

Forgive to Live
Kol Nidre 5770
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Author Steve Goodier tells the following story:

After seventeen years of marriage, a man dumped his wife for a younger woman. The downtown luxury apartment was in his name and he wanted to remain there with his new love, so he asked his wife to move out and said he would buy her another place. The wife agreed to this, but asked that she be given three days.

The first day she packed her personal belongings into boxes and crates and suitcases. On the second day, she had the movers come and collect her things. On the third day, she sat down for the last time at their candlelit dining table, soft music playing in the background, and feasted alone on shrimp (yes, full disclosure, this is not a story of traditional Jewish origin) and a bottle of Chardonnay. When she had finished, she went into each room and deposited shrimp leftovers into the hollow of her curtain rods. She then cleaned up the kitchen and left.

Her husband returned with his new girl, and all was bliss for the first few days. Then it started; slowly but surely. Clueless, the man could not explain why the place smelled as it did. They tried everything. First they

cleaned and mopped and aired the place out. That didn't work. Then they checked vents for dead rodents. Still no luck. They steam cleaned the carpets and hung air fresheners. That didn't solve the problem. They hired exterminators; still no good. They ripped out the carpets and replaced them. But the smell lingered.

Finally, they could take it no more and decided to move. The moving company packed everything and moved it all to their new place.

Everything. Even the curtain rods. 😊

On one level this story may seem amusing, and fair. The wife, who was certainly a victim, gets her revenge on her unsuspecting ex. But is revenge what we should be looking for in a case like this? Granted that the short time frame captured in this story doesn't even begin to allow for the process of healing to really begin, in principle, instead of looking to “get even” on some level when we have been hurt by another person, even someone close to us, over time we are better off pursuing a different, and more noble, value—FORGIVENESS.

Our tradition places a huge emphasis on the importance of forgiveness. We may be aware that, during this time of year, it is customary to approach people whom we have wronged during the past year to apologize for what we have done and ask them for their forgiveness

BEFORE we can try to repent to God. But we may not all know that our tradition goes a bit further than that. You see, if you have the strength to approach someone three times in sincere repentance to ask them for their forgiveness, and they refuse to grant that forgiveness all three times, then the burden shifts to them and you are free to continue on your path of *teshuvah*, return, to God. This particular law in our tradition teaches us two important things: ONE—it is vital that, over time, we move to forgive others, otherwise, why would this law assume that three real attempts at an apology ought to clear the slate; and TWO—forgiving can be very difficult—otherwise, why would this law acknowledge that it might take three legitimate attempts before an apology would be accepted!

The command to forgive IS a difficult one to fulfill when we have been wronged or hurt, and we are certainly not the only ones who have struggled with what might seem to us like an unrealistic obligation. Going back in history, let's just take two examples of people who simply refused to forgive when someone did them wrong, and made that point very publicly.

One was Michelangelo. Michelangelo was one of the greatest artists who ever lived. Not much debate on that front. He could carve incredible statues that still amaze us whenever we look at them to this day. He could paint pictures that still fill our souls with wonder. But there was one thing

that Michelangelo could not do. He simply could not forgive anyone who had hurt him.

A friend of his once dared to criticize one of his works of art. How did Michelangelo respond? When he painted the Sistine Chapel, he used that man's face as the model for the devil. So that everyone who enters the Sistine Chapel to this day looks at a work which is a testimony to Michelangelo's genius as an artist, but which is also testimony to Michelangelo's smallness as a human being.

For another example, how about Dante? Dante was arguably the greatest poet of the Middle Ages. And yet, Dante had a major flaw. He could not forget, and he could not forgive anyone who crossed him. And so when he wrote his masterpiece the Inferno, he described the terrible torment that those who suffer in hell will endure, and he used the names of his enemies as the examples. So whoever reads the Inferno sees the work of a man who was a brilliant poet, but not so noble in his character.

So if we're having trouble with forgiveness, we're in good company. If Michelangelo, who was an artistic genius, and Dante, who was a remarkable poet, could not forgive someone who hurt them, then maybe we shouldn't feel so bad? How can I be expected to forgive, if they couldn't?

And yet, our tradition is replete with examples of people who showed

remarkable strength of character in their decisions to ultimately forgive. Here, too, let's make mention of two such examples, both from the Torah.

The first is Joseph—many of us may be familiar with the general nature of his story; Joseph, the dreamer, the bratty, and even arrogant, kid brother, was sold into slavery by his jealous and hateful older brothers. Some years later, when the fortunes of both parties had turned completely—Joseph was the viceroy of Egypt and his brothers were suffering through a famine in Canaan—Joseph found himself in a position of power over his brothers who had come to Egypt to beg for food for their family and did not recognize that they had come face to face with the little brother they had once victimized. Joseph faced a dilemma—exact vengeance and make them pay for their sins against him, or forgive and reconcile. When they were willing to trade themselves to redeem the youngest brother Benjamin, Joseph recognized that they, in fact, had been redeemed—they had changed. And with that came forth the emotional cry from within Joseph—“I am Joseph. Does my father yet live? Come near to me, I pray you. I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt.” Joseph had finally reached the moment when he could let go of the memory of the wrong they had done him. Under the circumstances, reconciliation had to have been extremely difficult for Joseph, and yet he showed us that forgiveness can triumph.

For our second example, let's turn to our tradition's greatest prophet and teacher—Moses. Was there ever a Jewish leader who was rebelled against more often, who was betrayed more often, who was criticized more often, than he was? His brother, Aaron, and his sister, Miriam, both spoke out against him; his cousin, Korach, tried to overthrow him, the people of Israel rebelled against him over and over and over again for forty years in a row! Moses had to put up with this nonsense for 40 years! And yet, somehow Moses was able to forgive his people and to continue to lead them and love them until the end of his life.

