

Kohelet Remarks

Erev Rosh Hashanah

September 25, 2022

Introduction

Shana Tovah. Let me start by thanking Jonathan Katz for always leading such a beautiful Erev Rosh Hashanah service. I look forward to this service each year as it provides inspiration for the entire holiday season. I'd also like to thank Rabbi Halpern who I have had the great joy and privilege of studying with for many years. Many of the concepts I will share tonight come from these studies.

Tonight I will speak about Jewish perspectives on forgiveness, however, rather than speaking about seeking forgiveness, my remarks will focus on Jewish thinking about granting forgiveness. Through the holidays we ask G-d and we ask people for forgiveness. Teshuva, Tefilla, and Tzedakah are part of this effort. We ask for forgiveness so that we can grow closer, we can heal, we can repair, we can return. We know that if we have missed the mark, we are required to ask for forgiveness, required to ask as many as three times, authentically ask three times for forgiveness. There are many details in the writings about asking for forgiveness.

But what about granting forgiveness. It is surprising to me that there is so much information about asking for forgiveness while so little about how to grant forgiveness.

In my remarks tonight, I will start with some thoughts about why we should care about granting forgiveness – real, genuine authentic, intellectual, and emotional forgiveness – and then suggest four strategies to help us grant forgiveness while fully acknowledging that each strategy has strengths and weaknesses and must be chosen at the right time to align with the circumstances.

So Why Forgive

With few exceptions, Judaism directs us to forgive. We are taught that we are not to take vengeance and we are not to bear a grudge. [Leviticus 19-18] Alternatively, we are taught to judge with kindness and to forgive fully.

So one reason to forgive is because it is part of being Jewish.

Additionally, we forgive because it is in our self-interest. Simply stated, forgiving is good for us. There is abundant research that documents the significant harm to our health caused by not forgiving. As Maya Angelou wrote, "Forgiveness is the greatest gift you can give **yourself**. It's not for the other person." "You must forgive for your own sake. To rid yourself of that weight...." [Maya Angelou: Forgiveness Is the Answer - ABC News \(go.com\)](https://www.abcnews.com/news/2002/09/25/maya-angelou-forgiveness-is-the-answer-abc-news-go-com/) Her thoughts are all the more powerful when considering that she was raped as

a child and the trauma was so great that she didn't speak for five years. Nonetheless, she forgave her rapist, not for his sake, but rather for her own sake.

Similarly, this concept is summed up by a quote variously attributed to Nelson Mandela, Buddha and St. Augustine that "holding onto anger and resentment is like drinking poison and then expecting the other person to die." As a practical matter, the other person is not harmed; we are the one harmed by holding onto anger.

So, whether for Jewish reasons or for health reasons, or for purely self-interest reasons we clearly benefit by granting forgiveness. That said, knowing we should grant forgiveness is the easy part. Actually granting forgiveness – intellectually, emotionally, authentically granting forgiveness – can be extraordinarily difficult.

How can Judaism help us? I will suggest four strategies. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses, and like much in Judaism, our challenge is to develop the wisdom to know how and when to best use these insights, teachings, and strategies.

The Four Strategies to Forgive

First, we can try to be more open to forgiving by making it a daily habit. The traditional bedtime prayer states:

"I forgive all those who may have hurt or aggravated me." It goes on to forgive physical and emotional harm, knowing and unknowing harm, and willful harm – the list is comprehensive, and it is traditionally said every night.

Will this prayer heal an angry, vengeful heart? Perhaps not, however, perhaps by making it a daily practice we can soften our hearts, or in the words of our holiday prayers we can circumscribe our hearts, making us more open to forgiving.

Second, we can try to reframe our thinking about the person who harmed us. Instead of thinking of people as evil, we can try to perceive others with empathy and a questioning mind. We can judge in kindness, and consider what might have happened in their lives that has caused them to act in such a terrible way? This is not to apologize for or justify horrible behavior, or to deny that there is evil in the world, but rather it is to acknowledge that more often than not, people are acting in rational ways within the constraints of their life experiences even when they are acting terribly. While not easy, empathy can be a powerful tool to lessen the anger and resentment, and to open our hearts to the possibility of forgiving.

A third strategy is to consider that the situation may have been ordained. This approach can take many different forms depending on your perspective on faith. For example, you might believe that the harm was ordained by G-d, or that the universe was acting in mysterious ways, or that it was fate. The powerful Torah example of this perspective is

the Joseph story. Joseph has every reason to hate his brothers, to want to punish his brothers, to want to harm his brothers. However, instead of seeking revenge, he states (Genesis 50-20)

“Although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, in order to bring about this day, to keep a great populace alive.”

Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery which led to him spending many years in prison, yet he still had the ability to reframe and to forgive by believing that God had designed it for good.

A fourth strategy that can help us forgive is to consider what we can learn from the pain. How can we grow from this painful situation? This is not to blame the victim or to claim that every cloud has a silver lining. Rather it is to suggest that we have the ability to decide how we will respond to being harmed or as Viktor Frankl wrote,

“between stimulus and response there is space. And in that space lies our freedom and power to choose our responses. In our responses lies our growth and our freedom.”

Another perspective is provided by former Maryland Congressman Elijah Cummings, a civil rights leader who passed away in 2019. He was fond of saying, “Every time something bad happens to me, I don't ask the question, 'Why did it happen to me?' The question I ask is, 'Why did it happen for me?' Again, I am not suggesting that we blame ourselves when someone hurts us. Rather that as part of **processing** the pain, we consider if there is anything we can learn from the experience, and through this learning and growing, perhaps we can become more open to forgiving.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me wish everyone a happy and healthy New Year, and a meaningful holiday season. As we travel through the Days of Awe may we seek forgiveness sincerely and may we grant forgiveness – fully granting forgiveness with a humble, open heart – so that we can grow closer, we can heal, we can repair, and we can return.

G'mar chatimah tovah.