

YOM KIPPUR
5771

In Jewish mystical tradition every human being has a core of goodness, a *nekudah tovah*, within oneself. This is a point of being, a foundation of kindness and strength that we believe all human beings are created with that is actually the defining quality of our existence. When we are connected to this point of being we are more connected to ourselves, to others, to the world and to G-d. When we are not connected to this point of goodness within us, we are less than we can be; we are less than who we truly are. One aspect of this *nekudah tovah* is something we call *shiflut ruach*, a modesty of spirit that allows us to think of others and their needs. Our rabbis tell us that two of the greatest needs people have are to ask for forgiveness and to forgive. Our inherent goodness and humility are what inspire and enable us to do these mitzvot.

Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel of the 13th century would forgive everyone who offended him in any way before going to sleep every night. Rabbi Isaac Luria of 16th century Safed would add a proclamation to his prayers every evening: "I forgive whoever hurt me this day." Why did these great rabbis who knew the extraordinary pain and suffering that certain people inflicted on others do this?

They reasoned that we are created in the image of G-d and therefore, we should behave like G-d. Seeing that we ask G-d for forgiveness, we should be forgiving. Rabbi Jack Riemer encourages us to consider how different would we and our relationships be if once a day we let go of the grudges, resentments and irritations that have accumulated in us during the day? Rabbi Riemer tells us that we all would sleep better and travel through life much lighter. How many times have I heard engaged couples say that they intend to never go to bed angry at one another? Why would anyone want to go to bed at the end of a day angry? Doing the mitzvah of forgiveness is anything but child's play. It demands the best and the strongest within us.

Rabbi Yehiel Epstein of the 17th century tells us that to fulfill the mitzvah of loving our neighbor as ourselves we must do for our neighbor what we would want our neighbor to do for us. If we wronged someone, we would want this person to forgive us and therefore, we should do the same for those who wronged us. Rabbi Epstein knew that most of the resentment and anger that we have for others is with people in our everyday lives: family, neighbors, co-workers, fellow students; with people we know and often times are close to.

It is most concerning that there is so much hate toward groups of people where individual identity is erased; for example: immigrants, GLBTQ folks, Muslims and in some places of the world, Jews and Israelis. The victims of such hatefulness are often not recognized as individual human beings by the perpetrators. Furthermore, the wrongs done of heart, mind and action are difficult at times to assign responsibility for. If as a result of a talk show program, someone goes out and beats up a gay person or an immigrant, who is responsible? Who needs to ask for forgiveness? Forgiveness requires an awareness of culpability and responsibility. Our denial of responsibility and justification of our behavior are of the most serious impediments to doing the mitzvah of forgiveness.

Judaism teaches that there are times when we must embrace the shadow side of our souls and not run away from shame and guilt but allow them to help us learn and grow. Woody Allen does not understand Jewish guilt, Rabbi Solevetchik does. Rabbi Solevetchik teaches that guilt is to tell us that our finger is in the fire so that we can take our finger out of the fire, care for it, heal it and learn not to put our finger in the fire again. Shame and guilt can lead us to appreciating that all people have weaknesses and imperfections and therefore, we can come to understand their wrongdoings and become more able to forgive.

There is a powerful dynamic when a community openly expresses its regret, guilt and subsequent pain together. As we thought about last night, standing and confessing our sins together—openly and unabashedly—can be a catalyst, helping each of us, reach the place where we are able to say: "I am sorry." Sorry to G-d, sorry to our family, sorry to friends and acquaintances, sorry that I have done wrong, sorry that I have hurt and disappointed you, sorry that I lied to you and was not faithful, sorry that I have not loved, cared for and respected you, sorry that I have not helped and supported you, sorry that I have taken you for granted and not appreciated you and I am sorry that I have not spoken to you with kindness and affection. I am sorry that I have not lived from the point

of goodness within me, the *nekudah tovah*. I am sorry that I have held on to so many resentments and so much anger.

Can you imagine the challenge for Elie Weisel and other survivors to go to Germany and Poland and participate in Holocaust ceremonies and programs? Communal forgiveness is a complex and challenging. Many who have recently been to Berlin come away with a sense of the collective acceptance of responsibility that has taken place and the collective asking for forgiveness that continues in Germany. Not comparing the Holocaust to anything else, we must ask ourselves as Americans what are our collective feelings of historical responsibility and remorse for what we did to American Indians and African Americans? What do we need to do now?

What is involved for a woman who has been raped to forgive? How does the family of someone murdered stand outside a prison and protest against the convicted murderer's execution? How does an adult child who was abused embrace the abusive parent or a violated spouse forgive the infidelity? How? With great effort, deep faith and profound hope and with knowing that though understandable, hate and anger are self-destructive. This is anything but child's play; it is forgiveness—the most beautiful and the most powerful of human behaviors and arguably the hardest work there is.

How many of us here need to forgive ourselves. Our rabbis and therapists tell us that before we can genuinely forgive anyone else we must forgive ourselves. They explain that this is the reason why it is so difficult for us to forgive others. How many of us are angry with ourselves, resentful of ourselves, feel guilty about our lives, what we have done and accomplished? The mitzvah of loving another as we love ourselves requires us to feel good about ourselves otherwise to fulfill this commandment, for those who are self-demeaning or self-abusive, would require them to treat others in the same way. We have to be loving and forgiving of ourselves in the deepest of ways to be loving and forgiving of others.

