

## FORGIVENESS

### INTRODUCTION

At High Holy Days last year I spoke about apologies. I explored the American fascination with apologies and the criteria for a good apology. Hopefully, all of us have cut down on our "but apologies" during the past year. This year I want to look at the response to apologies, namely what we call forgiveness. After all, the goal of an apology is forgiveness. On Yom Kippur, we mention in our prayers different kinds of sins: those we do accidentally, those we do intentionally and those we do out of rebellion. Just as there are different types of wrong doing, I want to suggest that there are different types of forgiveness, or ways in which we respond to the wrong committed towards us.

As you can imagine there are many people who come into my office struggling with a variety of issues of forgiveness. People who feel that they have been egregiously harmed and question whether they should be required to forgive. The friends who no longer talk because one of them gossiped about the other one. How do you forgive when there is a serious violation of trust in a marriage? What happens when there has been a serious conflict between two business partners and one is accused of illegal and immoral actions? How do you get past a vicious divorce? Each case has a different set of circumstances and the type of forgiveness varies. I want to look at, not only how forgiveness deals with the past, but more importantly how it impacts our future.

### JEWISH VIEW

The Rabbinic view of forgiveness is clear, it requires that the person who committed the act ask for forgiveness from the person he or she wronged. But do you have to forgive the person? According to Rambam if a person refuses a sincere apology the one who was denied forgiveness should go back with a group of three friends and try again a second time and if needed even a third time. If after three times the wronged party will not grant forgiveness then, in the words of Rambam, "he is now considered as the sinner."

We could get into a great philosophical discussion about granting forgiveness to someone like Hitler, or Charles Manson, but I want to focus on the real conflicts of our every day lives. We grant forgiveness on a daily basis. Most of them are minor infractions. We forgive people for insensitive and stupid comments. We forgive drivers for cutting us off in traffic and the person in front of us at the grocery store who picked our line to win the extreme couponing challenge, thereby making our hectic day even more hectic. We forgive all the time... so what happens to us in the moment that we hold someone's actions against them sufficiently that forgiveness is required? By the way, how many times has it happened that you weren't even aware that you had offended someone and had to be told. Or better yet, through the other person's passive-aggressive behavior had to ask the question, "is there something I did?"

Rabbi Charles Klein, author of How to Forgive When You Can't Forget, says that forgiveness is an imperative stretching back to the Bible. "The Genesis narrative starts with fratricide—Cain and Abel—and ends with reconciliation—Joseph and his brothers," he says. "That clearly delivers the Torah's message: the only answer to hostility is finding a path to reconciliation."

Forgiveness is required when an action fractures the social relationship that has been established between two people. The type of the forgiveness required depends on the nature of the offense and the nature of the relationship between the two individuals. As recognized by many philosophers, forgiveness is a moral relationship that exists between the self and other.

## REVENGE

How do we recognize the need for forgiveness?

According to psychologists, it is determined by the pain we feel from being hurt and a desire for revenge, namely the person should pay for what he or she did to us. Revenge takes several forms. Sometimes it is trying to cause pain back to the offender or simply the silence of excommunication, where you ignore their existence.

Bishop Joseph Butler, a 17th century writer, spoke a great deal about forgiveness. His sermons are the touchstone of modern philosophical discussions on the topic. Butler is often interpreted as saying that forgiveness requires forswearing resentment, but what

he actually says is that it requires tempering resentment and forswearing revenge. He is surely right that it requires at least that much. If you claim you've forgiven someone and then proceed to take revenge, then you are either dishonest or ignorant of the meaning of the term. For Butler, forgiveness comes with conditions, such as the giving up of revenge.

Forgiveness is not always determined by the desire for revenge. Sometimes it is reflected in the emotional energy that is required when dealing with the individual.

