

Kol Nidrei 5780
Toward Forgiving
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About 6 weeks after Yom Kippur last year, a former student of mine reached out to me and shared a painful situation in her life. Someone had committed a crime against her which had left her distraught. Throughout the days of repentance, all she wanted was for the person who had hurt her to be punished. Moreover, she was worried about her own *t'shuvah*. She wanted to know: Did she fulfill her duties on Yom Kippur if she could not forgive the person who had wronged her?

Her question resonated in my own heart. As a young adult, I was very hurt by someone I liked. That person committed a crime against me. And for many years, I, too, came to Yom Kippur services wondering if I should forgive, and if so, whether I should forgive for my own benefit or for the sake of the person who had wronged me.

I will attempt to answer that question tonight. Let's start by clarifying what we are supposed to be doing in the forgiveness department.

Forgiveness is one piece of a much larger picture. The larger picture is about our relationships, on two levels: our relationships with others, and our relationships with God. We miss the mark in both categories. Regarding our relationships with God, our job at this time of year--and all times of year, actually--is to seek atonement for those times when we made our lives and our environment more profane or just plain ugly when we could have made it more sacred. We ask God's forgiveness for not holding up our end of the bargain our ancestors made, for holding back from bringing holiness into this world. For many of us, the notion of sinning against God and then returning to a more aligned relationship may be complicated on a philosophical level, and for others it is very important and the main reason we are here today--but either way, it makes sense logically that we would ask for God's forgiveness for wrongs against God, and hopefully God will accept our desire to return to relationship and forgive us, because God also wants to be in relationship with us.

Things get more complicated when it comes to relationships between us and other people. Maimonides makes it clear in his Laws of *T'shuvah* that we must ask forgiveness directly from the ones we have wronged in order to be forgiven. But for the wrongs we have committed against others, we must ask forgiveness directly from those we have wronged. Only if we are refused after begging forgiveness strenuously at least three separate times can we

come here to ask God to absolve us of wrongs we have committed against other people. You have probably heard that before.

There are times when a public apology is called for, and I want to offer my own apology tonight. We have members who have felt on the margins due to their political views. It has recently come to my attention that, on occasion, I have unintentionally reinforced the idea that only one perspective is welcome. That was never my intention and indeed it is something I work hard to avoid. We need to be able to hear different viewpoints and it is important that we respect one another in our sacred home, a place where you are *all* welcome and loved. I apologize for those times when, despite my best intentions, I contributed to someone feeling distant from the heart of our community.

On Yom Kippur, we actually do a lot of praying not only about how we've messed things up with God, but also about how we've messed things up with people. Even after we've had the conversations we needed to have, we want to get at the root causes of our mistakes. So we acknowledge that we have been self-centered, that we have turned a blind eye, that we let our appetites get the better of us, and so on. We atone for our character flaws and attitudes that led us to wrong other people. We ask God to help us become better people. And, our humility helps us to find compassion for others who have hurt us, so that we *can* forgive. The whole system falls apart if we cannot forgive people who feel true remorse and beseech us for forgiveness.

So, what about our obligation to forgive others? Rambam's Laws of T'shuvah stipulate that when a person asks for our forgiveness, it is forbidden to withhold it, to hold a grudge, or take revenge. We must pardon wholeheartedly, even if we were persecuted greatly. Our tradition very much hopes that we *can* forgive. Our tradition values human relationships and regards them as sacred, and our ways depend on community. We need each other, at least in a broad sense, so we are encouraged to return to each other.

With that as background, it makes sense that many people come to shul on Yom Kippur believing that we should forgive people who have hurt us. We want to cleanse ourselves of bitterness, and we do not want to leave here with unresolved issues. But I want to problematize the notion that we must forgive those who hurt us. From my experience as a person who has been hurt by others, I am troubled by the pressure that places on people who may not feel that they can, or should, forgive.

