



The Right Kind of Forgiveness

This might be a radical thing for a rabbi to admit, but I'm going to admit it anyway. I disagree with some of the things in the book of prayers for the High Holy Days. In fact, some of the words make me cringe. They make me cringe because sometimes the prayers oversimplify something that is really very complicated.

One example in particular has always struck me. In the section called the *vidui*, the confession of sin that we read on Yom Kippur, we are, as a congregation, directed to read in unison the following words: *I hereby forgive all who have hurt me, all who have wronged me, whether deliberately or inadvertently, whether by word or by deed. May no one be punished on my account.*

It is really not so simple, is it? We may read these words, but do we really believe them? Forgiveness doesn't come so easily for us. Take a moment to think about it. I'll bet that most of us can think of a person we have not forgiven because that person has done something unforgivable.

Take a moment to remember that experience, that time that you were hurt in a way that is beyond forgiveness. Perhaps it was a time when somebody's words cut you to the core, or a time you were betrayed by someone you trusted. Maybe what you remember is not something that was done to you personally, but something that hurt your family, your community, your people, or your nation. No matter how many times I say those words from our prayer book: *"I hereby forgive all who have wronged me,"* I know in my heart that some things are simply unforgivable – there are some sins that words just do not wash away.

In fact when I read stories of those who forgive the unforgivable they astonish me. Consider this true story. In October 2006, a gunman entered the West Nickel Mines Amish School in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. After releasing the adults and the boys in the school, he barricaded himself in the schoolhouse with ten girls, his chosen victims. He shot them all, killing five of them and critically wounding the others before he turned the gun on himself. Who could do such a heinous act? According to one of the survivors, the gunman said he was angry at God and needed to punish some Christian girls to get even.

With shocking swiftness, even before they buried the little girls, the Amish people of Nickel Mines forgave the killer and reached out in sympathy to his family. Members of the community embraced the killer's relatives, expressed their sorrow at their loss, and said "we forgive you." When the killer was buried days later, several Amish attended his

funeral. An Amish woman interviewed on CBS's Early Show explained: "We have to forgive. We have to forgive him in order for God to forgive us."

The Amish felt an obligation to forgive, an obligation engrained in their own history and religious teachings. What about us? Do we Jews have a different view of forgiveness?

Many years ago, Simon Wiesenthal explored the topic of forgiveness in his book The Sunflower. He tells a story – a true story – about his experience as a prisoner in a concentration camp. One day he and some fellow prisoners were working on the grounds of a high school that had been turned into a hospital for German soldiers. A Red Cross nurse came to his side, asked him "are you a Jew?" Then the nurse told him to follow her. She led him to the bedside of a dying German soldier.

The soldier said to Wiesenthal: "My name is Karl...I joined the SS as a volunteer...I must tell you something dreadful. Something inhuman...It happened a year ago....a year since the crime I committed. I must tell you of this horrible deed – tell you because you are a Jew."

Wiesenthal listened in silence as the soldier confessed to him about the part he played in committing an unspeakable atrocity. Under orders of his superior officer, he and his fellow soldiers forced Jewish villagers –men, women and children-- into a building and barricaded the door so none could escape. The Nazi soldiers then threw hand grenades into the building, shooting anyone who tried to flee through the windows. As the dying soldier spoke, he trembled and grasped Wiesenthal's hand, shattered by the memory of his terrible crime.

The soldier concluded by saying, "I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and again I have longed to talk to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. Only I didn't know that there were any Jews left....I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace."

After spending a few moments in silent thought, Wiesenthal stood up and left the room without saying a word.

At the conclusion of his narrative, Wiesenthal asks the reader whether his silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi soldier was right or wrong. Fifty-three theologians, political leaders, human rights activists, writers, and victims of attempted genocide – including Holocaust survivors – wrote essays in response to Wiesenthal's question.

It is not surprising that the responses written by Christians mirrored the response of the Amish community to the murder of their little girls. Theodore Hesburgh wrote: "My whole instinct is to forgive. Perhaps that is because I am a Catholic priest. In a sense, I am in the forgiving business. I sit in a confessional for hours and forgive everyone who comes in, confesses, and is sorry....if asked to forgive, by anyone for anything, I would forgive because God would forgive."

