and with generosity of soul. Even if the sinner aggravated and severely wronged him, he must not

seek revenge or bear a grudge. This is the path of the seed of Israel and their upright heart" (Mishneh Torah, Book of Knowledge, "Laws of Forgiveness" 2:10).

The Jewish heart is predisposed to forgive. The Jewish heart will not keep anger forever. Nor could we behave otherwise, for we worship a forgiving God. Forgiveness is one of God's 13 great attributes revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai. We are created *betzelem elohim*, in the image of that God. God wants us to be forgiving-minded people (B.T. Shabbat 133b).

So Jewish ethics encourages us to work hard to find that forgiving place within ourselves. It is *akzari*, "cruel," not to forgive. It is a violation of the Torah to bear a grudge or take revenge. And since there is no human being who has not done something for which we are rightly ashamed, by granting forgiveness to others we make it possible for God and other human beings to bestow the same generosity of spirit upon ourselves (B.T. Shabbat 151b; B.T. Rosh Hashanah 17a; B.T. Megillah 28a).

It seems to me that most of the hurts we cause others and the hurts they cause us are eminently forgivable. Yes, we may generate all sorts of rationalizations of why we can't forgive. But all too often what stands in the way of forgiveness is our angry and revengeful desire that someone must pay for the hurt we've been caused. More often than not, it is only our own pettiness and pride that robs us of true peace.

But what of the more serious wrongs we do to one another: does Jewish spiritual tradition teach that we are morally bound to forgive an unfaithful spouse? What about the partner who stole from the business? What about the relative who committed a crime?

No, we are not morally obligated to forgive them until they change. There is no divine grace here. Jewish ethics insists that we take responsibility for the consequences of our actions. Jewish ethics insists that forgiveness must be earned. It's not enough to say "I'm sorry" or "I'm seeing a therapist." We've been hearing that story for centuries. The Mishneh, a sacred Jewish text from the second century, has heard it before: "If someone says I will sin and then I will repent, I will sin and then repent, we do not allow them to repent." The prerequisite to being forgiven is serious change and the inner decision that one's future behavior will be different" (Schaefer).

Put differently, we are not obligated to forgive the person who wronged us. We are morally bound to forgive only the changed person who is on the journey to transform himself or herself into an altogether different human being (Mishneh Torah, Book of Knowledge, "Laws of Repentance" 2:4). Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz teaches, "[teshuvah] is more than just repentance for sin, it is a spiritual reawakening, a desire to strengthen the connection between oneself and the sacred."

We can earn forgiveness by going on a journey of five stages: the injuring party must: 1) concede the wrongness of his/her misdeeds 2) demonstrate genuine remorse, 3) privately confess to God his/her specific misdeeds, 4) make financial restitution wherever

applicable and 5) declare resolve never again to commit the same improper acts (Mishneh Torah, Book of Knowledge, "Laws of Repentance"2:9).

Please notice that Jewish spiritual tradition conceptualizes the seeking or granting of forgiveness as neither a one-time act nor a uni-directional act. Rather, forgiveness requires both the injuring party and the injured party to set out on a parallel journey of personal growth. Forgiveness is seen as the hoped-for outcome of an ongoing process of reconciliation.

But what if someone has done sincere *teshuvah* and fulfilled every prerequisite for forgiveness. What if this person is absolutely heart-broken about what he or she did to you and you still cannot find it within yourself to forgive ?

The midrash teaches that even God sometimes finds it difficult to forgive. In one Talmudic passage, God is portrayed as having to pray for the capacity to transcend divine justice in favor of divine mercy (B.T. Berakhot 7a). This Talmudic passage suggests that forgiveness sometimes violates God's own sense of justice. But when torn between choosing strict justice or mercy, God always prefers mercy.

Two years ago, Matthew Shepard, the victim of a hate crime against gays, was beaten to death in Laramie, Wyoming, by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. Although eligible for execution, Mr. McKinney was offered a sentencing agreement of life in prison without parole upon the insistence of Matthew's parents, Judy and Dennis Shepard. At the trial Mr. Shepard said, "I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney. However, this is the time to begin the healing process, to use this as the first step in my own closure about losing Matt, to show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy."

No one ever said that forgiving those who've hurt us would be easy. But if those who have suffered such terrible tragedies like Mitchell Wright and Sam Reese Sheppard and Judy and Dennis Shepard can find within themselves and their religious heritages a path to mercy and peace, then surely we can too.

Moreover, our unwillingness to forgive, getting stuck in that stuck place, is usually rooted not in anger – but in fear. Fear that forgiving means nothing will change for the better. Fear that forgiving means you will expose yourself to being hurt yet again. But forgiving doesn't have to make you vulnerable. Forgiving represents only the willingness to keep talking and to work toward reconciliation.

Forgiveness does not mean you forget about what went on in the past or open yourself to more of it. Forgiveness should not be confused with pardon. Pardon represents the willingness to wipe the slate clean, to act as if the wrongs of the past had never been. Pardon means to forgive and to forget. Pardon represents a higher stage of reconciliation than forgiveness, a stage when trust has been established and vulnerability is no longer an issue. Forgiving doesn't mean that things will revert back to the way they were either.

Forgiveness must always be accompanied by *kapparah*, atonement. These are the atoning acts that the injuring party must do to demonstrate good faith and a sincere change of heart and mind. At one time or another, everyone in this sanctuary has hurt someone else. We have no choice but to accept the consequences of our misdeeds. There is no *kapparah*, no atonement, without some pain and without giving something up.

To sum it up, forgiving is nothing to fear. We can do this. Always remember: it's through our embrace of divine forgiveness that we realize the divine within ourselves and thereby advance God's work of making a better world and establishing God's kingdom on earth.

In the last scene of Eugene O'Neill's heart-stopping play, "A Moon for the Misbegotten," Josie says to Jim, "May you have your wish and die in your sleep soon, Jim darling. May you rest forever in forgiveness and peace." Drama critic Ben Brantley observes, "We leave the theater wishing not only that we could have such a confessor as Josie, but also that we might have the power to offer such comfort to another."

Our world is cold and cruel enough as it is. Let us be such a comfort to one another. Let us warm up this world through *selichah*, *mechilah*, *kapparah*, and *ahavah* —through forgiveness and pardon and atonement and love.

Our spiritual challenge on this Yom Kippur morning is to rise above our feelings of hate and revenge, no matter how justifiable. Our spiritual challenge today is to choose a process of reconciliation over clinging to hurt and bearing a grudge. Our spiritual challenge this Day of Atonement is to embrace the words of Rabbi Hillel: do not treat anyone in a manner that you yourself would not wish to be treated. Our spiritual challenge this day is to forgive and to ask for forgiveness before it's too late.

And time is always running out. There is never any better time to begin the journey to wholeness within oneself and peace with others than the present moment. Shall we respond to those who have hurt us or disappointed us or disillusioned us like one of those who keeps his or her anger forever -- or shall we respond with *lev nachon*, "An open and generous heart" ? The path of spiritual enlightenment is clear. But "as with everything we ponder on these High Holy Days, the choice is in [your] hands" (Rabbi Michael Signer).