We should start by defining what we mean when we talk about forgiveness. It turns out that "forgiveness" is a term that means different things to different people. Jewish sources do not define "forgiveness" explicitly so I am suggesting a working definition from contemporary

scholarship. Psychologists have developed therapeutic interventions called “forgiveness therapy.” In fact, the groundbreaking work took place right here at the UW in the mid-80s. Robert Enright was part of the research team, and he went on to study, write about and speak about forgiveness. Enright offers the following definition of forgiveness: “When unjustly hurt by another, we forgive when we overcome the resentment toward the offender, not by denying our right to resentment but instead by trying to offer the wrongdoer compassion, benevolence, and love. As we give these, even as we know that the offender does not necessarily have a right to such gifts and even as we know that we are morally entitled to be angry. Forgiveness is a process that can take a long time to complete. It is a choice we may choose to make, and it is a risk.

Let us now acknowledge that forgiving others can be very beneficial. Maimonides knew a fair amount about human nature. He understood that in general, people thrive better when we let go of anger and resentment. You may have heard the quote “Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.” It eats away at us. Science confirms that carrying around anger and hurt is detrimental to our health in all kinds of ways. Psychologists confirm with substantial and credible evidence that forgiveness produces benefits for those who forgive.

Our tradition also hopes that people will forgive each other when possible. In the Torah, Joseph’s brothers need to be assured that Joseph has forgiven them after their father has died, that he will treat them as brothers and not exact retribution. After the Sin of the Golden Calf, God gives the Israelites instructions for building the Tabernacle in the wilderness. According to the medieval commentator Rashi, receiving those instructions fulfills a fundamental human need to be forgiven, and it is that concern that permeates the consecration of the Tabernacle. At the conclusion of the consecration ceremonies, we understand that the sin of the Golden Calf has been atoned for and God wants renewed closeness with the nation. It is a relief. People breathe easier when they know they are forgiven and taken back into relationship with others they care about.

The rabbis of the Talmud want us to make ourselves available to people who have wronged us so that they can ask our forgiveness. They relate the following story: Once, Rabbi Zeira had a complaint against a person who had insulted him. So he would go and pace back and forth before him, probably in front of his home, presenting himself so that the person would come out and appease him (Yoma 87a). Rabbi Zeira tried to make it easier for the other person to apologize to him. Why would he do that? Probably not only for the moral value of compassion. More likely, he genuinely wanted to restore their relationship. Ideally, we thrive when our relationships are life-giving.

Holocaust survivor Eva Kor, who died this past year, gives us a powerful example of forgiveness. She and her twin sister, Miriam, were subjected to Dr. Mengele's medical experiments at Auschwitz. She tells her story clearly and movingly. Needless to say, Eva and Miriam were deeply traumatized. Although they did survive, Miriam eventually died a premature death as an adult due to the damage that was done to her by Mengele. Half a century later, as an American citizen living in Indiana, Eva forgave the Nazis. She had not planned to forgive. She carried her pain with her for all of those years, and then she surprised herself. She met with a Nazi doctor in Germany and learned details from him about what, exactly, happened at Auschwitz. The doctor was remorseful. Eva wanted to send the doctor some sort of gift to thank him. For 10 months, she tried to think of how best to do that, until one day, she realized that she had reached a point in her own healing process where what she wanted to do was tell that doctor that she forgave him for his complicity. She felt she was ready and willing to forgive him for his role. Months later, she forgave Mengele in her heart. From there, she went on to forgive all of the Nazis and everyone who ever had hurt her. Her process was internal. She considered how she felt at each step in the process. No longer was she a prisoner of her tragic past. She felt liberated--even, as she put it, elated.

So, it is possible to forgive, and when we can forgive, it can be profoundly redemptive, regardless of whether our forgiveness has any effect at all on those we have forgiven.

But *must* we always forgive, and must we forgive *today*?

