

D'var Torah for Kol Nidrei

5783

With appreciation to Laurie Spear and to Rabbis Alfredo Borodowski, Charles Klein, Ziona Zelazo, and Rafi Rank, who invited me to look deeper.



You probably heard the story about the rabbi who gives a fiery Yom Kippur sermon on the value of forgiveness to all, and how we are called to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves and forgive those who have wronged us. The rabbi, who wishes to engage his congregants, asks them all, "Are you ready to go out into the world and forgive those who wronged you?"

People are moved by the rabbi's passion and every hand in the congregation goes up, except for one.

The rabbi sees that it is Mrs. Goldstein, a little old lady in the front row. He asks the woman, "Mrs. Goldstein, why can't you forgive those who wronged you?"

Mrs. Goldstein replies, "Rabbi, I can honestly say I have no enemies."

The rabbi says, "That's incredible, may I ask how old you are, Mrs. Goldstein?"

"I am 104, Baruch HaShem," replies Mrs. Goldstein in a soft voice.

The rabbi says, "104 and no enemies? That's incredible. Would you mind coming forward and sharing how you have achieved this?"

Mrs. Goldstein slowly totters to the front of the shul, turns around to the congregation and says, "I outlived all of them!"

While forgiveness is one of the main topics of Yom Kippur, it is hardly the only one. That is why I was surprised, when last August I reached out to four colleagues and invited them to teach us in preparation for these High Holy Days, and each of them chose to teach about forgiveness.

I hope you were able to attend one or more of the presentations. Rabbi Borodowski, Rabbi Zelazo, Rabbi Klein, and Rabbi Rank, tackled forgiveness, each of them from a different perspective, and emphasized how forgiveness is not only a central theme of the High Holy Days, but an essential part of everyone's lives.

In my almost thirty years of rabbinical experience, I found out that the ability to forgive, or even more often, the inability to forgive, was at the center of the lives of many of the people with whom I came into contact.

Not unlike Mrs. Goldstein, many people outlive those who wronged them, but not the resentment they hold. Many times, the resentment evolves into anger, bitterness, sadness, and depression.

Our four speakers emphasized how the ability to forgive, to let go, holds the key to happier and more meaningful lives. Yet forgiveness is one of those things that is easier said than done.

That is why, I would like to share with you some new-for-me insights on forgiveness, with the hope that you will find them meaningful, helpful, and more importantly, healing.

At the center of the Yom Kippur liturgy, we find two prayers of confession, a shorter one, Ashamnu, and a longer one, Al Chet. Even those not very familiar with the High Holy Days complex liturgy, will remember the Al Chet refrain:

ועל כולם אלוה סליחות – סלח לנו, מחל לנו, כפר לנו

And for all these things, forgiving God, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement!

I have been singing the *Al Chet* refrain since I can remember, and I confess (very appropriately) that I never stop to ponder the difference between סליחה, מחילה and כפרה, forgiveness, pardon, and atonement. So let me try and see, if exploring how these three concepts are intrinsically different, can help us (and Mrs. Goldstein) gain new insights into the entire forgiveness process.

Let's begin with the word סליחה. I am sure, the word סליחה is ranked among the most frequently used words in the modern Hebrew language. Its best translation in

modern day Hebrew is something like, "excuse me," or "please forgive me," and the overuse of סליחה is not necessarily due to the courtesy and good manners of the average Israeli. As a matter of fact, the word סליחה is mostly used with people you don't know if you need to cut in front of them in line, or interrupt what they are doing to address your needs first. Also, the word סליחה is being used to train little children to say "I am sorry." מה אומרים? - What do we say? - סליחה - "I am sorry."

סליחה is, thus, the lowest, but necessary level of forgiveness, one we use daily to repair relationships quickly and move on even quicker to the next thing. "I am sorry I forgot to buy milk," "I am sorry I didn't put the toilet seat down," "I am late, I was caught in traffic. Please forgive me." סליחה is the forgiveness expression we use after "oops;" as in "oops, forgive me."

