

**Ripening the Time:
Forced Forgiveness and Real Reconciliation in Law and Lore
Yom Kippur Morning 5772
October 8, 2011**

A few months ago I overheard a woman referring to her upcoming wedding. The subject of the groom-to-be came up; she smiled and with love in her heart and a twinkle in her eye said: “Yes, I think he’ll make an outstanding first husband.” I’m fairly sure she was joking. But I guess it’s an important notion for all of us, to keep trying to get things right.

One of the deepest challenges of our lives, one of the major themes of this season is the whole question of getting things right. Central to that effort is the issue of forgiveness. We heard a wonderful approach to the topic on Erev Rosh Hashanah, at the late service that night, from Rabbi Ackerman.

I’ve been wondering about forgiveness a great deal myself recently. It was triggered by discussions surrounding the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Indirectly, I heard about a church service that Sunday morning, whose liturgy consisted entirely of readings on the topic of forgiveness. I heard that the service was... profoundly moving for those who were there. While I understand this and can appreciate the importance of this perspective on it on its own terms, especially given what I think I understand about different branches of Christianity, still, my internal Jewish reaction was bewilderment and awe. How, I wonder... how can we talk about forgiveness when, as far as I know, the planners show no remorse, the perpetrators are not around to atone, and the victims are beyond being able to receive restitution. Never mind that,

according to our perspective, the murdered are the only ones who can grant absolution, and they...are in no position to do so.

[There may, actually, be a bright line distinction between faith traditions on this particular issue. As much as we have in common (perhaps more and more as we live together in this modern world), this is one of those places where we are just different.] I have addressed this dilemma elsewhere. I responded, some years ago, to the story of Bud Welch, whose 23-year old daughter Julie Marie was killed in the Oklahoma City bombing, and who went on a speaking tour before the execution of Timothy McVeigh, indicating that he forgave the bomber. I myself was moved by his story – featured to this day on the website of a British-based non-profit called The Forgiveness Project. But I stand by the position... that while I cannot imagine what he has gone through, while I am inspired by his ability to face the future, still, Bud Welch cannot... forgive... McVeigh, on behalf of his daughter. Even her father... cannot speak for her. In Jewish terms, he has no standing to do so.

A group of 100 Benedictine nuns, at a retreat they had invited me to address, once posed the matter in the following way: Jews should forgive the Nazis, they argued, not for the sake of the Nazis, but for our own sake. It was time, they said, to move on. But how? And why? Who is to say what would be better for the soul, the bitterness of history or the betrayal of memory? And who am I, who are you, to speak for those whose voices were forever stilled?

One conclusion I have come to is that I think we are simply using the wrong word. “Forgiveness?” No, what we are talking about is “acceptance,” or “moving on,” or a sense of “balance” and wholeness and peace. If so, that’s potentially very powerful. That’s important. That is, perhaps, the most holy task I can imagine, in the face of the slings and arrows of our lives. What it’s not, though... it’s not “forgiveness.”

Remorse, and restitution... remain the necessary components... for real repentance in our tradition, as I understand it. And something else. Compassion and empathy, openness, and love.

Let’s imagine a different scenario. What if... what if we knew the killers did feel bad? That they had regrets, and wished they had acted differently? That is a question I faced when I received, in June of 2001 at my home address in Buffalo, a letter from a murderer. In response, we promptly moved to Washington. Of course, we were moving here the next month anyway. But, what *do* you say, to a repentant murderer? What does Judaism have to offer, where remorse is real, but restitution remains out of reach? Some things you just can’t fix. Saying you’re sorry is not enough.

This is the time, the season of forgiveness, the Day of Atonement. But for contrition to work the conditions must be right. Can it be demanded, by aggrieved parties whose motives are unclear? Or forced, by one party on another? The international expectations of Israel in recent days for public and

extensive apologies would be worth it, some writers suggest... if it would work. If only it would lead to any kind of reconciliation. But when an apology is a tool in an ongoing game of brinksmanship, when Turkey, for example, owes as many apologies to others as it is now demanding for itself, when it refuses to acknowledge its history and is intent on a vision of its own destiny, no number of Yom Kippurs will automatically come and make things all better.

I believe that forgiveness, repentance, reconciliation and restoration are real and present possibilities in our lives. I believe this season has a lot to say about how to make this happen. But. We can't always force time. Rules and timetables and fixed formulas help, except when they don't. Certain preconditions must be present. The light bulb has to want to change.

In my studies this past summer I came across two stories from the Talmud I had not thought about in a long time. As we looked closely at these texts, I was convinced once again that though our ancestors may have led simpler lives than we do in material and technological terms, they were nevertheless capable, repeatedly, of profound psychological insight and wisdom. Circumstances may have changed, but the human condition has not.

Tractate Yoma of the Babylonian Talmud has as its subject Yom Kippur. The first seven sections are about a ritual we Reform Jews sort of skip, or have chosen not to mention. The traditional Torah reading for this morning, rather

than the section we substitute for it, is the ritual, in Leviticus, of the high priest on Yom Kippur. What works, to cleanse the people? Goats and gimmicks, formulas and a fast fix. The high priest casts lots over two goats, sacrifices one as an offering, and places the sins of the people upon the other, before sending the animal off, into the wilderness. That second beast essentially “escapes,” symbolically bearing all of our burdens with it, from which we derive the term “scapegoat.” The portion then describes the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies, reciting the formulas and performing the rituals that will effectuate atonement for the people.

