

Rabbi Daniel Berman Temple Reyim

Kol Nidrei 2024

I have been thinking about tonight for an entire year. That there would be a day after October 7 called Yom Kippur, whose entire purpose is to push ourselves to be people who forgive.

Forgiveness hasn't felt like a priority this year.

I don't mean forgiving those who perpetrated the horrors of that day. That's not our conversation.

What I mean is this year we have felt constantly angry and sad. We have been grieving and even felt a strong sense of vengeance that has been activated in ways Jewish community hasn't felt since the Shoah. We carry all these feelings around like heavy weights. The stakes for *everything* just feel so high.

This is what it has meant to be Jewish person this past year. To have to confront and confront and confront. We have just been on edge all the time.

So I have been thinking about tonight and how dissonant it could feel to be expected to call up feelings of forgiveness for anyone - family and friends, classmates and colleagues, even strangers who just cross our paths.

It seems to me this year we may have a hard time with this Yom Kippur project.

We may not be able to be a forgiving kind of people right now.

Honestly, it's exactly the question I have been asked the most this past year:

“Do I really have to forgive this person who hurt me? Because I don't have it in me right now.”

To that question, I have tried to offer a direct and plain response, which has seemed to catch people a bit off guard. From a Jewish perspective, *no - you don't have to be ready to always forgive*. In fact, forgiving too quickly can cause more harm - it can imply that the injury was not serious, or that accountability isn't required.

Judaism does ask you to keep trying, to have faith in the potential for forgiveness, but for now, yes, *there is space in the tradition to not forgive*.

It's also clear, however, that: the consequences of resigning ourselves to that self-understanding - to give up hope that in time, forgiveness is possible - can be devastating. The inability to have the empathy we need to forgive can shatter the

spirit of a people. Not because those who hurt us necessarily deserve our grace.

Rather, because the weight, the burden of feeling hurt is overpowering. We carry it around our necks. Our family and friends, members of our communities - all the ones we are with - they, too, feel it.

That the inability to forgive carries enormous risk comes to life in an amazing, though totally absurd, story in the Talmud about one of the greatest sages, Rabbi Abba Arikh - known as Rav - and his relationship with his local butcher.

The story is based on the spiritual practice of a different sage named Rabbi Zeira.

When someone offended or hurt Rabbi Zeira, he had a practice of repeatedly passing by that person, hoping they would see him, and ask for his forgiveness. The question is: was his practice caring and gracious, offering opportunity for reconciliation? Or passive aggressive?

The story about Rav and a butcher goes like this:

A butcher insulted Rav.

Knowing both Rabbi Zeira's practice and the tradition that before Yom Kippur you need to seek forgiveness from the person you hurt before turning to God for atonement, Rav apparently wanted to offer the opportunity to the butcher.

Yom Kippur was getting close, and the butcher had not come to him to ask forgiveness, so Rav said to himself: "I will go to him, to make it easy for him to apologize to me."

On his way to the butcher, Rav ran into his student, named Rav Chuna. Rav Chuna asked him: "Where are you going?"

Rav said: "To make amends with a person."

Rav Chuna thought to himself: "Rav is about to kill somebody"

Rav went to the butcher, and stood before him, and remained standing there while the butcher was chopping. The butcher looked up and saw Rav, and yelled: "Go away! I have nothing to say to you!"

Just after his outburst, a bone flew off of the animal, struck the butcher, and killed him.

End of story.

(Shanah tovah!) :)

So let me try to break this story down a bit for us.

Rav has been offended by the butcher and he goes out of his way to make himself available for the butcher to apologize in time for Yom Kippur.

Were his intentions good? Did he want the butcher to be free from the weight of the offense he had caused by Yom Kippur, so the butcher could be sealed in the Book of Life for the coming year? Or just the opposite - did Rav go self-righteously, harboring aggression, knowing that just standing there would infuriate the butcher?

Personally I don't feel very positive about Rav. Because when he ran into Rav Chuna on his way to the butcher, Rav Chuna immediately knew this would not turn out well. There must have been something about the way that Rav was presenting himself, perhaps agitated and ready to fight, moving harshly as if knowing he's right, not softly, quietly, humbly, as if seeking repair.

The butcher is still furiously angry at whatever interaction they had that caused him to insult the great sage. He is unwilling to talk, and certainly not inclined to apologize. He interprets Rav's coming as pressure to ask forgiveness and reconcile before he is ready, which of course makes him even angrier.

The pain of that tension - Rav's aggression and the butcher's rage - was so severe that it caused death. Though expressed in a bit of an absurd way, with bones flying off of animals being chopped, the rabbis thought it unbearable for the butcher to carry that much weight, that much unresolved anger, and so he died.

Through a Jewish lens, forgiveness comes from an honest, mutual exchange, not from an assertion of rightness and wrongness. We may not be able to forgive yet when we still feel wounded.

The risk, however, is that the rupture in the relationship becomes resistant to repair. Imagine a fractured bone that is not tended to, not reset. It might not heal at all - it might remain fractured and constantly swollen. Or it could heal on its own in time - but it will likely be far weaker, unable to hold the same amount of weight.

So what enables us to be forgiving? To begin a process of shared healing rather than trying to win the competition of pain? How do we reset what has been broken and return to being a person who forgives? What does that look like?

Of course, our ancient Jewish sources have a story for this question as well.

Again, there has been an insult. Rabbi Yirmea insulted Rabbi Abba.

In a reversal from Rav and the butcher, here the one who hurts the other goes to apologize.