סליחה is also the word we use for a general, unspecific forgiveness: "if I did anything to hurt you, please forgive me."

In a religious setting, סליחה is the mechanical beating on the chest during the Jewish confession prayer, or the forgiveness of the Catholic Priest after confession.

סליחה as I said, is necessary, and useful, and important, but not necessarily transformative.

Now, let's move on to the next level, מחילה.

מחילה is perhaps the easiest of the three terms to explain and can be translated as pardon. מחילה involves always the cancellation or revocation of a punitive action. A clear example, one I am afraid I am familiar with, is when a police officer stops someone for speeding. You may try to deny the charge - "I wasn't speeding" - but generally it doesn't help. When stopped for speeding or for missing a stop sign, I usually tell the police officer, "Sir, please forgive me, I will be more careful next time," and usually it works. My goal in asking for forgiveness is very clear: I want to avoid paying for a ticket. When a person accused of a serious crime pleads for forgiveness, that person is looking for a reduction of the sentence. Among friends, acquaintances, or colleagues, the words מחילה is used to bring the relationship to the point it was before whatever incident is being addressed. Unlike with סליחה, you cannot rush מחילה. You need to do your homework, show contrition, make reparations. If the police officer who stopped you wants to give you a *shpil* on safe driving, you better listen.

In a religious setting, in our relationship with God, מחילה points to the king-subject relationship. We acknowledge our frailty and unworthiness and ask God to forgive us.

כי הנה כאבן ביד המסתת. ברצותו אוחזי וברצותו מכתת. כן אנחנו בידך מחייה וממותת.

Like stone in the hand of the mason, if he wills, he holds it [in position], if he wills, he smashes it; so too are we in Your hands, Causer of life and death.

With מחילה our main goal is not to build a relationship, but to avoid punishment, even though I need to do some schmoozing to get there. After the police officer lets me go, I am not interested in him any longer. I got my מחילה, my forgiveness; I may learn the lesson and drive slower, or not, but all I wanted with מחילה is to restore things the way they were before.

Now, what I am about to say, is one of the insights I gained in the spiritual preparation for these High Holy Days.

One of the main points the four presenters who spoke on forgiveness emphasized, is that forgiving those who wronged us and letting go, is truly a favor you do yourself, not an undeserved gesture to the person who hurt you. In other words, be kind to yourself and forgive. In the words of Harold Kushner, "Nursing a grudge only perpetuates the offender's power over you. He continues to live in your head, reinforcing your frustration, polluting your imagination with thoughts of getting even. Don't let him get away with that. He may or may not deserve forgiveness, but you deserve better than to waste your energy being angry at him." Or in the words of One of the Charleston survivors (2015) who lost her son in a shooting during Bible study at the Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, "If you don't [forgive], you're letting evil into your heart. You're the one suffering. You're the one hating. You have to forgive. When I forgave him, my peace began. I'm done with him. He doesn't have control of me." Or in the words of Dr. Haviva Pedaya, professor in the Department of Jewish History at Ben-Gurion University, "When you do not forgive, you do not separate from the person you do not forgive. You continue to carry it on your back. When you forgive, it is easier for you to move forward and evolve. Those who do not forgive, remain more stuck."

Now, I am a big believer in the above approach to forgiveness. I myself had counseled countless congregants throughout my rabbinical vocation on forgiveness as a gift to yourself. Rabbi Charles Klein's Selichot presentation, and the title of his

book, "How to Forgive, When You Can't Forget," address the huge benefits of forgiveness for the forgiving person, and I couldn't agree more.

My insight, and what I would like to suggest, is that the above not-so-easy-to-achieve level of forgiveness is still within the parameters of מחילה, and it is the mirror image of the police officer and the speeding driver scenario. There I asked for מחילה, for forgiveness, to avoid being punished, and here, I forgive those who wronged me, not to get stuck, to be able to move forward and live a more meaningful life. In both scenarios, however, the person asking for forgiveness and the forgiving person, are not interested in a relationship.