What does Jewish law say about teshuvah and forgiveness? There are three parts, according to Maimonides, to doing teshuvah: acknowledging the sin—no ifs, ands or buts—feeling remorseful for doing it—experiencing real regret—and resolving not to do it again even if the opportunity to do so presents itself. When the sin is between a person and G-d, the forgiveness is between that person and G-d. When the sin is between a person and another, the forgiveness must be between these two people. Our Talmud tells us that G-d will not forgive a person for a sin committed against another person until the wronged person is apologized to and forgives.

Think how wise this is. To fulfill these requirements there must be direct interaction and communication between us and those we have wronged. We cannot forgive or be forgiven by proxy. It requires an immediate and intense "I-Thou" interaction between two real, feeling, thinking people. We are told that many of the wrongs we commit are because we turn other people into objects; we do not see them as equals, as having emotions, needs and hopes just like we do. If we did, we would not be able to wrong them. When a man abuses a woman, at the moment of abuse, that woman's humanity, her fears, feelings and pain are non-existent to the abuser; the inherent sacredness of her individual life is erased as she is violated.

Jewish law requires a person to ask for forgiveness three times—it must be genuine, heartfelt and inspired by true remorse. If the wronged individual does not forgive after three sincere attempts, then the person who did the wrong is forgiven and the one not forgiving becomes guilty and now needs to ask for forgiveness for not forgiving. How many of us here refuse to forgive even though those who have wronged us have genuinely apologized and asked for forgiveness? How many of us here have not genuinely apologized and asked for forgiveness whereas those we have wronged are ready to forgive us if we would only do so? How many times have congregants said to me: "I know during Yom Kippur we are supposed to open our hearts and be forgiving but I am not going to do it." Why is this? What then is Yom Kippur?

Reb Nachman tells us that just as it is a mitzvah to remember—remember Shabbat and remember the Exodus from Egypt—it is also a mitzvah to forget. He teaches us that we must forget the resentments, anger, grudges, jealousies, hurts and regrets so that we may forgive and be forgiven. The Baal Shem Tov related to his followers that he never regretted trying to make peace: peace with others, peace with himself and peace with G-d. He only

regretted missing an opportunity to ask for forgiveness and missing an opportunity to forgive. Let us not miss these opportunities; not only but especially on Yom Kippur.

Several years ago I shared with you how I personally witnessed two adult siblings at a *shiva minyan* literally fall on each other's shoulders and weep finally in unison getting out the words: "I am sorry, please forgive me." What I am sharing with you is real; these are not rabbinic platitudes. Rabbi Eliezer tells us that we should repent a day before we die; not knowing when this is, we should repent every day. If we are to repent a day before we die, we then better be sure to ask for and grant forgiveness two days before we die.

The mitzvah of forgiveness challenges us to try to understand what it is that makes us hold on to resentment and anger refusing to forgive and to confront our fear and insecurity that prevent us from asking for forgiveness. We live in a culture that tragically regards such spiritual behavior as weakness and not being in one's self-interest. In 2007, an article was published entitled: "In Israel, the Worst Thing a Person Can Be is a Friar." A friar is someone who is perceived as being weak and exploitable, a sucker. Sadly, this cultural bias compromises much *mentshlikh* behavior including the mitzvah of forgiveness. What could be more in one's self interest than to ask for forgiveness and to grant forgiveness? What could be more in the interest of family and community? Would we not rather be the type of people who ask for forgiveness and grant forgiveness no matter what others may say and think?

Rabbi Eleazar ben Yehudah, the Rokeach, of the 13th century, shares an extraordinary piece of wisdom: "The most beautiful thing a person can do is forgive." Think for a moment what it is to consider forgiveness beautiful as compared to something physical. What does this teach us as to Judaism's value system? The difference between this world and the world to come is that in this world there are people who do not ask for forgiveness and people who do not forgive but to enter the world to come, everyone asks for forgiveness and everyone forgives. There is no guilt and shame or resentment and anger in paradise. Perhaps this is why some of our lives are more like hell than heaven. They do not have to be that way.

So important is forgiveness that our rabbis developed ways for those of us who are still angry with those who died to forgive them and for those of us who need to be forgiven by those who died to find forgiveness. I would be honored to facilitate these healing experiences for you. Think about the importance of forgiveness that our tradition allows for making peace with those who have died. Rabbi Harold Kushner tells of a person who was so wounded by her father because he abandoned the family when she was a child that she did not want to attend his funeral, sit *shiva* or say *kaddish*. Rabbi Kushner urged her to do so. He told her if you cannot say *kaddish* for your father because of the person he was and because of how he mistreated you, then say *kaddish* for the father you never had but wish you did.

How much anger, resentment, hurt, pain and determination to get our due is there in this sanctuary right now? How much is there throughout the Jewish world on this Yom Kippur? How much hope, concern and love are there in this sanctuary right now before *Yizkor*? How many relationships need forgiveness and healing? How many of us in our own hearts and souls need forgiveness? How many of us need to forgive? How many of us in the New Year will approach others and try our best to do what is required to forgive and be forgiven? Our rabbis tell us that this can only happen from the place of goodness, the *nekudah tovah*, within each of us. Our rabbis tell us that our lives and our world will continue to be fragmented and conflicted until we do. Our rabbis, who knew very well how hard the mitzvah of forgiveness is to do, tell us that each of us can forgive and each of us can be forgiven. Forgiveness is love, forgiveness is power, forgiveness is holiness.

I do not know what that chicken did. I do know what the parrot did: he apologized and asked to be forgiven. I know what the parrot's owner did: she forgave him. If we can do this for a bird, let us, please G-d, do this for others and for ourselves.