

The following sermon on Concerning Forgiveness was given by Rabbi Daniel Alexander on Kol Nidre, 5767. In his sermon, Rabbi Dan illustrates that to be forgiven one must not always work hard for forgiveness as long as one truly feels sorry for what they have done.

Concerning Forgiveness Kol Nidre, 5767

In her Yom Kippur story for children and grownups, Jacqueline Jules tells about a gigantic yellow bird with a purple head called a Ziz. The Ziz has a huge wing span, so huge that it blocks the sun in flight, like a dark rain cloud. The Ziz has a particular fondness for children but also a knack for inadvertently scaring them and their parents. Once he inadvertently knocked over some tall trees into a garden they had planted with vegetables intended for Sukkot decorations. The Ziz felt very badly about what he had done but did not know how to fix the problem.

So, as was his custom when really confused or upset, he flew to the top of Mt. Sinai and brought the matter directly to God. God agreed with the Ziz that there were no easy fixes to this mistake and then charged the Ziz with the task of retrieving the hardest word. The Ziz then set out with great energy and enthusiasm to do this as he was very eager to make things right with the children. On his travels, he encountered many hard words, hard in the sense that the situations involved difficult emotions, like the mother who firmly says “goodnight” to her child who resists going to bed. Other words were hard to pronounce, like “spaghetti.” God does not accept these words, though, as the hardest. Nor does God accept “Mississippi” or “rhinoceros” or “anxious” or “disappoint” or “Rumpelstiltskin” or “rock” or even “antidisestablishmentarianism.” In fact, God does not accept any of the words which the Ziz fetches until, many days later, exhausted and discouraged, the Ziz returns to Mt. Sinai just before Yom Kippur without a new word and admits his failure.

“No word?” God asks.

“No,” says the Ziz sadly. “I’ve come to say I can’t find the hardest word.”

“You can’t?” God asks.

“No,” says the Ziz, shaking his head. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” God asks.

“Yes,” says the Ziz nodding his big purple head. “I’m sorry.”

“Good job!” God said. “You’ve found the hardest word!”

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement crowns the Ten Days of Repentance, a

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period of inward turning, self-examination, the recognition of imperfection, fault, responsibility, and the need for seeking and granting forgiveness, for saying “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you.” As the Mishnah we read near the beginning of our Kol Nidre worship makes clear, the atoning and purifying effectiveness of Yom Kippur applies only to transgressions against God. For those committed against our fellows, we must seek forgiveness directly from the wronged party. Thus has arisen the custom of requesting forgiveness before or during Yom Kippur from those we may have wronged, lest we go through the day with the weight of unrepentant sin still upon us. At this junction, I wish to explore some of the dimensions of seeking and granting forgiveness.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik references Rambam in describing repentance (like prayer) as a form of service of the heart. That is, the essence of the process of seeking forgiveness is not in the performance of certain outward acts, though these are necessary, but rather in an inward change of heart, beginning with actual remorse (not just saying “I’m sorry” but actually feeling sorry), with a sense of guilt, and culminating in confession. The process of repentance, thus, goes to the core of personal spiritual growth and is one’s life’s work. But, for most of us, confession does not come easily. “Sorry” really is hard for most of us to say. In the words of the Art Scroll Machzor, “it is usually excruciatingly difficult for people to admit that they have done wrong. We excuse ourselves. We refuse to admit the truth. We shift blame. We deny the obvious. We excel at rationalizing. But the person who wrenches from himself the unpleasant truth, ‘I have sinned,’ has performed a great and meaningful act.”

As difficult as is the admission of wrongdoing in the process of seeking forgiveness so too does the granting of forgiveness not come easily for most of us. But atonement for transgression between us and our fellows requires both the heartfelt request for forgiveness and the heartfelt granting of the same by the aggrieved. What models does our tradition provide us to guide us in the challenging practice of seeking and granting forgiveness?