The Charleston survivor who forgave the murderer of his son, doesn't wish to become closer to him, neither do the victims of rape or violent crime who after a lot of work were able to let go, in order to move forward. In religious life it is the same: God's חילה, may save me from fire and brimstone, but won't bring me closer to Him.

For that closeness, for the deepest level of forgiveness, we need to talk about כפרה, usually translated as atonement. כפרה shares the Hebrew root with כיפור, like in יום כיפור. כיפור also shares the root with the word כפורת, the golden cover of the Ark of Testimony. כפרה, like כפורת covers, hides the transgression, makes it non-existent, and thus fully allows for the rebuilding of the relationship.

The first five letters of the English word atonement spell "at one." At the level of כפרה we are one with the other, being that other, another human being or God Himself.

Now, we may not want or need to be at-one with everybody (although some religious philosophies like Buddhism teach us that this level of union is desirable and even possible). Building a relationship with a police officer who wishes to give me a ticket or with a stranger who deeply hurt me or my loved ones, might be asking too much. In those cases, the level of מחילה -forgiveness, pardon, and letting go so I can move forward, might be all we can do.

However, when you were hurt by people close to you, when you are estranged from your children, or your siblings, or God, you may have to go beyond סליחה and מחילה.¹

¹ As Rabbi Borodowski so eloquently expresses it: "...failures persist within ourselves, immune to confessions, forgiveness, or reparations. Betraying a friend or ignoring those in despair leaves you

And here is another insight: to go beyond סליחה and מחילה, to fully restore the relationship, it is not enough to “forgive when you cannot forget;” you need to forget as well.

Also, at the כפרה level, reward and punishment stop being relevant and you focus only on the relationship.²

Perhaps that is the reason why my favorite Yom Kippur prayer is *Ki Anu Amecha*

כִּי אָנוּ עַמְךָ וְאַתָּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ. אָנוּ בְנֶיךָ וְאַתָּה אָבִינוּ:

אָנוּ רַעֲיָתְךָ וְאַתָּה דוֹדְנוּ:

For we are Your people; and You are our God. We are Your children; and You are our Father. We are Your dear ones and You are our Beloved.

At the end of the day, it is all about relationships. I am fluent in Hebrew, I can beat my chest and confess my sins and I will, and yes, like all of you, I wish to be inscribed in the book of life, health, and sustenance; but I am here, beginning this one-day journey, because I crave to come closer to HaShem, because I want to feel the words: I am your child and You are my father, I am my Beloved and my Beloved is mine.

I hope that coming closer to HaShem, and being embraced by His unending love and forgiveness, will move me to work on strengthening my relationships with those I love, with all of you, and to become more loving and more forgiving.

Our God and God of our fathers, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement, for we are Your people; and You are our God. We are Your children; and You are our Father.

with a corroding acid in the soul. Though Judaism offers a chance for Teshuva, “repenting, returning, and then preventing a recurrence,” sometimes we feel paralyzed beyond repair. Haunted by our internal stains, Yom Kippur, atonement enters our lives. Atonement does not forget or forgive. Instead, it entails the laundering of our internal stains. It rescues us from the insufficiency of our regrets. It operates where admissions and retributions leave us empty.”

² As the Alter Rebbe, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, put it so bluntly: Master of the Universe, *I want nothing at all! I don't want Your paradise, I don't want Your world to come, I want nothing but You alone.*

In this sacred hour I have come in front of You to seek Your presence. Do not send me away empty handed. Hear my voice when I cry out; be gracious to me, and answer me. Teach me Your ways, help me be more forgiving, more loving, more compassionate.

And in your kindness, bless all of us with a year of health, and joy, contentment and forgiveness; with a good and sweet year.