

Is Forgiveness Possible?

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A number of years ago I worked as a chaplain at an elderly home in Harlem. One morning I noticed a man in his forties come by one of the rooms. His visit lasted for quite a while. As he walked out, tears were in his eyes. I approached him and asked him if he was the man's son. He was not. He was his nephew. He was anxious to talk, to speak about his visit.

He told me that he had come to reconcile with his uncle. "What did you fight about?" I asked. "We never fought. My father and he fought." He explained that the two brothers had not spoken for over twenty years. Now he came to reconcile between them.

"Where is your father? Why didn't he come?" I asked sheepishly. "My father died a number of months ago. But they still needed to make up" he explained.

"And..." I asked impatiently, "did they..."

"I think he forgave him. I think that this time he really forgave him," was his answer.

Do you believe in forgiveness?

Isn't that *the* question?

Is forgiveness possible or not?

Last year, on Rosh Hashanah, I stained my favorite white shirt with pomegranate seeds. The same white shirt that I wore at my wedding. I spent the entire week trying to clean it, to wash it off, to remove the stain. Drycleaners spent hours upon hours experimenting on that poor white shirt. But to no avail, the stain was and remains there.

Is forgiveness possible or must we learn to live with permanent stains?

Tonight I would like to briefly explore some passages that grapple with this very question.

The end of *Sefer Bereshit*, the book of Genesis, powerfully describes Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers. After years of being apart, Joseph finally reveals his true identity to them. We read in the Torah:

בראשית פרק מה

(ד) וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל אֶחָיו גִּשׁוּ נָא אֵלַי וַיִּגְשׁוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו יוֹסֵף אֶחָיִכֶם אֲשֶׁר מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי מִצְרַיִם:
(ה) וַעֲתָה אֵל תַּעֲצְבוּ וְאֵל יִחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי הַנְּהָה כִּי לְמַחְיָה שָׁלַחֵנִי אֱ-לֹהִים לְפָנֵיכֶם:

“Joseph said to his brothers: Please come close to me, I am Joseph your brother! You sold me to Egypt. Now don't worry or feel guilty because you sold me. Look! God has sent me ahead of you to save lives.”

This is a defining moment. Can you even imagine the inner strength, religious conviction, moral audacity that enabled and inspired Joseph to utter those words? His brothers betrayed him! They threw him to the pit, sold him to Egypt, their own brother; flesh and blood. But Joseph forgave them. *Yosef HaTzadik!* Yosef the righteous! I believe that this particular challenge, the challenge of forgiving his brothers, defined Joseph's life more than any other trial or tribulation that he had experienced.

Forgiving others is truly a challenge. And yet, our tradition is clear that there is something that may be just as difficult.

Only a few chapters later, still in *Sefer Bereshit*, in the book of Genesis, we learn of another encounter between the brothers:

בראשית פרק נ

(טו) וַיִּרְאוּ אֶחָיו יוֹסֵף כִּי מֵת אָבִיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ יִשְׁטַמְנוּ יוֹסֵף וְהַשֵּׁב יָשִׁיב לָנוּ אֵת כָּל הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר גָּמְלָנוּ אֹתוֹ: ...
(יט) וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָהֶם יוֹסֵף אֵל תִּירְאוּ כִּי הִתְחַת אֱ-לֹהִים אֵנִי:

Shortly after their father's death, the brothers become anxious and fearful.

“What if Joseph is still holding a grudge against us?’ they say to one another.
‘He is likely to pay us back for all the evil we did him.’”

Here once again Joseph comforts them.

“Don’t be afraid.... Shall I take God’s place ... I will fully provide for you and your children.”

After all those years, after living together peacefully in Egypt, side by side, Joseph’s brothers still wouldn’t trust, still couldn’t accept or believe that their brother had forgiven them.

Do you know what’s as difficult as forgiving other people’s sins, allowing other people to forgive us our own.

Unfortunately, at times we just don’t believe that we are worthy of forgiveness.

But there is one more challenge. Perhaps a more subtle challenge. At times it is difficult to believe that God truly forgives.

We learn in the Talmud, Tractate Yumah 86b:

תנו רבנן: עבירות שהתודה עליהן יום הכפורים זה - לא יתודה עליהן יום הכפורים אחר

“Transgressions that a person confesses to this Yom Kippur should not be confessed again next Yom Kippur.”

If a sin was not repeated and the person already repented for it in the past, then that person is forbidden to continue repenting for it in the future. Forgiveness is absolute. We are not allowed to repent for things for which we were already forgiven.

Rabeinu Yonah explains this *halakhah* or rule in a most insightful way.

והזהירו על זה ... כי הוא מראה עצמו מקטני הבטחון וכאילו איננו בוטח על גדולת סליחת השם יתברך שהוא נושא עון ועובר על פשע

“Our rabbis warn against confessing again for sins of the past for by doing so a person shows that he or she lacks trust, that he or she doesn’t believe in God’s forgivingness, in God who forgives inequity and overlooks transgression.”

According to Rabeinu Yonah, by repeatedly confessing to sins of the past we demonstrate a lack of trust in the power of God’s forgiveness. We only apologize again and again because we don’t really believe that we were truly forgiven.

Yom Kippur is the time to seek forgiveness and doing so is a critical part of the day. But there is something else we must do on this day. On Yom Kippur we must also learn to accept that we can be forgiven.

At the end of Tractate Taanit, Rabban Shimon Gamielel teaches: “*Lo hayu yamim tovim le’israel ke’yom hakippurim*”—“Israel does not have happier days than the day of Yom Kippur.” Rav Shlomo Carlebach called it: “*Simchat HaSlicha*”—the joy of forgiveness.

In our shul in Montreal Yom Kippur was more joyful than Simchat Torah or Purim. And I always believed that our Rabbi, R. Schmidman (of blessed memory) was teaching us to rejoice in our having been forgiven.

As we enter Yom Kippur, let us remember: It takes courage and strength to seek forgiveness, to right wrongs, to mend our relationships. It also takes deep trust and faith to accept that we can be forgiven.

That is the very message of the powerful *piut* we sing during the Mussaf service:

“*Ve’khol maminim.*”

“Vekhol maminim sheho tov la’kol”—“All believe that God is good to all.”

“Ve’khol maminim sheho notzer chesed”—“All believe that God preserves kindness.”

“Ve’khol maminim sheho soleach selah”—“All believe that God indeed forgives.”

This Yom Kippur let’s dance to these words—“All believe that God indeed forgives.”

Let’s really believe them.

May God give us the strength to forgive and the courage to seek the forgiveness of others, of God and of ourselves. And may we be blessed with the faith to accept that we can be forgiven.