

To Forgive or Not to Forgive

Kol Nidre 5776 – September 22, 2015 – Mount Zion Temple - Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker

“How could they just forgive him?”

“What?” I managed to get out. Royal asked me again, “Rabbi, how could they just forgive him?” We were speed walking in the early morning on the Journey for Justice in Alabama. Just four of us, two 20 year olds, and Royal and me; the crack team to make up some lost time in the walk to get us back on schedule. Royal was not going to let this be a light walk. He, a leader in the NAACP, was asking my opinion about forgiveness.

“How could they just forgive him?” The “him” was Dylann Roof, the white terrorist who killed nine people in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston in June. The “they” were family of the victims. Not long after the shooting, Nadine Collier, the daughter of Ethel Lance, one of the victims, said to Dylann in his first court appearance: “I forgive you...I will never talk to her ever again, never be able to hold her again. I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me, you hurt a lot of people, but I forgive you.”

There is something admirable about the faith that enabled Nadine and the other family members to forgive, but also something confusing. What kind of forgiveness is this? What does it mean? Royal, on our walk, did not wait for my answer. He launched right in: “It was not right. Justice needs to be served. Dylann needs to admit wrongdoing and be punished. We are nowhere close to thinking about forgiveness.” I agreed. This is a Jewish way of thinking about forgiveness, but Royal’s question started me on a path of reflection.

On this night of forgiveness and atonement, Kol Nidre, we read: “For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones; but for transgressions of one human being against another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another.”ⁱ

How is peace made? When the person who has done wrong goes through a process of turning, *teshuvah*, repentance. It starts with recognition of one’s actions as wrongs (*hakarát ha-chét*), and then four additional steps: remorse, desisting from sin, restitution where possible, and confession (*vidúí*). When you do wrong, you can start with any part of this process, the analysis, the feeling, or the action. Ideally all five steps are done before forgiveness is granted but most important is the action of making things right and ceasing to sin. This is how we rid the world of evil and bad behavior. We lay out a process that puts responsibility on the one who does wrong. All this is necessary before one seeks forgiveness from God.

In contrast, the family members of the Charleston shooting victims offered a free forgiveness, a merciful forgiveness that required nothing from the perpetrator. “I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. You hurt me, you hurt a lot of people, but I forgive you.” It was a Christian view that all are sinners and so I place you in God’s mercy, but you will not have power over my heart. I will not harbor hatred, only love. Your act will not change me. You are free from my anger but I am also free from my anger turning into resentment and making my loss even more miserable.

This kind of forgiveness, of freeing oneself from resentment regardless of the behavior of the wrongdoer such as Dylann, is different from the forgiveness that leads to reconciliation after repentance. They are two sides of the same coin, and though Judaism emphasizes *teshuvah*, a process of change, leading to forgiveness, the forgiveness by grace can also be found in our tradition. Both are important. There are

times when the wrongdoer does not deserve forgiveness and yet even then, there are significant reasons for forgiveness.

Would we forgive Dylann Roof if we were in that position? Are there unforgiveable crimes? Who has the right to offer forgiveness when the victims are no longer here? Can there be collective forgiveness, for an entire people or country or religion? Elie Wiesel has publically struggled with these questions on our behalf. He has asked, does anyone have the right to even consider forgiving when a million and a half children are dead? Yet in the year 2000, during a speech in the German Parliament commemorating the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel said to the assembled German leaders, "You have been helpful to Israel after the war, with reparations and financial assistance. But you have never asked the Jewish people to forgive you for what the Nazis did." Two weeks later, the Bundes president, Johannes Rau, went to the Israeli Knesset and did just that.ⁱⁱ "Before the people of Israel I pay humble tribute to those who were murdered, who have no graves at which I could ask their forgiveness. I ask forgiveness for what Germans have done - for myself and my generation, for the sake of our children and children's children, whose future I would like to see at the side of the children of Israel."

Whatever we think the response should be to the seeking of forgiveness, Germany's actions are changed from World War II. Germany today is accepting more refugees from Syria than any other country. As a Jew, I cannot address the topic of forgiveness without bringing up the Holocaust, but I want to bring us now away from the collective which is challenging, back to the personal which is not much easier.

When can we say "I forgive you" to another person who hurt us? It can be hard enough to say "I forgive you" when the wrongdoer is deserving! If someone who has wronged you truly is penitent and seeks your forgiveness, you ought not to withhold it. Maimonides gives the gold standard: "When the person who wronged [you] asks for forgiveness, [you] should forgive him with a complete heart and a willing spirit. Even if he aggravated and wronged [you] severely, [you] should not seek revenge or bear a grudge." (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tshuvah 2:10*).