And on the day that he died, the Midrash says that Moses made the rounds of the twelve tribes, hugged each one of them and accepted their apologies, and gave them his apologies. The Midrash says that they said to him, "We are sorry that we rebelled so often," and he said to them, "I am sorry that I was so hard on you," and they made up with each other and then he died.

Could any of us have done what Moses did that day? If we were in his position, could we have forgiven the people that harassed us mercilessly for forty years? Deep down we can admire Moses for having been able to forgive his people, for it couldn't have been an easy thing to do.

Long after Moses lived, an anecdote was told about the life of one of Judaism's Talmudic sages, Mar Zutra. Each night before he went to sleep, Mar Zutra would say, "I forgive all who hurt me today". He understood that people weren't perfect, and he genuinely forgave those who had hurt or disappointed him. He gave the gift of forgiveness freely to others as well as to himself. He knew he would sleep better and live happier if he had removed the bitterness and hatred from his heart.

And that's just it—as Steve Goodier, who shared the story with which I began, analyzed the story this way: *"The problem is... we can't carry a grudge and carry love in our hearts at the same time. We have to give one of them up. It's a choice we make. Some resentments are large; they've built up over a long time and will not be easy to part with. Some have been fed by years of pain and anger. But all the more reason to give them up. When we're tired of the anger and resentment and bitterness, we can choose a better way. We can be forever unhappy, or we can be healthy. We're just not made to carry a big grudge and a heart filled with love at the same time"*.

I think that the truth is that we don't like to forgive, because there is something inside of us that enjoys the taste of revenge, like the woman in the story. Let's be honest. On an instinctual level, it feels good to get back at

someone who has hurt you, doesn't it? Refusing someone's apology gives us a certain amount of power over that person and that power feels good.

It is tempting to nurse a grudge. And yet our tradition is emphatic in telling us not to do it. Here are three important reasons why: The first reason: When you hold on to a grudge, who does it hurt: your enemy or you?

Rabbi Harold Kushner, a Conservative rabbi and world-renowned, best-selling author, tells the story of how a woman once came to him, and poured out in detail her anger against her husband for how he left her for another woman, and how he had mistreated her and their children. What advice did Rabbi Kushner give her? "Let it go, not for his sake, but for yours. For ten years this has been burdening you. If you wouldn't let him live in your house, rent free, why on earth do you let him live in your mind rent free?"

What harm does it do to the one who has hurt us for us to brood and wallow in our anger and in our self-pity? It is better for us to get on with our lives, and not let the one who has hurt us continue to control our lives and pull our strings and drive us crazy.

The second reason why we ought to forgive can be illustrated by a brief story, told by Rachel Naomi Remen. Years ago, she went to a Yom Kippur service to hear a well-known rabbi speak about forgiveness, thinking

he would be speaking about God's forgiveness. Instead, as she tells it, *"he walked out into the congregation, took his infant daughter from his wife, and carrying her in his arms, stepped up to the bimah. The little girl was perhaps a year old and she was adorable. From her father's arms she smiled at the congregation. Every heart melted. Turning toward her daddy, she patted him on the cheek with her tiny hands. He smiled fondly at her and, with his customary dignity, began a traditional Yom Kippur sermon". The baby girl started grabbing his nose; he freed himself and went on; then she took his tie and put it in her mouth. Everyone chuckled. The rabbi rescued his tie, and then said to the congregation—"Think about it. Is there anything she can do that you could not forgive her for?" After the nods and murmurs of assent came from the crowd, he went on—"And when does that stop? When does it get hard to forgive? At three? At seven? At fourteen? At thirty-five? How old does someone have to be before we forget that everyone is a child of God?" We are all God's children, part of the same family; we expect forgiveness from God, for anything we do, and God's children, our family and extended human family, deserve that same forgiveness from us.*

Finally, here is a third reason why we should try to forgive, and that is: That the truth is—although we don't like to admit it, that we have

slandered just as much as we have been slandered; that we have insulted, just as much as we have been insulted. We have said and done hurtful things to friends, co-workers, loved ones. The only difference is that when WE do it, we justify it, and we rationalize and we forgive ourselves. But when it is done to us, we get upset, and we want retribution.

It is much easier to think of times when we have been wronged than it is to think of times when we have done wrong. Somehow the human mind works that way. We have a selective memory, and so we find it easier to remember the times when we have been hurt than it is to remember the times when we have hurt.

And so I pray that this year you and I may work on developing not only our memory skills, but, as my colleague Rabbi Jack Riemer terms it, a good “forgettery” as well. Because without a good “forgettery” we really cannot live. If we hold on to every insult, and every harsh word, and every misdeed that has ever been done to us, we become so weighed down by this burden that we can barely walk or breathe or live.

The truth is that, with no exceptions, everyone has his own baggage and there is no need for any of us to add any more to each other’s pain and suffering; on the contrary, there is a need for comfort and companionship. Let us try yet again this year to minimize the hurt that we cause with our

words and deeds; but, when inevitably we slip up, AND WE WILL SLIP UP--let us forgive each other, because we truly do need each other so much.

May we learn how to let go of the anger that we all carry around inside us that chokes us and that does not let us love. And let us forgive, so that we may live.

May this new year be a good year, a peaceful year, a year in which we give and get forgiveness, both from our Heavenly Parent, and to and from the people with whom we live here on God's earth. And to this, let us all say: amen.