

"FORGIVE & FORGET?"

Lessons on moving on from Shai Agnon & Simon Wiesenthal.



Introduction

I said nothing. The truth was that on his battlefield he had also “fought” against defenseless men, women, children, and the aged. I could imagine them enveloped in flames jumping from the windows to certain death. He sat up and put his hands together as if to pray. “I want to die in peace, and so I need...” I saw that he could not get the words past his lips. But I was in no mood to help him. I kept silent.

“I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. Only I didn’t know whether there were any Jews left... “I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace.”

Two men who had never known each other had been brought together for a few hours by Fate. One asks the other for help. But the other was himself helpless and able to do nothing for him.

I stood up and looked in his direction, at his folded hands. Between them there seemed to rest a sunflower. At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room.

I gazed at the lonely woman sitting sadly with her memories. I formed a picture of how she lived. I knew that from time to time she would take in her arms her son’s bundle, his last present, as if it were her son himself.

“I can well believe what people said—so many dreadful things happened. But one thing is certain, Karl never did any wrong. He was always a decent young man. I miss him so much now that my husband is dead...” I thought of the many mothers who were also bereft of their sons. But her son had not lied to me; his home was just as he had described it. Yet the solution

of my problem was not a single step nearer...

I took my leave without diminishing in any way the poor woman's last surviving consolation—faith in the goodness of her son. Perhaps it was a mistake not to have told her the truth. Perhaps her tears might help to wash away some of the misery of the world.

THEODORE M. HESBURGH Who am I to advise a person of another religion who has suffered incredibly more than I have? I would not ordinarily presume to do so, but I was requested to do so, so I do. My whole instinct is to forgive. Perhaps that is because I am a Catholic priest. In a sense, I am in the forgiving business. I sit in a confessional for hours and forgive everyone who comes in, confesses, and is sorry. I think of God as the great forgiver of sinful humanity. The greatest story of Jesus is the Prodigal Son. Can we aspire to be as forgiving of each other as God is of us? Of course, the sin here is monumental. It is still finite and God's mercy is infinite. If asked to forgive, by anyone for anything, I would forgive because God would forgive. If I had suffered as so many had, it might be much more difficult, but I hope I would still be forgiving, not from my own small position but as a surrogate for our almighty and all-forgiving God.

SUSANNAH HESCHEL I would have done exactly as Simon Wiesenthal did. Since the war, Wiesenthal's questions have taken on even more practical significance than they did for him in the camp that one day. Can we forgive the Nazis their crimes? Can we forgive the German people? In Judaism, where forgiveness requires both atonement and restitution, there are two sins that can never be forgiven: murder and destroying someone's reputation. In these two situations atonement is possible, but not forgiveness. A murdered person, after all, cannot forgive the murderer, and a good reputation can never be restored. The Holocaust involved both of these sins: murder and the defamation of the Jewish people through anti-Semitic propaganda. No matter how much atonement is expressed for these crimes, no restitution is possible, and no forgiveness can follow.

My father, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote that "the blood of the innocent cries forever." Should that blood cease to cry, humanity would cease to be. Perhaps the issue is not forgiveness, but rather how the victims and their descendants can live without bitterness or vengeance, without losing their own humanity, when they hear the cry of the blood of their families. Rather than asking for forgiveness, the descendants of the Nazis should continue to hear the cries of Jewish blood, and thereby preserve their own humanity.

Cynthia Ozick

The morally sensitive SS man goes on shoveling, and shoveling, and shoveling. A virtuous childhood as a server in his church lies behind him; he shovels. A virtuous future as a model of remorse lies ahead of him; he shovels. He shovels and shovels, all the while possessed of a

refined and meticulous moral temperament—so refined and so meticulous that it knows the holy power of forgiveness, and knows to ask for it.

Let the SS man die unshriven.

Let him go to hell.

Sooner the fly to God than he.

Joshua Rubinstein

Confession and remorse alone are not enough to warrant forgiveness. Even though this Nazi was dying and had neither strength nor opportunity to do some kind of righteous deed, as other remorseful Germans managed to do, his dying wish to beg forgiveness from a scared, vulnerable Jewish prisoner was as much an act of callous egotism as it was a misguided act of contrition. A sense of humanity requires regard for justice and mercy. When Simon helps the wounded man to drink water or waves an annoying bug from his face, such spontaneous gestures reflect instincts that could well have grown extinct in the camps. The Nazi had committed mass murder. Simon was merciful enough with him. For Simon to grant him forgiveness, as well, would have been a betrayal of his and his family's suffering, and all the suffering around him. This was the first and probably last time, after all, that he confronted an utterly helpless Nazi and could have smothered him.