Our tradition recognizes that this is not easy. You may choose not to say, "I forgive you". In that case, it is up to the one who wronged you to find a different way to seek your forgiveness. If you again refuse, there needs to be some time and yet another way. Imagine seeking forgiveness from the same person three times! This is a high bar. If at that point you still refuse, then you are in the wrong, the burden shifts to you. You are preventing a person from changing. If you refuse this third time to forgive, then you have sinned. (Lev 18:18).

Imagine saying these words to a co-worker who had truly wronged you but then felt awful about it and apologized: "I forgive you for what you did to me." When done intentionally, the words are powerful and transformative. Sometimes we say the words without intention, like kids following direction from their parent. Say, "I'm sorry." Say, "I forgive you." Like a play that will shut down on opening night. It doesn't convince us. When intention is there, because of a true process or conviction, the same words can change everything.

It is harder of course to say "I forgive you," when the wrong is closer to our hearts or the crime more significant, even if the person who did it is penitent. What would it take to say: I forgive you for leaving us when I was a child? I forgive you for gambling away our savings. I forgive you for years of abuse.

Some offenses feel unforgiveable. They are too heinous, the crimes too severe. In Judaism, there is room *not* to forgive especially if the process of *teshuvah* is not complete. You may choose not to forgive, but then comes the question: at what cost to yourself?

This is where forgiveness moves from a *result* of justice, to an *act* of mercy for our self, even more than for the one who did the wrong. In this sense, according to Dr. Robert Enright in his book *Forgiveness is a Choice*: “Forgiveness is not: condoning or excusing, nor forgetting, nor justifying, nor calming down, nor pseudo-forgiving (de nada – it was nothing.) It is not yet reconciliation which may or may not happen.” What it is, according to Rabbi Abraham Twersky, is letting go of resentment.

We are no longer in the realm of Yom Kippur’s ideal of atonement coming from the just process of return. This is forgiveness even in the absence of apology.

Sometimes it takes stepping back and giving perspective. Rabbi Pesach Krauss would show people he counseled a piece of paper with one dot on it and asked folks to describe what they saw. Most of course say, “a dot”, but Rabbi Krauss reminds them that there is far more blank space on that page. He tells them that this space represents all that is precious and good in their life. We spend so much of our energy on the darkness. What would it take to shift our focus to the light?ⁱⁱⁱ

When we are wronged, we harbor resentment, the re-feeling of the original anger. Dr. Enright says. “Anger is like a flame, resentment like a hot coal. Humans can keep a coal that should get cold, alive and hot indefinitely. Forgiveness allows us to drown out that coal and stir it up to prove that resentment is no longer a danger.” (p. 13-14). Anger is a reaction we cannot always control, but we have a choice about reliving that anger. The choice to forgive, to let go of resentment, can be a long process through years of therapy. It can also be more immediate, a personal practice of *being* a forgiving person so that when hurts come in life, as they will, your reflex is not to harbor resentment. This is the forgiveness the families in Charleston practiced which grew out of faith.

It can also grow out of nurturing our character traits of humility and equanimity. Humility is observing how much space we take up for our self and our needs. Equanimity is restoring a calmness to our souls.

Rabbi Karyn Kedar speaks to this kind of forgiving in her book, *A Bridge to Forgiveness*: “Not forgive and forget. Or turn the other cheek. Rather, releasing resentment, anger and fear to restore an inner light of our holy soul. Forgiveness is a spiritual state, a way of being in the world that is sustainable with work and practice. Forgiveness can be about the other but not necessarily. It can be about reconciliation but not necessarily. It is always about finding what you have lost, restoring a sense of wholeness, redeeming your inner light. It is always about an internal process of loss and acceptance, pain and understanding, anger and blessings, love and faith regained.”

In our liturgy of forgiveness tonight, we implored: *slach lanu, m’chal lanu, caper lanu*, three verbs translated as “forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.” In order of importance, the first level is *méchila*, a pardon, freeing the other from any kind of indebtedness and releasing your resentment. The second level is *selicha*, forgiveness, a more empathetic level because one understands the other person’s context and journey and accepts the desire for change. The final level *kappara*, atonement, is only offered by God after the first two levels are attained, a wiping of the slate clean.^{iv}

Our tradition has understood these categories differently over the centuries. There are overlapping meanings. *Selicha*, which many argue is the deeper forgiveness, in modern Hebrew actually means, “pardon me”, as in when you bump into someone. Others say *méchila* is the deeper kind of forgiveness because it frees someone from any further responsibility related to their sin. However we understand pardon and forgiveness, there is a certain paradox presented. We make it very hard to get to forgiveness and also very easy. It can be granted with mercy or one may have to prove one is worthy. The ideal is still to help someone go through the process of *teshuvah*. That is justice and rids the world of evil. At the same time the rabbis imagined God writing only one prayer for Godself and it is this: “May

it be My will that My mercy suppress my anger, and that it may prevail over My attributes of justice and judgement; and that I may deal with My children according to the attribute of compassion, and that I may not act toward them according to the strict line of justice (Brachot 7a). When we are merciful, even with forgiveness, we emulate God.

