

## Yom Kippur Morning 2021

### “Can we Forgive?”

In our prayerbook for Yom Kippur, our Machzor, there is an important statement from the Mishnah, “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.” As I was doing my own preparation for the holidays, I came across this story which is originally found in the Talmud but was translated and edited by Eric Kimmel. It illustrates this message very clearly.

In the beginning of the month of Tishri, Rabbi Eleazar ben Shimon journeyed from the Academy at Yavneh to his home in Migdal Gedor to spend the holidays with his family. Along the way he passed through the village of Tekoa. The people of Tekoa were honored to have such a famous scholar in their midst. They conducted Rabbi Eleazar to the synagogue and begged him for a “devar Torah.” He obliged with a sermon. He spoke of the potter at his wheel, the weaver at her loom, the blacksmith at his anvil. He told the inhabitants of Tekoa, “Just as these artisans shape the raw material according to their needs and inclinations, so too does the one Who Made Us All mold each of us to God’s purpose.”

Now among those who came to hear the sermon was a deformed beggar who lived in a ruined tower outside the village. Ashamed to enter the synagogue because of his appearance, he stood listening outside the door. Rabbi Eleazar’s words touched his heart. The beggar hurried home and waited beside the road. When the rabbi rode by on his donkey, he approached and asked a blessing. Startled by the man’s appearance, Rabbi Eleazar gasped without thinking, “Heaven shield me from such ugliness!” “Ugly, am I?” the man replied. “Then

go to the One Who Made Me and say to God, 'How ugly is this vessel You have formed!' Rabbi Eleazar blushed with shame. Not only had he humiliated an unfortunate, but he had violated his own teaching to cherish all creation.

He turned to the beggar with lowered eyes. "I have wronged you. I spoke without thinking. I am deeply sorry. Forgive me." But the beggar's humiliation rankled. "I will forgive you when the One Who Made Me forgives you," he said. Rabbi Eleazar came down off his donkey, threw himself on the ground and refused to move until the beggar would forgive him – lying in the dust at the feet of the beggar, who ignored him.

Meanwhile, in Rabbi Eleazar's hometown they were getting worried that he had not returned. His children went out to look for him and found him and the beggar. The beggar told them what had happened. Rabbi Eleazar's children did not believe him at first but Rabbi Eleazar told them that it was true. The children explained to him that their father is a good man and ask him why he won't forgive him. The beggar stubbornly continued to say, "I will forgive him when the One Who Made Me forgives him."

Finally Rabbi Eleazar's daughter came forward. She spoke to the beggar gently. "My friend, the one Who Made You has already forgiven our father. God is always ready to forgive. Our father requires nothing from you. Instead, he afflicts himself for your sake. He understands the bitterness of withholding forgiveness, of storing up malice like stones. He will not leave this spot until you accept his apology and drop this bitter burden from your shoulders. Come, say with me the words, 'I forgive.' Begin the new year with a clean heart." The beggar, whose life since birth had been one endless round of abuse and misery,

felt himself moved in a way he had never known before. Rabbi Eleazar's daughter offered him her hand. He took it. They approached Rabbi Eleazar together. The beggar bent low to lift the sage from the dust. "I forgive you, Rabbi," he murmured. "Can you ever forgive me?" Rabbi Eleazar answered, "It is already done." Then he arose and called for a new robe which he placed not on his own, but upon the beggar's shoulders. He and his children lifted the man onto his donkey and together, with song and rejoicing, they continued on home, together.

I love happy endings.....if forgiving were only that easy. Jewish tradition certainly recognizes that asking for forgiveness and granting it are not always easy or simple. We are told that a person must ask forgiveness 3 times. Maimonides says: "If the person still refuses [to forgive after three tries] then the person asking for forgiveness should leave and go on his or her way. The one who would not forgive is not the sinner!" The one who did the harming can now be forgiven by God. Obviously, this rule does not apply to big crimes like – murder or terrorism – that is for another sermon.

If someone who was hurt does not forgive after being **sincerely** apologized to the burden of sin falls on him. This burden is not just a religious burden but it is an emotional burden as well. Dr. Fred Luskin in his book, Forgive For Good, has an image which I find very compelling. He says, "Picture the crowded screen in front of a harried air traffic controller. Picture the chaos in the room and the jumble of planes on the screen. Now imagine that your unresolved grievances [your grudges against others] are the planes on that screen that have been circling for days and weeks on end. Most of the other planes have landed, but your unresolved grievances continue to take up precious air space, draining resources that may be needed in an emergency. Having them on the screen forces you to work harder.....The

grievance planes become a source of stress.....” In other words, being angry at someone for a long period of time, leaving hurts unresolved and grudges burning is hard work. It is a burden to carry.

Further, when we are so heavily focused on the anger we have very little room and energy left to see and appreciate the good in our lives or to move forward in a positive way. Dr. Luskin tells the story of a woman named Dana who is an account executive at a large software company. She has been at the company for ten years and has worked very hard to build an excellent career. She has sacrificed time with her family to do so. Unfortunately, after ten years Dana was passed over for a promotion because the company had a new policy of hiring some executives from the outside. Dana was angry and disappointed (and understandably so) however, she could not move beyond her hurt and anger and she let it color the last ten years at the company. She looked back on past incidents and suddenly saw them as slights. Instead of seeing her success and the job she loved she resented everything associated with her work. Further, she began to see ten good years as miserable ones. How could Dana work through her anger and forgive those who had hurt her? Should Dana have forgiven her bosses who she felt betrayed her? What was done to her, probably was unjust. Should she just ignore the injustice?