For starters, the Torah presents the life and times of Joseph, the dreamy daddy’s boy, hated by his less favored siblings, whose youthful misadventures lead him to indentured servitude, a lengthy stint in prison, and ultimately to the powerful position of chief Financial Advisor to the Egyptian king and a potentate in his own right. From the perspective of family dynamics, the story of Joseph is one of love, dysfunction, favoritism, enmity, betrayal, yearning, forgiveness, and reconciliation. As such, the story of the Jacobson’s stands as a model of intra-

familial dynamics worthy of our attention on this day of forgiveness.

Toward the end of the family saga, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers who understandably fear that their powerful younger sibling will seek vengeance for the “excesses” of their youth: having tossed him into a pit, sold him as a slave, and separated him from their aging father. Jacob, in turn, claims no desire for vengeance against his trembling brothers. Rather than seeking revenge, he facilitates the reunion of the family in their new home as exiles in Egypt. But now, 17 years later, as Jacob dies, the old fears of the brothers rise to the surface once more, suggesting that the reconciliation of the past was incomplete.

Some details of the scene following the funeral of Jacob illustrate aspects of the complexity associated with a process of forgiveness, from which we may learn:

When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said: it may be that Joseph will [now] hate us and will fully requite all the evil which we did unto him. So, they sent a message to Joseph, saying “Before his death your father left this instruction: so shall you say to Joseph, ‘forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.’ And now forgive, we pray, the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.” And Joseph **wept** when they spoke to him.[Genesis 50:15ff]

Why did Joseph weep? In the emotional layering under these tears, one might recall the earlier scene of reunion and reconciliation, also tearful, that took place 17 years before. One imagines that those years had not produced the kind of familial bonds of friendship and trust that would have allayed the brothers’ fears. Were Joseph’s tears, then, tears of disappointment at longed for fraternal closeness that was not to be, unmet yearning for brotherly love? That Joseph needed to verbalize his assurances to his brothers now frightened anew suggests that he too may not have entirely transcended the hurt, anger, and resentment from their harsh treatment of him during his childhood. Were his tears, then, tears of recognition, his words of reassurance to the contrary, that his own lingering anger and resentment played no small part in the coolness between his brothers and him, that despite the outward signs and words of reassurance, forgiveness and reconciliation were incomplete?

The tearful post funeral scene in Genesis calls to mind a vivid funeral scene in my own experience: at the grave side, the elderly sister of the newly deceased turned toward the grave and begged forgiveness for over 40 years of non-contact

and then she turned to her great nieces and nephews and implored: “Don’t do what I did! How foolish and how sad to have allowed resentment to destroy our love! Don’t hold a grudge! Don’t wait for the funeral to make up!”

With regard to the possible lingering resentment of Joseph (or any one of us) and the inability to generate heartfelt forgiveness, consider the story of the two Buddhist monks who take a journey on foot, bringing them to a stream which they must cross. At the bank of the stream stands a young, attractive woman who also wishes to cross but cannot do so on her own. To the chagrin and embarrassment of his companion, one of the monks offers to carry the woman across. She agrees and hops onto his back. When they reach the far bank of the stream, the monk with the woman on his back gently places her on the ground and the two monks continue on their way in stony silence. After some time, one says to his companion, “I just do not see how you can justify carrying that woman on your back, after the vows we have taken.” His companion replies, “I put the woman down some miles back. You seem to be carrying her still.”

We humans seem to have a knack for retaining resentment, harboring hurt feelings, bearing grudges, and blocking the pathways to forgiveness and potential reconciliation. Much of the time, I find myself like the companion monk, unable or unwilling to set it down.

True story [from an account by Rachel Musleah]: In 1986, a Palestinian man shot Rabbi David Blumenfeld on a Jerusalem street. Blumenfeld survived, but a decade later his daughter, a reporter for the Washington Post, began to seek out stories about revenge, a search she documented in the book *Revenge: A Story of Hope*. In it, Laura Blumenfeld writes: “At some point in every country and every persons life, a choice presents itself that defines one’s soul. You have been hurt. What will it be? Turn the other cheek or an eye for eye?”

