



Forgiveness

By Rabbi Jesse Gallop

There is a story about a painter whose latest work was being unveiled before a gathering of art critics. They were scrutinizing the painting, when one critic noticed what he felt was a glaring oversight by the artist. The critic called out, "Sir, I see that the door to the house in the painting has no handle. Was that deliberate?" The painter responded, "The house represents the human heart. And there is no handle because it can only be opened from within."

Each of us has the ability to let another into our heart. To trust and let people in is one of the hardest, and yet holiest task we perform. By allowing another human to get close to us, we become vulnerable. At times we even get hurt. And when someone breaks our trust, we are thus hurt emotionally and spiritually. And once this trust is broken it is very hard to forgive.

On Yom Kippur we are commanded to forgive. For today is our Day of Atonement. For the mishna teaches: -"For transgressions between one person and another, the Day of Atonement atones, only if the first one appeases the other." When we hurt another we are obligated to help heal and satisfy the need of the one we offended. We are commanded to ask for forgiveness from those we have sinned against.

But what is our role as the one who forgives? We might think our role is to be passive, waiting for the sinner to come to us. But our great sage Moses Maimonides, the Rambam, teaches "When one person sins against another, he should not hide the matter and remain silent... rather, it is a mitzvah for him to bring the matter into the open and say, "Why did you do such and such to me?" ...And if the person [who sinned] returns and asks him for forgiveness, then he should forgive, for the forgiver should not be cruel... (Laws of Moral Conduct 6:6)." It might seem foreign or uncomfortable to us that we are required to exonerate and pardon. Many may feel, "Saying sorry does not equal the pain I went through. Only when he shows me that he can empathize and understand how deeply I was hurt, only then will I forgive."

We must remind ourselves that we will never know to what depth one is grieved by his or her short comings and wrong doings. You will never know the true extent of an apology. We need to have hope in humanity that one who comes to us has gone through true anguish and repentance by the time she or he has come to speak to us. But as a mere human, we must be humble enough to accept that we are only mortals. We lack an eternal perspective on the world...we are not God. Rather we hope just as we struggle to learn from our mistakes that others go on the same voyage. For if we live in sacred relationships with God and community then we are all struggling together. Searching, learning and growing to understand how and why we hurt others, especially those we love.

Rashi reminds us that we have limitations and that many times when we get hurt by others we forget all the positive they have done for us. Rashi explains. "Even though they threw your first born into the Nile. Nonetheless, you must not hate the Egyptians." We are not allowed to bear a grudge towards the Egyptians For when you were in need, when famine hit the land of Canaan and Jacob and his sons sought refuge and sustenance, the Egyptians saved them from famine and starvation. They extended their hospitality for many generations. Due to the care, warmth and friendship of Egypt our people survived. It was only the last generation, with a Pharaoh "who did not know Jacob", that wanted to bring pain and terror to our people. Rashi reminds us that we forget so easily the good this sinner has done in the past.

In our obligation to forgive, we must be aware of our psychological and spiritual needs. Because if we are not true to ourselves then we will say that we absolve what has transpired but our hearts and souls will continue to stoke the fire of rage and hurt that is within us. So many of us struggle with the concept of forgiveness because it contradicts our logical sensibilities. It seems more rational not to trust someone who hurt us than letting the perpetrator back into our lives. Commonsense may be that we are to learn from the past hurt and carry those understandings into future friendships and relationships. However, we know that this way of life will never bring us happiness or contentment in life. Theologian Martin Buber has great insight on the matter, he states, "A person chooses death by not forgiving. Forgiveness is the great Yes. Acting in accordance with the Highest Ideals of our tradition, I do not have a choice whether or not I should forgive you. I only have a choice whether or not I will, And I must if I want to be alive". Therefore our 1st step towards forgiveness is by choosing life and accepting that we need, for selfish reasons, to forgive others.

After we accept the need for forgiveness, we need to accept that our hearts need healing, and that by forgiving others, no matter how hard it is, brings health to our lives. Our heart is like our bones, "a mended limb may be stronger than one never broken." Sometimes through pain we learn how much we truly love ourselves causing us to heal. This is our second step, for Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a story that enlightens us on the power of forgiveness, "I knew a woman who had been mistreated by her husband and who, ten years after her divorce, could still not surrender her rage. I counseled, "For ten years you have been walking around with a hot poker in your hand, ready to throw it at your ex-husband. But you've never had the chance. All you've done is burn your hand." Therefore it is sometimes worth forgiving not for the sake of the one who hurt us, but for our own. Not letting go of our rage is likely to have the effect of prolonging, not shortening, our suffering." How much pain do you need to self induce before you forgive?

The third step in our process of healing is realizing that the sinner or transgressor is only human. Forgiveness is the act of admitting humility, acknowledging that each of us is just like all other people. And that all humanity, including ourselves, makes mistakes. Rabbi Harlan Weschler helps us to understand this. He teaches, "keep in mind that we will never be able to live with one another if we expect perfection. We will never be worthy of each other if we do not try to achieve a more perfect love, as perfect as can be. To do so, we must be engaged in a life long effort to achieve reconciliation, through all the steps of repentance, and into that place which is the holy of holies to us,

the heart of someone whom we love.” When we are able to see each other’s hearts, even those that hurt us, we are thus able to see each human’s holiness, including our own.

The fourth and final step of internalizing forgiveness is realizing that our act helps to bring about tikkun olam; By forgiving you are help to heal the world. The famous Holocaust survivor Rabbi Leo Baeck reflects, “Let there be peace for those of ill will, and an end to all vengeance and all talk of penalty and punishment... and that we, when all of this is over, may live again as humans among humans, and that there will be peace again on this poor earth upon persons of good will, and that peace may also come upon the others.” By healing the world and focusing on God’s partnership with humanity we are reminded about what life is truly about.

Today we emulate God, who finishes the day sitting on the throne of forgiveness. We are reminded of the words of our closing service later today, “Forgive your neighbors the wrongs they have done you, and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven. If I nurse anger against another, can I ask pardon of the Eternal One? Showing no pity for one like myself, can I then plead for my own sins? If I, a creature of flesh, nourish resentment, who will forgive me my sins?” (p.500)

May this Day of Atonement remind us that through our love for Adonai, we are challenged to love all of God’s creatures, even the ones that hurt us dearly. May this day of reflection help us to understand the meaning of life. I would like to close in the words of Rabbi Charles Klein, “Holidays and holy days are mountains in time. They are moments when some are able to acquire a deeper understanding of life and what life requires of us....As we climb above the clamor and pettiness of daily life, we reach a vantage point from which life is viewed differently. We can see how many irreplaceable hours are spent nursing grievances. Perched upon these mountains, we often become wiser. Insults, disappointments, and hurts we’ve suffered appear smaller. These sacred times are the substance of life. From the top of these mountains, we see more clearly that life is too short to be unforgiving.” May we internalize and accept that today is a day of struggle not just to recognize our short comings and make change, teshuvah. But that today is also a day in which we accept the faults in others as well. Let us support and nurture each other so that we can be partners in seeking holiness in our lives, especially through the act of forgiveness.

Ken Y’hei Ratzon, May this be God’s will.

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