Slach lanu, m'chal lanu, caper lanu. Forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement. Thus, *mechila*, pardon, can be offered as the result of *teshuvah* or given out of mercy. *Selicha*, the deeper forgiveness, often comes after this pardon, but on Yom Kippur it is given first. *Slach lanu, m'chal lanu.* The placement of forgiveness first, before pardon, suggests that forgiveness is often not a single magnanimous gesture in response to an isolated offense; rather a way of life in nurturing and healing relationships.

This is nowhere more true than within families and sometimes within friendship circles. Everything becomes more complex within life-long relationships where cycles of wrongs make it hard to know whose wrongs are more egregious. Memories are imperfect. They are shaped by emotion. Rabbi Charles Klein writes in *How to Forgive When You Can't Forget*: "I know of families in which every member routinely disappoints and hurts one another. They always seem to fall short of each other's expectations. Nonetheless, there is, above all, a commitment to family and to each other which binds them together. They know that there is something irreplaceably precious which overshadows the wounds and bruised feelings. Each relationship survives because those involved understand that even a flawed relationship is not to be casually discarded. Families such as these remind us that true family is found where people share a sense of history, a dream of a common future, and a rootedness in the lives of one another." This is not always the case. When relationships break, which happens for some of us, or all of us at some point, when someone has said or done hurtful things, when another seems to have hardened her or his heart perhaps to protect feelings, days of distance or anger can turn to months and years of resentment. Emotional or actual estrangement can happen too easily. What is clear is that there is nothing good about broken relationships. To heal them can be the work of years or just one moment.

As poet Marge Piercy writes:

We forgive those we firmly love
because anger hurts, a coal that burns
and smoulders still scorching the tissues
inside, blistering wherever it touches
so that finally it is to ease our own pain
that we bury the hot clinkers in a mound
of caring, suffocate the sparks with promises,
drown them in tears, reconciling.

We forgive mostly not from strength
but through imperfections, for memory
wears transparent as a glass with the pattern
washed off, till we stare past what injured us.

We forgive because we too have done
the same to others easy as a mudslide;
or because anger is a fire that must be fed
and we are too tired to rise and haul a log.

Before we are too tired, we can actively seek forgiveness. Before it is too late, we can seek healing. Every night, traditionally, we have a bedtime prayer that includes the Shema but begins with a less familiar paragraph offering *mechila*, pardon, forgiveness, to all who have done us wrong. This is the daily

practice of forgiveness that leads us to forgive more easily. It was said by Mar Zutra in Talmudic times because he empathized with the imperfections of being human. He contextualized disappointments in others' behaviors. Thus he could freely give his forgiveness when he wrote this nighttime prayer, preserved in every traditional prayer book:

I hereby forgive all who have hurt me, all who have angered or antagonized me or who sinned against me whether against my body, my property, my honor, or against anything of mine, whether by accident, willfully, carelessly, or purposely, whether through speech, deed, thought or notion. ^v

May you experience such forgiveness in your life and offer it to others. In whatever ways needed, may you find the first step of releasing the burning coals of resentment. May 5776 bring you a merciful forgiveness in your heart and upon your lips.

ⁱ Literally "until he appeases with his friend." Appeases is "yirtze" which can mean "gain favor, reconcile, makes peace". It is interesting that the term of the one being appeased is "chaver", that is, a friend, a companion. It is not a stranger or neighbor. One wonders is this is too high a bar for seeking favor.

ⁱⁱ A very important film on this topic is "The Power of Forgiveness" which was shown at last year's Men's Retreat. We reflected that the word "forgiveness" seems to mean different things. For some, it means letting go of hatred and revenge. For others, it means pardoning the wrong. Elie Wiesel speaks in this film: <http://www.thepowerofforgiveness.com/>

ⁱⁱⁱ As found in: *How to Forgive When You Can't Forget: Healing our Personal Relationships* by Rabbi Charles Klein (p.62).

^{iv} I owe some of this language to Dr. David Blumenthal in his seminal essay "Repentance and Forgiveness", though I started realizing that I disagreed with Blumenthal's categorical understandings of Slicha and Mechila. He does not reference the bedtime prayer which suggests a "pardon by grace" or the miiddah (character/soul trait) of forgiveness. <http://www.crosscurrents.org/blumenthal.htm>

^v The prayer continues: "May no one be punished on my account. Whatever sins I have done before You, may You blot them out in Your abundant mercies, but not through suffering or bad illnesses. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you. My Rock and Redeemer."