Actually, in her own process of dealing with the strong emotions following the shooting of her father, Blumenfeld explores a third alternative, neither passively turning the other cheek, nor retaliating in vengeance, but transforming the hateful act into something constructive.

On the West Bank, she found the gunman’s family, but didn’t reveal who she was. She introduced herself simply as Laura, a journalist writing a book about revenge. She also corresponding with the shooter, Omar Khatib, who was in an Israeli prison, to find out who he was and why he had done it, and to allow him to

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slowly discover who his victim was. In an early letter to her, he said he had shot at a “military target.” Challenging that mind set became her goal. At a medical hearing to determine whether Khatib could be freed she spoke on his behalf – and only then revealed who she was. Though he remained in jail, Khatib later wrote a letter to Rabbi Blumenfeld: “God is so good to me that He gets me to know your Laura, who made me feel the true meaning of love and forgiveness. She was the mirror that made me see your face as a human person deserved (sic) to be admired and respected.”

“Resentment [and anger are] ... the enemy of the spiritual life,” say the psychologists Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham [*The Spirituality of Imperfection*]. Resentment, K and K find, is about revisiting old feelings, anger generated by past events. It revives those events and permits one to feel victimized anew. But reconciliation requires forgiveness. And forgiveness implies letting go of anger and resentment or channeling the anger constructively, an extraordinarily difficult task for most of us who tend to carry our angers and resentments as if they were precious jewels.

For me, the issue of granting forgiveness plays out in the mundane details of relational living: can I generate a forgiving attitude for my neighbor who allows her yappy dogs to wonder onto our property even though she complains if we permit a guest to park a car in front of her house? Can children forgive parents who nudge them to live their (the parents’) dreams? Should one forgive a spouse who insists that one must change? Should one forgive the spouses who stubbornly refuse one’s legitimate efforts to change him or her? Should we forgive our children when they refuse to live our dreams for them? Can we forgive siblings or friends or spouses or rabbis who are not there for us when we need them in the way we desire? Can we forgive the one who criticizes us or lectures us when we need her or him to comfort us? Regarding the one who has hurt us, can I find it in my heart to forgive that person?

Dela and I have been married for over 33 years, amazing as she is only 39. We have a perfect marriage ... except for a few tiny exceptions to the rule. One of these exceptions has to do with the closet doors that Dela often opens but often does not fully close. Now anyone who has ever looked into my study knows in an instant that I am not the neatest or most organized person. Generally speaking, Dela organizes her personal space and keeps it far neater than do I. However, she often does not close closet doors and for some reason the sight of the doors ajar bugs me. In my version of family history over the 33 plus years, I will

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periodically bring to Dela's attention the issue of the doors and will implore her to try and comply with this tiny request to "close-the-darn-doors-why-is-it-so-hard anyway?!" Now and then, instead of raising this weighty matter directly and verbally, I would simply slam the doors closed, but only when I thought Dela could hear the slam. Very mature!

I am only admitting all this embarrassing personal foible in order to reveal a recent change, a change I would like to see as a sign of a new stage of spiritual maturity: I have come to realize that the resentment and annoyance I feel about the doors is more an issue in itself than is Dela's inscrutable failure to close them. And I would prefer not to carry around the resentment and annoyance any longer and so I have decided to set them down. I still do notice the open doors and sometimes I wonder what idiosyncratic peculiarity inhibits her from closing them and what emotional quirk of mine causes a reaction of annoyance. Then, I sometimes shut the door quietly or sometimes I leave it ajar.

Jewish tradition has long noted the relationship between anger and the inability to forgive and tried to teach restraint of this powerful emotion. Peninna Schram recalls this story as told to her by her mother:

Once there was a couple who had a baby son. Soon after the birth of the child, the husband was forced to leave his home to fight in the Russian Army, and he was away many, many years.

One night he returned home. Just as he was about to knock on the door he heard voices in the house: first a man's deep voice and then his wife's voice answering. He could not hear their words, only their voices.