In order to answer these questions, we have to further define what it means to forgive. First of all, forgiving does not mean condoning. There are many times when we have been genuinely wronged by someone else. Forgiving does not mean that justice should not be served. Rabbi Eleazar in our opening story genuinely wronged the beggar with his hurtful words.

Forgiving DOES mean not letting the anger of the incident consume us for many years to come. Rabbi Eleazar will not leave the beggar until the beggar has forgiven him because he is worried that the beggar will carry the anger with him and harm himself with it.

Forgiving doesn't mean forgetting either. "Forgive and forget" is not a very health phrase to live by. We can and should remember that someone has hurt us but we need to put that hurt into perspective. The perspective of the entire relationship. So what exactly do I mean by forgiveness?

I don't mean forgetting about the hurt or condoning the wrong done – forgiveness is ultimately letting go of anger or as the book of Leviticus commands us – not holding a grudge. But why is this so incredibly hard sometimes? According to Rabbi Charles Klein in his book "How to Forgive When You Can't Forget" there are several reasons. First, we live in a disposable age. Some people sadly believe that not only are the things which we own disposable but the people in our lives are too. Relationships are expendable and no one is irreplaceable. According to this line of thought, anyone who disappoints us should be replaced like a broken appliance. Since none of us are perfect it is inevitable that we will disappoint others at different times of our life.

Another reason we have trouble forgiving others is that our pride gets in the way. We are so sure that we were wronged and that we are justified in our anger that we cannot let it go. Pride is the enemy of forgiveness. Pride also keeps us from making the first move in reconciling with someone who has hurt us but who we really want back in our lives.

A third reason we have trouble forgiving is that we would prefer to blame someone else rather than accept the fact that we may have played a role in damaging the relationship. Blaming someone else leaves us pure. I read a story about two brothers who had a falling out and stopped talking to each other. One brother said, "For one year, my brother and I didn't speak. I blamed him and he blamed me for what had happened. Neither of us was willing to accept responsibility. We had been so close. But then, we walked out of each other's lives. That year was a living hell for the two of us. Thankfully, our wives...arranged a surprise encounter. When we saw each other, I understood how foolish we had been. Because neither of us wanted to accept the blame for the misunderstanding which had occurred, we lived for one year without each other."

Yet another reason it is so hard to forgive is that we are afraid that we will be hurt again. In my years as a rabbi, I have heard people say many times that they have tried and tried to repair a relationship but nothing changes. Sometimes that happens. And it is possible that we will be hurt again. God made us human, we make mistakes and the people we care about make mistakes, sometimes over and over...even a holy, learned rabbi like Rabbi Eleazar made a horrible, hurtful mistake. However, Judaism teaches us that people can change. We are here on Yom Kippur because we believe that WE can change.

There is a beautiful Midrash about a king and his son. According to this story the son does something wrong, which angers his father, the king. The son runs away from home. After running for several days the son is tired and longs to return home to his father. His father, who

was angry, but misses him dearly, sends him a message. “Just start out for home and I will meet you.”

The midrash explains that the king in the story is like God and the son is like us, God’s children. If we just take one step in God’s direction God will meet us. God is the model for us here. If a loved-one has hurt us, let them just take one step back in our direction, one step in the direction of change so that we may meet them. Rabbi Charles Klein says, “At the heart of the forgiving response is the thought that people can change, grow, and overcome their past.”

But what about the case where the person who has hurt us has not apologized or asked for our forgiveness? Forgiveness is an internal process. It helps us to lift the burden of our anger and to move forward in positive directions. The process of forgiving someone even if they are not looking to be forgiven is a health one.

So how do we forgive? How do we move past our hurt and our anger? How do we repair relationships that have been damaged? The first step is to realize that, in most cases, the relationship that has been lost or damaged is more important than the wrongdoing. To do this we must put the situation into perspective. When someone hurts us we tend to dwell on that hurt. It becomes the focus of the relationship. We quickly forget all the good things that the relationship has been for us over the years. The hurt must be put in the perspective of the whole relationship. For the two brothers who reunited after a painful year apart, upon seeing each other they remembered all the good that they had together, making the fight which separated them seem trivial. As a result, they realized that their love for each other was more important than the hurtful words spoken.

Rabbi Pesach Krauss, who served at Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital describes a technique which he uses with cancer patients who are fixated on their pain and personal suffering. He shows them a piece of paper with one dot on it and asks them to describe what they see. Many, of course, see the dot, but Rabbi Krauss reminds them that there is far more blank space on the page. He tells them that the blank space represents all that is good and precious in their life. Rabbi Charles Klein explains, “Those who forgive see the dot. The wrongs it represents cannot be wiped off the page. But, they put the dot in perspective and come to see better than before some of the positive qualities of the other person. Psychologists call this “reframing.”

There are other ways to put the hurt into perspective or reframe it. One way to do so is to accept that people are not perfect. – even the great Rabbi Eleazar. God didn’t make us that way. If God did, we wouldn’t need to be sitting here today – hungry! The result of not being perfect is that inevitably, we all disappoint those we love at some point. We fall short and we bring pain to the people we least want to hurt. Understanding and accepting that about ourselves means understanding and accepting that about others. Love is not always easy.

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. He called out, “Sir, I see that the door to the house in the painting has no handle. Was that deliberate?” The painter responded, “The door is the human heart. And there’s no handle because it can only be opened from within.” Within each of us is the power of forgiveness, the power to open the door to our heart and let others in.



May 5782 be the year in which we discover the power of forgiveness and let all of those we love, despite their shortcomings, back into our lives. Then 5782 will truly be a good and sweet year!