Only the last section of the Tractate deals with what is more familiar to us: the concept of *teshuvah*, of repentance. And here, too, we begin with formulas: if you have sinned against someone in words, go, humble yourself before them. If you have sinned against someone materially, then be generous now, send gifts or valuables back. If it was something else, send friends, pave the way, send a delegation... indeed, three people each, up to three times, to get the person to forgive you. And, indeed – and this custom I had not known – if the person you have harmed has died, gather a minyan, ten people at the grave, acknowledge your offense, and pray for forgiveness.

The vestige of the formalistic, formulaic approach remains with us, in the words of our *machzor*, our High Holy Day prayerbook: “I hereby forgive all who have harmed me...” Sometimes this hits me like a two by four. Oh, really? All who have harmed me? Everyone? What if they’re not sorry?

But then, after this straightforward presentation in the final section of Yoma, this what-to-do list, come two strange stories. In some ways the two stories cannot be understood without each other. I will tell them, in reverse order of how they appear.

Rav had a complaint against a certain butcher. When he saw that Yom Kippur was getting close, and the butcher had not come to him, he said to himself: "I will go to him, to pacify him." Rab Chuna saw Rav while Rav was on the way to the butcher, and asked: "Where are you going, sir?" Rav said: "I'm off to make amends with so and so..." Chuna thought to himself: "Oh, yeah? Rav is about to cause someone to die!" Rav went on his way, found the butcher, and remained standing before him, while he was sitting and chopping an animal's head. The butcher raised his eyes, saw Rav, and said: "You're Rav!. Go away! I have nothing to say to you!" While he was chopping the head, a bone flew off, struck the butcher in the throat, and killed him.

B. Talmud, Tractate Yoma, 87a

What I had not seen in this story before, which our teacher Micha Goodman pointed out, was that here, Rav is following the formula. He is practicing halacha, Jewish law, to the letter. Yom Kippur has come. The time is now. We are taught to find those we have wronged and apologize to them. The opportunity to ask forgiveness is *so important* in our tradition, that it is even salutary for those whom we have been harmed to show up, to make themselves available, as it were, making it convenient for us, natural for us... easing the way for us to make amends.

So Rav does all of these things. He follows the rules... with disastrous results. He does it at the right time, but the time was not ripe. No one was

really ready. Even Chuna could tell. How? Was Rav storming off, red in the face, saying “It’s Yom Kippur and he’s going to apologize, or else!”

Rules and rituals are all well and good. But is it possible... is this story trying to hint to us... that making amends is about more than just... walking a walk? That it takes more than just going through a motion, or connecting the dots?

A second story.

Rav Abba had a complaint against Rav Jeremiah. Rav Jeremiah went and sat down at the door of Rav Abba. Rav Abba’s maid was there, she was cleaning up the... [well, I’m going to skip some of the details here], and as she poured it out, some fell upon Jeremiah’s head. Then Jeremiah said: “they have made a dung heap out of me,” and he cited this verse about himself: “[God] raises the poor from the dust, [lifts up the needy from the dunghill.] (I Samuel 2:8) Rav Abba heard this and came out towards him, saying: “Now, I must come forth to appease you, as it is written: ‘Go, humble thyself and urge thy neighbor.’”

B. Talmud, Tractate Yoma 87a

What is going on here? Jeremiah has wronged Abba. Abba is mad at him. But then, suddenly, Jeremiah looks ridiculous. Or worse. Abba knows that he is partly to blame for this new development. And all of a sudden, they are friends again. No formula, no apology. No sense of a ticking clock, no mention of Yom Kippur coming.

I suspect, in fact, that the one story exists in dynamic tension with the other. Because, in the end, reconciliation won’t happen because of a date on the calendar, and it won’t work if all you are doing is following a checklist.

At the core, at the heart of it all, Abba and Jeremiah actually like each other. There is a reservoir of that friendship, that love, buried beneath the surface rupture that has thrown them apart. And when he sees Jeremiah in his current condition, when he looks down at him, he forgets that he felt put down himself.

In the heat of anger, we want the one we are angry with to disappear. To *not be there*. To, as the butcher said to Rav, to just *go away!*

But when something happens, and the person we are angry with is diminished, is embarrassed, shrinks before us... when they are humbled, or even humiliated... if there is any humanity in us, if there is any bond left then somehow the anger turns, the emotional valence reverses, and somehow the diminution of the other restores a sense of balance to both parties.

Micha Goodman's sense of these stories was that *aggadah* offers a critical commentary on *halacha*, that, in my words, law must be seen through the lens of lore. It's not always a pretty picture. But if we want to be productive, and not merely pious, it is important to understand the dynamic of the heart, and not just rely on the magical power of ritual reconciliation.

What's another word for feeling deeply sorry? We occasionally say that we feel "mortified." From *morte*, mortal... death.

Think about Yom Kippur for a moment. We do not eat. We wear white. We refrain from intimacy, from adornment, even, traditionally, from washing or

bathing. We withdraw from the comforts of and connections to daily life. On Kol Nidrei, indeed, we remove the scrolls from the ark... and we stare into an empty, and wooden box. Yom Kippur is a day when we face death, when we feel it, we rehearse it, we taste it.

But it only works, this ritual, it only serves to restore our lives, to renew us... when we really feel it inside. When we do more than go through the motions, or come here only because the holiday shows up on our calendar. Yom Kippur only works when we act it out... and let it in! When we see the imperfections of others, yes, but even more, when we feel... broken... ourselves. Perhaps we are only able to get back up... when we are aware that we have fallen down.

For me, there are moments when I know that I have failed...as a father and a friend, a partner and a person, in my work and in the world. This year may I be a better person, a better son and sibling, a better rabbi, and a better husband. May I remember who I am capable of being, and be the best Michael I can be.

And now, having said that, and felt it at more than mere words...

Now it's your turn.

L'shanah Tovah.