The soldier-husband was infuriated at the thought that his wife was unfaithful and had taken a lover during his absence. In his rage, he drew his revolver and prepared to rush in and kill the man in his house. As he forced open the door he suddenly heard the word "mama" and realized that the man was his son, now grown up. Fortunately, he had stopped himself in time.

Over and over on this day, we intone the words of divine attributes *Adonai adonai, El Rachum V'Chanun* – the attributes of God we wish to invoke at this season, mercy, kindness, and *Erech Apayim*, the divine quality of long suffering patience, but literally "with a long nose." The word nose - *Af* in Hebrew-- connotes anger as in "His nostrils flared in anger." To be long-nosed, then, is to be able to absorb grievances without allowing anger to flare. No one could expect a person to exhibit the endless quality of patience we attribute to godliness.

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However, as someone once said: Jewish teachings on improving one's character could be reduced to one piece of advice: when you feel angry find a way to lengthen the fuse, to generate a little godly patience. How does one lengthen the fuse in the moment when the nostrils begin to flare, when anger begins to rage within one's chest? There is no one sure fire technique, but some voices from our tradition go to the question.

Says R. Hayyim Yosef David Azulai: "If someone you are with provokes you to anger, be silent. If you have to speak to that person, make a point to speak in a low and gentle voice, as this will keep anger from overcoming you. This is a good method to prevent an argument that starts from getting bigger."

Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak of Makov says "If you wish to break your anger, the best advice is to sing."

The Rabbi of Gastinin, of blessed memory, made it a practice never to express anger on the same day when he was upset or annoyed with someone. Only on the following day would he tell him, "yesterday I was annoyed with you."

My mother, may her memory be a blessing, used to give me the opposite advice, to try and reconcile with loved ones quickly and "never go to bed angry." It would seem to me that each individual needs to look within and determine the way anger and resentments operate for him or her and discern how they can best prevent them from taking governing control in each specific case, whether by silence or singing, or quick apology, by delayed expression, or by some other technique whereby one lengthens the fuse until one can actually set down the emotion altogether.

Dr. Frederic Luskin of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project has studied the relationship between emotional health and forgiveness, in which forgiveness is defined as "learning to make peace when something in your life doesn't turn out the way you wanted it to be, an inner quality, not dependent on anyone else, and an assertive and necessary life skill." He finds strong correlation between forgiveness and the reduction in emotional wounds as well as in physical symptoms of stress, including back and stomach ache, headache, sleeplessness, listlessness, and dizziness. In order to achieve the "assertive and necessary life skill" of forgiveness, Luskin recommends 1) that one learn to amend one's grievance story by including the option to forgive and 2) that one remember that the best revenge for hurt feelings is a life well lived, a life attuned to the love, beauty and kindness all

around.

From this point of view, the cultivation of the ability to forgive, though distinctly in one's self-interest, at the same time signals important personal growth. As the psychologists Sydney and Suzanne Simon [*Yom Kippur Reading*, pp 65-6] put it:

Forgiveness is the gift at the end of the healing process.... We find it waiting for us when we stop expecting them to pay for what they did or make it up to us in some way.... Forgiveness is a sign of positive self-esteem....[It] ... is recognizing we no longer need our grudges, our resentments, our hatred or our self-pity. Forgiveness is recognizing that nothing we do to punish them will heal us.... [It] ... is freeing up and putting to better use energy once consumed by holding grudges, harboring resentment, and nursing unhealed wounds. Forgiveness is moving on, recognizing we have better things to do with our life and then doing them.

Both seeking and granting forgiveness, then, the simple and difficult chores of this season, are central to the curriculum of our lives. On this Day of Atonement, may the One who is long suffering and endlessly patient forgive us for all our sins against heaven and may we too become more adept in the skills of admitting our transgressions against fellow earth dwellers and in forgiving one another. May those we have wronged forgive us even as we forgive them. And may the forgiveness come from our hearts. *Ken Y'hi Ratzon*. May this be so.