Wiesenthal, Simon. *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*

"Were we to base our ruling on humanitarian concerns, or for that matter, on national honor or sentiment, then surely [there would not be any way to meet this request]. Such a person, whose hands [are stained] with Jewish blood has no place in the [Jewish community]. Indeed, "let him be called 'unclean, yea unclean'" [Lev. 13:45]; let his place be distant from Israel. How difficult ... it is to entitle him 'our brother'.

"Yet from the perspective of the dry halakha I can find no barrier to accepting him. Behold Cain, the first murderer in human history, according to Genesis Rabbah 22) crying, 'I have repented! I have separated!' Exodus Rabba 19:4 describes Job's reference that 'the stranger shall not remain outdoors' to mean that the Holy One, Blessed be He, does not invalidate a human being. He receives everyone, the gates remain forever open ... Does the Talmud not relate that R. Meir descended from Nero ...? Did not Nebuzaradan, slaughterer of Jews, repent and convert (B. Sanhedrin 96b)?

"If the Court is therefore convinced of his utter remorse, of his complete repentance, of [the purity of his motive to convert], then there is no halakhic barrier [to his conversion] ..."

R Moshe Halevi Shteinberg

The Mitzvah to Seek Forgiveness

עבירות שבין אדם למקום - יום הכפורים מכפר עבירות שבין אדם לחבירו - אין יום הכפורים מכפר, עד שירצה את חבירו. דרש רבי אלעזר בן עזריה: +ויקרא טז+ מכל חטאתיכם לפני ה' תטהרו עבירות שבין אדם למקום - יום הכפורים מכפר, עבירות שבין אדם לחבירו - אין יום הכפורים מכפר, עד שירצה את חבירו

FOR TRANSGRESSIONS AS BETWEEN MAN AND THE OMNIPRESENT THE DAY OF ATONEMENT PROCURES ATONEMENT, BUT FOR TRANSGRESSIONS AS BETWEEN MAN AND HIS FELLOW THE DAY OF ATONEMENT DOES NOT PROCURE ANY ATONEMENT, UNTIL HE HAS PACIFIED HIS FELLOW. THIS WAS EXPOUNDED BY R. ELEAZAR B. ALARIAH: FROM ALL YOUR SINS BEFORE THE LORD SHALL YE BE CLEAN - FOR TRANSGRESSIONS AS BETWEEN MAN AND THE OMNIPRESENT THE DAY OF ATONEMENT PROCURES ATONEMENT, BUT FOR TRANSGRESSIONS AS BETWEEN MAN AND HIS FELLOW THE DAY OF ATONEMENT DOES NOT PROCURE ATONEMENT UNTIL HE HAS PACIFIED HIS FELLOW

Mishnah Yoma Chapter 8

אין התשובה ולא יום הכפורים מכפרין אלא על עבירות שבין אדם למקום כגון מי שאכל דבר אסור או בעל בעילה אסורה וכיוצא בהן, אבל עבירות שבין אדם לחבירו כגון החובל את חבירו או המקלל חבירו או גוזלו וכיוצא בהן אינו נמחל לו לעולם עד שיתן לחבירו מה שהוא חייב לו וירצהו, אע"פ שהחזיר לו ממון שהוא חייב לו צריך לרצותו ולשאול ממנו שימחול לו, אפילו לא הקניט את חבירו אלא בדברים צריך לפייסו ולפגע בו עד שימחול לו, לא רצה חבירו למחול לו מביא לו שורה של שלשה בני אדם מריעיו ופוגעין בו ומבקשין ממנו, לא נתרצה להן מביא לו שניה ושלישית לא רצה מניחו והולך לו וזה שלא מחל הוא החוטא, ואם היה רבו הולך ובא אפילו אלף פעמים עד שימחול לו.

Repentance and Yom Kippur atone only for sins between the person and G-d, such as eating a forbidden food, having prohibited relations, and similar things. But sins against other people such as injuring, cursing or stealing are never atoned for until he has paid what he owes the person and appeased him. Even though he has returned any money he owes he still has to appease him and ask for forgiveness. Even if one only made fun of someone else he has to appease him and entreat him until he forgives him. If the person does not want to forgive him, then he must bring a row of three of his friends and entreat the person to forgive him. If they still won't forgive he must ask him two or even three times. If they still won't forgive him he should leave him alone and go away. This person who did not forgive is now the sinner. But if [the person sinned against was] his Rabbi, he must continue to approach him even a thousand times until the Rabbi forgives him.