## FORGIVE AND FORGET

Many people, when dealing with forgiveness, like to draw upon the philosophy of forgive and forget. I tend to believe that this is suggested more by offenders, than those who have been wronged. But, in truth, most of us know that it is almost impossible to forget. The forgive and forget model really only works in cases where the act was inconsequential or unintentional. But for most of the real conflict that exists in our lives, forgive and forget doesn't work. The pain that we have experienced is just too great. We wish we could forget it, for our own well being, but it is just not possible.

So how do we get to a place of forgiveness? Forgiveness is complicated because there are different types of forgiveness. I want to offer a model of forgiveness based on the three different Hebrew words that we utilize during the Yom Kippur service; *s'lichah*, *m'chilah* and *kapparah*. You know the words from the prayer (SING) "*s'lach lanu*, *m'chal lanu*, *kapper lanu*."

## *S'LICHAH*

The first category of *s'licha* refers to the forgiveness granted for the minor sins that we call *het*. *S'licha* is the most common word we use for forgiveness in Hebrew. If you accidentally bump into someone you say, "*s'licha*." In regard to our relationships with others, these acts are the ones committed unintentionally or by being careless or apathetic about the feelings of those around us. We unintentionally embarrassed a friend in front of others. We forgot to call a sibling on their birthday. Or when we accidentally left someone out when getting a group of friends together.

In this category, *s'licha* should be fairly easy. As long as the person comes with a sincere apology and the action is not typical of their behavior, forgiveness is attainable. In these instances forgive and forget should apply, because it should be as if the wrong never took place. That is to say, the relationship should be unaffected by what took place and both parties should be able to go back to things just as they were before.

Rabbi David Blumenthal, a professor who writes about ethics, sees *s'licha* as "an act of the heart. It is reaching a deeper understanding of the sinner. It is achieving an empathy for the troubledness of the other. *Selicha*, too, is not a reconciliation or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender, too, is human, frail, and deserving of sympathy. It is closer to an act of mercy."

### *M'HILAH*

The second category of forgiveness relates to the wrong we call *avon*- an intentional act, but often done out of the emotion of the moment or a moment of moral weakness. We feel the pain of these moments. Sometimes we can even anticipate them, like when we say, "stop right there, before you say something that you will regret."

*M'hilah* is needed when we utter hurtful words, or in an act of jealousy we intentionally don't invite someone to a party, or when we yell at someone in front of peers.

The forgiveness for this type of wrong is more difficult. The apology for this one better not have one of those "but's" attached. We wonder how the person could do this to us. For the forgiveness of *m'hilah* we want to make sure that the individual is truly sincere. Some times we are moved by their apology to grant forgiveness on the first request, but other times we may respond, "I'm sorry, but I'm not able to forgive you yet. I need a little more time." It is their follow up that tell us that they are sincere and makes the forgiveness easier. How long can we postpone the forgiveness of a sincere apology? Jewish tradition tells us that three times is the limit...I love the Jewish tradition. It often tells us when it is time to let go. Whether it is our mourning rituals or forgiveness, our tradition tells us when it is time to let go of the past and move on to the future.

Rabbi Blumenthal, describes *m'chila* as the offended person "forgoing the debt of the offender, relinquishing his or her claim against the offender. This is not a

reconciliation of heart or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender no longer owes me anything for whatever it was that he or she did"

### *KAPPARAH*

The final category of forgiveness is *kapparah* and relates to the most severe sin of *pesha*. A *pesha*, is an act done out of rebelliousness and intended to hurt the person that it is directed towards. In religious language it is sins that are done out of rebellion to God, seen as an act of defiance. The wrongs that require *kapparah* represent the most malicious of acts, like intentionally maligning someone's character, violating the trust of a committed relationship and cheating or stealing someone out of a large sum of money. This kind of act requires a different kind of forgiveness, namely *kapparah*. In the Jewish tradition the forgiveness of *kapparah* is a Divine quality; the ability to forgive humans for the heinous crimes if we are sincere about change. Where humans can't forget, we portray God as having that quality. Namely, to wipe the slate clean and let us begin again.