Compare this to the response written by the Jewish intellectual Herbert Marcuse: "I think I would have...refused the request of the dying SS man. It always seemed to me

inhuman and a travesty of justice if the executioner asked the victim to forgive. One cannot, and should not, go around happily killing and torturing and then, when the moment has come, simply ask, and receive, forgiveness. In my view, this perpetuates the crime.”

Jewish writer Cynthia Ozick also condemns easy forgiveness in her response: “Forgiveness is pitiless. It forgets the victim. It negates the right of the victim to his own life. It blurs over suffering and death. It drowns the past. It cultivates sensitiveness toward the murderer at the price of insensitiveness toward the victim.”

In the Jewish view, to offer easy forgiveness is to commit an injustice. In fact, the Jewish view of forgiveness is rooted in our commitment to justice – a commitment that has shaped our teachings and laws from the earliest days of our people. We value justice and fairness.

The Jewish view of forgiveness follows this commitment to justice. According to our Jewish tradition, if a person offends someone else, only the offended person can offer forgiveness. It is unfair for one person to forgive a crime committed against another. If you are the one who is hurt, who am I to forgive the one who has hurt you? I can only offer forgiveness to those who hurt me. That theme repeated itself in the Jewish responses to Wiesenthal’s question: he had no right to forgive the dying SS man; only his victims could forgive.

In fact, our tradition teaches that even God cannot forgive us for the wrong we commit against a fellow human being, until we have made peace with the person we have wronged (Yoma 8:9). God can only forgive us for the wrongs we have committed against the divine, not for the wrongs committed against our fellow human beings.

Furthermore, Judaism teaches that forgiveness can only be granted if the offender asks for forgiveness from the one he has wronged. But what if the offender does not—or cannot – do the right thing and ask for forgiveness? Does that mean that we must live with bitterness towards that person? Unresolved bitterness can quickly turn to poison inside of us. It means that we are forever tied to that hurt that is unforgivable, forever re-living the moment in which we were harmed, forever tempted by thoughts of revenge.

How do we balance our need to rid ourselves of bitterness with our commitment to fairness and justice? The first step is to recognize that forgiveness has more to do with us than it does with the person who has wronged us. Harold Kushner has observed, “Forgiving is not something we do for another person, as the Nazi asked Wiesenthal to do for him. Forgiving happens inside of us. It represents a letting go of the sense of grievance, and perhaps most importantly (sic) a letting go of the role of victim.”

But still -- how do we release the bitterness inside us without betraying our commitment to justice?

The answer lies in one of the Hebrew words for forgiveness: *Mechilah*. The rabbis of the Talmud use this word in reference to the forgiveness of debt, but it can apply to much more. The following story helps illustrate this principle. Suppose that John Doe owes

Sam twenty shekels of silver. Sam loaned the money in good faith with the expectation of repayment. Yet John has fallen on hard times. With each passing week, as the debt remains unpaid, Sam gets more and more frustrated. One day, Sam realizes that John will not be able to pay him back. Sam has a choice: to continue to feel bitter and frustrated, or he can practice *mechilah*. Sam can say: "John, you owe me this money. Yet I, for my own sake, for my own peace of mind, choose not to collect this debt."

With this approach, the "wrong" – the debt – is not erased. To erase the wrong would be an injustice. However, the one owed repayment simply forgoes his right to collect on the debt. In the story of John and Sam, Sam makes this choice because it releases him from ongoing frustration and bitterness.

Using this approach to forgiveness, Wiesenthal would say to the dying Nazi: you committed a grave wrong with your participation in the murder of innocent people. That wrong will not be erased. Yet we, the Jewish people, for our own sake, choose not to collect on the debt.

In this way, justice stands, and we purge ourselves of bitterness and thoughts of revenge.

We here in this room have not faced the terrible dilemma that Wiesenthal faced at the bedside of dying Nazi. Nor have we had to bury young girls gunned down in their schoolhouse. But, nevertheless, we all have been hurt, all have been wronged. While we can never erase the wrong, we can liberate ourselves from its effects, if we but make the choice to do so.

In nine days it will be Yom Kippur and we will say those words from our prayer book together: "I hereby forgive all who have wronged me." In the days to come, may we find the strength to make those words mean something; may we find the strength to release those who have wronged us from the debt that they owe us. We do this for our own sake, for the sake of our community, and for the sake of our world.

Rabbi Jennifer Jaech
Temple Israel of Northern Westchester
Rosh Hashanah 5770