דביוה"כ איכא קפידא שיתפייס א' עם חבירו ואין נפקותא אם הצדק עמו במה שמקפיד עליו או לא מ"מ צריכין להתפייס

Before Yom Kippur there is a necessity for people to appease one another. And there is no difference if the aggrieved party is correct in being upset, or not, nonetheless, he must appease him.

Sfat Emet Yoma 87b

מה ששמעתי על הגאון והצדיק רבי ישראל סלנטר דלפעמים במה שמבקש מחבירו מחילה, בזה גופא עובר עבירו, שמצער בזה חבירו, דכל זמן שאין הלה יודע שתבירו ביזה אותו ודיבר עליו לשון הרע וכדומה אינו מצטער כלל ועכשיו כשחבירו מבקש ממנו מחילה ומפרט מה שעשה בזה גופא נודע לו וע"כ מצטער ונגרם לו צער ועגמת נפש

I heard in the name of the righteous gaon, Rav Yisrael Salanter, that sometimes the asking for forgiveness is actually a sin, because he causes pain to his friend. For all the while when the other did not know that his friend had shamed him and spoken Lashon Hara against him etc, he was not pained by this. And now when his friend asks for Mechila and specifies what he has actually done, he is pained and this causes him real suffering.

Moadim Uzmanim, R Moshe Shternbuch 1,54

The Mitzvah to Forgive

אסור לאדם להיות אכזרי ולא יתפייס אלא יהא נוח לרצות וקשה לכעוס ובשעה שמבקש ממנו החוטא למחול מוחל בלב שלם ובנפש חפיצה, ואפילו הצר לו וחטא לו הרבה לא יקום ולא יטור וזהו דרכם של זרע ישראל ולבם הנכון אבל העובדי כוכבים ערלי לב אינן כן אלא ועברתן שמרה נצח, וכן הוא אומר על הגבעונים לפי שלא מחלו ולא נתפייסו והגבעונים לא מבני ישראל המה.

It is forbidden for a person to be harsh and not be appeased. Rather he should be easily accepting and slow to anger. When someone asks for forgiveness he should forgive him wholeheartedly and with a desiring soul. Even if the sinner had distressed him considerably and sinned against him a lot, he may not take revenge or bear a grudge. This is the way of the descendents of Israel, and to those with a good heart. But the non-Jews, who have uncircumcised hearts, are not so. Rather "he has kept his fury forever" (Amos 1: 11). Similarly it states concerning the Givonim, because they not forgive or appease Israel, "The Givonim are not of the Children of Israel" (Shmuel 2 21: 2)

Rambam Hilchot Teshuva Chapter 2

Behold I forgive completely anybody who has sinned against me, whether against my person, or my property, or who has spoken ill against me, even slandered me or in any other sin. With the exception of money over which I still have a legal claim, behold I forgive them completely. And may no person be punished on my account.

Tefilat Zaka

That aside, the very necessity of accessibility on the part of Rav is troubling; as he is clearly prepared to forgive and forget, there should be no need for the butcher to ask. It seems, then, that the act of apologizing is integral to the forgiveness granted on Yom Kippur. Similarly, R.

Eliezer Ginsberg (V'Atah B'Rachamekha HaRabim, Hilkhoh Teshuvah 2:9) writes that the mechilah would be ineffectual, lacking genuine penitence on the part of the sinner.

Rabbi D.Z. Feldman

The Benefits of Forgiving

1. It is good for our health – Forgiving others has significant health advantages. The Stanford Forgiveness Project (2001) conducted a large-scale study on the effects of forgiveness across a number of variables. They found that forgiveness significantly reduces levels of stress, feelings of anger, feelings of hurt, and increases levels of optimism.
2. Finding meaning – One of the basic tenets of Judaism is that there is a reason for everything. Oftentimes, the life lessons that are most precious come at the greatest cost. While we would not choose to be hurt, we often learn the most about our resilience, our strengths, and what really matters to us specifically from those events that are really hard. By appreciating what we may have gained in growth, it may become easier to let go of the negativity that brought us to where we are now in our understanding of life.
3. Judgment – Realize that when we feel wronged it has a lot to do with how we perceive the actions and motives of another person. The Sages teach that we should not judge a person until we have walked in their shoes, partly because of the difficulty of judging accurately. We need to ask ourselves if our reading of the situation is completely accurate. When we consider a bigger picture and our own limitations of grasping it, this may soften our stance and make it easier to [forgive](#).
4. The Golden Rule – Everyone makes mistakes, including us, and the same way that we would want others to forgive us for our offences we should likewise be willing to extend forgiveness to others. We are not able to control anyone else's behavior except for our own and we cannot make anyone own up to something they do not want to. But we can choose to take a higher road and be willing to forgive even if no apology is forthcoming.
5. Forgive Yourself – How we relate to others, and how we relate to ourselves, is often two sides of the same coin. Sometimes the hardest person to forgive is the one who looks back at us from the mirror. Whether it is for opportunities missed, mistakes made, or perceived imperfections we sometimes carry a grudge against ourselves. As a result, we may suffer feelings of low self-esteem and a host of other negative emotions. When we are more willing to forgive ourselves this can open the door to forgiving others a bit more easily. The Torah famously states that we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves. This implies that our ability to love others is based on our ability to love ourselves. Forgiving ourselves is a good place to start.