So Rabbi Yirmea goes to Rabbi Abba's. He doesn't see Rabbi Abba so he just sits there at the doorway, hoping he will have the opportunity to ask for Rabbi Abba's forgiveness.

We know that Rabbi Abba was inside the house. We don't know if he saw Rabbi Yirmeya sitting at his doorway and ignored him, or didn't see him. Either way, he didn't come out.

Now Rabbi Abba has a maid and when she cleaned the house, she would take the dirty water and pour it out the window.

Perhaps predictably, she is cleaning the house as Rabbi Yirmea sits at the doorway and when she pours out the water, it lands on his head.

Shocked and soaking wet, Rabbi Yirmea does what any of us would do in that moment - he quotes a biblical verse from the book of psalms.

מְקִימֵי מַעֲפָר דָּל מֵאַשְׁפֹּת יְרִים אֲבִיוֹן:

“God, raise the poor from the dust,

lift up those who need you from their heap of trash.”

Rabbi Abba hears what happened, and rushes out. He sees Rabbi Yirmiya sitting there, head soaked in dirty water citing verses that express a kind of shame.

He looks at him and says “I forgive you.”

And, then he too, of course, quotes a biblical verse, this time from proverbs:

כִּי בָאתָ בְּכַף־רֵעֶךָ לְךָ הַתְּרַפָּס :

You have come to your friend

Go, kneel before him.

Seeing Rabbi Yirmiya covered in dirt-soaked water changes Rabbi Abba - allowing him to feel the empathy he needs to forgive.

It’s a psychologically insightful story - what moves us to soften our stance and maybe even forgive, is to see the person before us as exposed. Humbled. Human. We fall to our knees, and meet them in that place that is close to the ground.

A mentor used to say to me: when someone has hurt you, and it’s time to reconnect, listen to them as if they are speaking to you from a hospital bed. You’ll hear them differently. You’ll realize that the gown they’re wearing is just a thin veil, you’ll see the

IVs connected to bags of fluid, you'll hear the pace of their heartbeat on the monitor.

With *that person*, you will be able to empathize.

This kind of visualization, it's not a mind-trick - it's an act of faith: that we can see each other as relentlessly human. Hurt. Powerless.

We may not have it within us right now. I get that, I do. What I want to offer is a derekh - a pathway - that might help relieve some of the weight we carry.

It comes from a short poem by the great Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai. I'll share it in Hebrew first so you can hear the rhythm and then translate it for you.

שיר יום כיפור / יהודה עמיחי

סלחו לי כְּבֹר עֲכָשׁוּ - שְׁלֹשָׁה חֲדָשִׁים

לפְּנֵי יָמֵי הַסְּלִיחָה הַנּוֹרְאִים

אֲנִי חוֹשֵׁשׁ שְׁלֹא אֲגִיעַ

אֲנִי מְפַזֵּר אֶת יוֹם הַכִּיפּוּר עַל פְּנֵי כָּל הַשָּׁנָה

עֲנֵבִים בְּשָׁלִים בְּעוֹנָתָם

אֵךְ אֵיךְ יִבְשִׁילוּ חֲטָאִים וְכִפְרָתָם בְּיוֹם אֶחָד

Here's the translation:

Forgive me already now,

three months before the days of awe and forgiveness.

I am afraid that I won't get there.

I scatter the Day of Atonement over the surface of the whole year.

Grapes ripen in their season.

So how will sins and their atonement ripen in one day?

That's the close of the poem.

Amichai gives us an image that is helpful and hopeful - This forgiveness project, it's like grapes. It needs time. Atonement doesn't happen in a day. It certainly may not happen on this particular designated day. Just because the day is here doesn't mean you are.

We may need to

לִפְזֹר אֶת יוֹם הַכִּיפּוּר עַל פְּנֵי כָּל הַשָּׁנָה

To scatter Yom Kippur over the surface of the whole year.

The risk, of course, is *that it is a long time to stay focused on forgiveness. It's so much easier to have one singularly focused, intensive day to lay everything bare.*

But what Amichai offers is far more time to soften our stance; to see the person before us as humbled, wounded, unguarded. You don't have to heal yet. But we do need to understand the shared pain.

Which is at the heart of this final story, a Hasidic tale from Sassover in Galicia, present day Ukraine.

The Hasidic rebbe Rebbe Moshe Lieb Erblich, known as the Sassover Rav, enters an inn, and sits beside two locals. He overhears their conversation.

One turns to his friend and says, "Tell me, friend, do you love me?"

His friend responds, "We're good friends. Of course I love you."

"Tell me, then," the first one said, "what hurts me?"

"How should I know what hurts you?" his friend replied.

The first one said, "If you loved me you would know what causes me pain."

From that day the Sassover Rebbe taught his students that to be in a relationship with another human being means to know what hurts them.

If we're going to be people who forgive, we will have to learn about each other's pains.

We may not be there yet. Our ability to be empathic has itself been wounded in this year of war. But don't let go of the possibility that we might fall on our knees and meet each other close to the ground.

This is what we mean when we say that on Yom Kippur we have to approach one another before we approach God. Otherwise we might think that God is in some far away space, above and beyond.

No, God is right there, on the ground, waiting for us to reach towards one another.

This Yom Kippur, amidst so much pain, in a time of war, when we are ready to burst with the anger and sadness we are holding, I hope we will also find a way to reach.

“With all my heart I reach out to You, Adonai,” wrote the great Hebrew poet Yehuda HaLevy.

“And in my going out to meet You,
I found you seeking me.”

Lshanah tovah, gmar chatimah tovah.