In his Laws of T'shuvah, Maimonides does *not* teach that we are required to forgive people who have not repented and come to us to beg forgiveness. Our tradition asks us to forgive others when they *ask* for our forgiveness, yes, but nowhere in Judaism are we required to forgive people who have hurt us if they do not beg our forgiveness. So that is one thing: we are not required to forgive people who have not asked for our forgiveness.

We could stop there, but I want to push the point further and ask, if people do not ask for forgiveness, do we still have a *moral* obligation to forgive them?

Based on what I have learned, I would say that we do not have a moral obligation to forgive. Forgiveness is a choice that involves unpacking and process our feelings about what happened to us. Those feelings can take a lot of time to work out, and even then, we are not morally bound to forgive. In my case, for decades I was unable to feel anger that would have been perfectly justified. I only felt shame. I was stuck emotionally, in ways I didn't even realize until I began a process that eventually did lead to forgiveness. But it did not have to. That was *my* choice.

Forgiving someone does not mean that we trust them again. It is not something we declare by fiat and it is not a tool of manipulation, as in “I’ll forgive you, and then you must change.” It is not condoning or excusing. It is not forgetting. It is not calming down and moving on. Forgiveness will not necessarily transform the one who is forgiven. Real forgiveness involves moving forward and sliding back within our own psyches. It is an act of mercy, and that is difficult. When we’re doing it, forgiveness feels like it’s more about us than the people who have wronged us--which in most cases, it probably is.

I think it is very interesting that the laws of *t’shuvah* are not found among the laws for Yom Kippur. Rather, the laws of *t’shuvah* are for every day, all year long. And, critically, they are not commanded. Maimonides tells us that *t’shuvah* can only come from a place where our own freedom stirs within us. I believe that holds whether we are on the forgiving side or on the side seeking forgiveness. Maimonides understood something prescient: Atonement and forgiveness are invaluable, ongoing processes for human thriving--and they depend upon human agency. We are the ones who set them in motion. Today is a time for us to introspect and move ourselves as far as one intense day can allow. For what is between us and God, we sincerely hope for atonement on this day. For what is between us and others, we need more than this one day. This day may not be the time when we are ready to complete the complex process of forgiving other people who have hurt us. Our job today is to move the needle, by moving ourselves.

These 25 hours offer a gift: the help of God as we attempt to gain clarity about how we are responding to our lives, to examine whether and how we are living from the purest core of our being. That includes the work of confronting our responses to having been hurt by others. Real forgiveness is about how we decide to survive after being hurt. The choice to forgive *can* be a life-giving, emotionally freeing, and spiritually elevating choice. It is a process we may choose, whether we do so to make ourselves more whole, to restore a relationship, or to give the gift of compassion to someone who has wronged us. It may be all three, or maybe not.

Regardless of the type of baggage we carry in our hearts, **our moral and religious imperative for this day, I believe, is to look deep within ourselves and discern our next step forward. That is why we are here.**

And so, I offer this prayer on behalf of anyone who has struggled to forgive others:

May we have the ability to us discern our truth.

My we find as much compassion as we can hold in our hearts.

May we forgive ourselves for what we did not say.
May we be forgiven for not finding the right words.
May we forgive ourselves for acting like we were not hurt.
May we be forgiven for being angry at the wrong people, or for not being angry enough.
May we forgive ourselves for being naive.
May we be forgiven for blaming ourselves for what was not our fault.
May we forgive ourselves for not owning our pain.
May we be forgiven for covering our most beautiful selves with layers of protection.
May we be forgiven for not trusting people who tried to help.
May we be forgiven for what we did on the rebound.
May we be forgiven for what we drank and what we ate.
May we be forgiven for not being able to fix what was broken.
May we be forgiven for how we chose to survive.
May we know when it is time to let go.
May we find the strength to be vulnerable despite our fear.
May we open our hearts to trust in goodness and love.
May there be people in our lives who see our goodness.
May they hold us close when we suffer.
May our hopes of reconciliation be answered with compassion.
May we be held in God's unending love and compassion.

May God's tender mercy find us all and lift us up.

Amen.