Forgiveness is a process where someone who has been wronged chooses to let go of their resentment, and treat the wrongdoer with compassion.

Deepening Understanding of Forgiveness

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting or condoning the wrongdoing, granting legal mercy, or reconciling a relationship. You can forgive a person while in no way believing that their actions were acceptable or justified.

On the other hand, simply saying the words "I forgive you", or accepting an apology, is not forgiveness. In fact, forgiveness can occur without ever speaking to the wrongdoer. Forgiveness is an emotional change that occurs within the person who has been wronged.

What forgiveness is:

The decision to overcome pain that was inflicted by another person.

Letting go of anger, resentment, shame, and other emotions associated with an injustice, even though they are reasonable feelings.

Treating the offender with compassion, even though they are not entitled to it.

What forgiveness isn't:

Reconciliation (repairing or returning to a relationship).

Forgetting the injustice.

Condoning or excusing the offender's behavior.

Granting legal mercy to the offender.

"Letting go", but wishing for revenge.

The Four Phases of Forgiveness

- 1 The Uncovering Phase.** During the first phase of forgiveness, you will improve your understanding of the injustice, and how it has impacted your life.
- 2 The Decision Phase.** During the second phase, you will gain a deeper understanding of what forgiveness is, and make the decision to choose or reject forgiveness as an option.
- 3 The Work Phase.** During the third phase, you will start to understand the offender in a new way, which will allow positive feelings toward the offender and yourself.
- 4 The Deepening Phase.** During the final phase of forgiveness, you will further decrease the negative emotions associated with the injustice. You may find meaning in the experiences, and recognize ways in which you have grown as a result.

The Special Forgiveness of Yom Kippur

...This is an additional rule to the obligation that all year one is obligated to ask his fellow man for forgiveness, for when it comes to the atonement of Yom Kippur it is not enough that his fellow forgives him, but one must also reconcile with his fellow, in other words to appease him with words and to return his heart to the amity that existed before he sinned, and return the relationship of love and fellowship that existed between them before he sinned against him. And as far as the reason one can suggest, that the atonement of Yom Kippur takes effect only as an atonement of the community, and if so

in order to join and unite the community together it is necessary that there be no division that separates between the people of the community...

Rabbi Soloveitchik

מאמר זה
ראשון יראה לומר בזה, דשאני דינו של ראשון
והחובה לרצות את חברו לפני יוה"כ,
מהדין הכללי דבקשה מחילה שנמשכה דהחובל,
דדינא דראשון הוי דין הנאמר לענין כפרת יוה"כ,
דאין יוה"כ מכפר עד שירצה את חברו, וזה דין
נוסף על החובה דכל השנה שחייב לבקש ממנו
מחילה, דבעד כפרת יוה"כ לא די בזה שחברו מחל
לו אלא דלרין גם לרצות את חברו, כלומר,

Sholem Spector (19)

Forgiving G-d?

Once, on Kol Nidrei night, as the Day of Atonement was beginning, he looked around the synagogue and saw a man whose face was filled with tears. He went up to him. 'Why are you crying?'

'I cannot help it. Once I was a pious Jew. I had a good livelihood, a comfortable home. My wife was devout. Our home was always open to strangers. Then suddenly He intervened. I lost my wife. My business collapsed. I had to sell my home. And I am left poor and homeless with six children to look after. I do not know how to pray any more. All I can do is come to the synagogue and weep.'

Levi Yitzchak comforted the man and brought him a prayer book. 'Will you pray now?'

'Yes,' said the man.

'Do you forgive God now?'

'Yes', he replied. 'Today is the Day of Atonement; I must forgive.'

Then Levi Yitzchak turned his eyes upward towards heaven and said, 'You too must do the same, Master of the Universe, You too must forgive.'