In the context of our relationships with others, the wrong of a *pesha* is the one that causes us great emotional harm. No "pulling of punches", as we say. Sometimes these acts are committed by people we don't know well. It might be part of an ongoing conflict or a singular act. But most painful, is when it comes from someone close to us. We wonder if this is truly the person we knew, because the person we knew would never do something like this to us.

What are the symptoms of this kind of transgression? We can't let go of the anger. We want revenge and we want them to suffer. The transgressor consumes a great deal of our emotional energy. We think about all the possible ways we could run into them and we avoid the possibility. If some fluke of luck brings you together at a gathering, you are conscious of the other person's every movement. Ever been in one of those situations where you are talking to someone and the other person continues to show up on your emotional sonar. You are aware of their every movement...like a blip on the radar screen. You can't even be fully invested in a discussion because your brain is being utilized for sonar and radar activity.

In the weekday Amidah, three times daily, we ask God for *slichah* and *m'hilah*, but the request for *kapparah* is only made on Yom Kippur. When translating Yom Kippur we call it the Day of Atonement, but it is really the Day of *Kapparah*. What is *kapparah*? While there is great debate about the etymology. Rashi suggests that it means wiping out, as if to suggest our sins are wiped away. But I side with Nachmanides, otherwise known as Ramban, who connects *kapparah* to the Hebrew word *kofer*, meaning ransom. He gives examples in the Torah of where *kofer*- ransom is given in exchange for a life. In relationship to Yom Kippur we are able to ransom our lives back by going through the process of teshuvah. In the case of my model of forgiveness, we are given our lives back. How? By letting go of the pain, anger and resentment that consume our lives and by offering forgiveness we are able to get our lives back.

#### REQUESTED KAPPAH

The first model of *kapparah* I want to suggest is the one in which someone has egregiously harmed us and has actually requested forgiveness. In this model, we cannot even think about the forgive and forget model. How do you forget a best friend that stabbed you in the back? How do you forgive a child who stole from you? How do you forget a parent who was unkind to you for most of your life?

These are the cases that most often come to me for counseling. They deal with the most meaningful of relationships and therefore the most painful. When these questions come to my office I encourage people to forgive. What do I mean by forgiveness?

According to Dr. Robert Enright, the author of Forgiveness Is a Choice, forgiveness is not absolution, but rather it is a process. It is not sufficient to say, "I forgive" because the feelings of pain, anger, resentment and even the desire for revenge return. It takes time to get past all these issues. Only when we are not expending energy on the other person whom we cannot control is our forgiveness process complete."

I advocate beginning the process of forgiveness because I don't want people to continue to let the perpetrator control their life. When people are so consumed by anger and resentment, when they give over so much of their emotional energy to the person who wronged them, the abuse and suffering continues. By holding on to the moment we

continue to let the other person control our life. I want forgiveness to liberate people's enslavement and let them begin life again. It is this *kapparah*- the ransoming of their life that allows them to get on with life.

The granting of *kapparah* does NOT mean that things go back to the way they were. In fact, sometimes the relationship can never be resumed in any meaningful way, but letting go of what was, is good enough. But other times a new relationship can be forged. It is nothing like the old relationship, and in fact it is twice as difficult as any new relationship, because it is going to take extra time to build a layer of trust upon the layer of pain. But if two people are willing to work hard enough, one day the relationship may be as strong as it was before.

#### UNREQUESTED KAPPARAH

But what about the individual who has wronged us in the most severe way, but has not requested forgiveness? Are we supposed to grant *kapparah* to him or her? I want to suggest a new model of *kapparah* in which we do just that.

Now before you say that I've been spending too much time with Father McNamara and this sounds like a very Christian idea about forgiveness, let me explain. Having studied a little bit of Christian theology in Rabbinical School I was always uncomfortable with the Christian idea of forgiveness in which those who have been wronged are called upon to grant forgiveness even when the perpetrator has not demonstrated remorse and certainly did not ask for forgiveness. I was most troubled when Christian clergy would talk about forgiving those who committed great acts of violence like 9-11. But several years ago, when Father McNamara and I addressed the issue of forgiveness in our pulpit exchange, I came to understand it in a different way. As explained by Father McNamara, this forgiveness is not offered in regard to the people they wronged, nor represent Divine forgiveness, but rather only deals with the way in which their act impacted me. Namely, acts of violence impact all of society; we become demoralized, pained and even scared. The Christian concept of forgiveness, as I understand it, is simply my forgiving of the way in which the individual affected my life. Or today, maybe Christian forgiveness, is the forgiveness necessary when a church carnival falls on Yom Kippur.

This view stands in opposition to the Jewish attitude of forgiveness where it can only be given by the victim. Even if the perpetrator of a wrong is found guilty by a court, paid compensation and even incarcerated for the crime, forgiveness can only be granted after the perpetrator has apologized to the victim and the apology has been accepted.

But nevertheless, I was moved by the Christian idea that we can remain psychologically and spiritually wounded by the actions around us OR through the act of letting go and giving forgiveness, we can bring some peace to ourselves.

#### NEW FORGIVENESS- KAPPARAH

Rabbi Blumenthal describes *kapparah* as a type of purification, it is "a total wiping away of all sinfulness. It is an existential cleansing. *Kapparah* is the ultimate form of forgiveness, but it is only granted by God. No human can "atone" the sin of another; no human can "purify" the spiritual pollution of another."

So I would like to suggest a new model of *kapparah*; forgiveness that allows us to let go of the past while recognizing that the perpetrator is unrepentant and not really deserving of forgiveness. In this model there is no reconciliation because there is no repentance on the part of the perpetrator. But in order for us to get past the pain and anger that consumes us; in order to NOT expend any more emotional energy on someone who does not deserve it: in order to take back control of our own lives; I want to suggest a *kapparah* of cleansing as an experience of rebirth in which our lives are given back to us.

But much like the Jewish model when forgiveness can only be received after the offender has gone through the stages of repentance, this *kapparah* is waiting to be received. In this model forgiveness has been granted for our own wellbeing, but is undeserved until the offender goes through the process that we call teshuvah, and which I spoke about last year, in which there is recognition of wrong, remorse, regret that is verbally expressed to the person who was wronged and the resolution not to do the action again.

While there is no resumption of a relationship, we have done our part to go on with life and now it is up to the other person to do their part. Sometimes, just

sometimes, when all the anger and pain is gone, the other person is able to then move forward and acknowledge the way in which they were wrong.

Louis Smedes, author of the Art of Forgiving, wrote, "to forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."

## CONCLUSION

Dr. Frederic Luskin, author of Forgive for Good, says people can't forgive because they confuse specific offenses with the process of forgiveness. "People think that forgiving lets people off the hook. In fact, it doesn't mean forgetting, nor even reconciliation." In Luskin's definition, forgiveness means "learning to make peace when something in your life doesn't turn out the way you wanted it to. It's an inner quality not dependent on anyone else, an assertive and necessary life skill rather than a specific response to a particular life situation. People who are hurt have a narcissistic perspective that it's unusual to be hurt, but in fact it's common. When you understand how common it is, you can forgive life."

Last year after my sermon on apologies I was very touched by the number of people who sent me e-mails or told me about the ways in which they were able to approach someone important and offer the appropriate apology. I was even told about one teenager who immediately texted a friend with the beginnings of an apology, that eventually led to their reconciliation. Yom Kippur is about the process of *kapparah* and changing our lives. I'm hoping this year, that some of you will be able to forgive others and in the process find reconciliation. For others, even when reconciliation is not possible, I hope that forgiveness will allow you to let go of the past and start anew. Only in this way can we truly find peace and fulfill our own mission in life.