

“Dear Rabbi, Have you forgiven the driver of the truck who hit you? Not completely. But I’m not carrying around the red hot rock either.”

Rabbi Daniel Gropper

Yom Kippur Morning

A year ago I received such an outpouring of love from so many of you. The cards, the emails, the Facebook posts, even the “likes” buoyed me and my family during a very challenging time. But one email stopped me in my tracks. It was a single sentence, a question: “Dear Rabbi, have you forgiven the driver of the truck that hit you?” What kind of question is that? Have “I” forgiven? I was the victim. If anyone should be asking for forgiveness, it’s the driver of the truck. But the question got me to thinking, what would it look like if I forgave the driver - not to forget the incident, not to release the driver of his negligence but to forgive, to stop carrying around the hurt, to somehow put it down? What would that look like? What would that feel like?

This question of forgiving the perpetrator took me back two years to June 2015. You may recall that in that month, a young man named Dylann Roof did the unconscionable. Just 21 years old at the time, he walked into a church in Charleston, South Carolina, joined in on a Bible study class for an hour, pulled out a handgun and murdered nine people.

What struck me most profoundly from that tragedy was what happened soon after. As Roof was arraigned in court, relatives of some of his victims spoke directly to this killer. One by one they shared their tremendous pain and anguish. Then something extraordinary happened – one by one, they offered their forgiveness. A daughter of one victim said: “You took something very precious from me...I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you.” The sister of another said: “We have no room for hating, so we have to forgive, I pray God on your soul.”

I recall reading their words and feeling so moved by their compassion. I may have even preached about their magnanimity. But then I was reminded of a basic Jewish fact. In Judaism *we* seek forgiveness from those we have wronged. We don't grant it until we are asked. As powerful as it was for the family members of these victims to forgive their killer, from a Jewish perspective, they had it backwards. Christian tradition counsels one to be the first to forgive. Mathew Ch. 6 reads, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." As beautiful as this is, it's not the Jewish way. The Jewish way of Teshuvah is to take responsibility for our actions, to apologize to those whom we have harmed and to commit to doing better the next time.

In 1970, Simon Wiesenthal published his memoir entitled "The Sunflower." Wiesenthal writes about how, during his imprisonment during the Holocaust, as he was forced into cleaning duty at an SS hospital, a nurse summoned him to the bedside of a 21-year-old Nazi soldier named Karl. Karl's head was completely covered in bandages and he knew that he did not have much longer to live.

Karl unloaded his story on Wiesenthal, how he began as an innocent youth, how his parents disapproved of his joining the Nazi party. He confessed that as a soldier, he had herded hundreds of Jews into a house and set it on fire, and gunned down those who tried to escape. The soldier grabbed Wiesenthal's hand in his, and said that he had to talk to a Jew and beg for forgiveness: "Without your answer I cannot die in peace."

Wiesenthal pulled his hand away and left the room without saying a word. The SS soldier died the next day.

Wiesenthal was haunted by his own silence – it tugged at his conscience, even to his last day. At the end of his book he asks: “What would you have done?” This was not a rhetorical question. Later reissued with a second half, the Sunflower contains over 50 responses from prominent writers, theologians, and political activists from Deborah Lipstadt to Desmond Tutu to the Dali Lama. Virtually all of the Christians challenged Wiesenthal’s choice and felt he should have forgiven the dying man. But nearly all of the Jewish authors defended his decision.

In his response, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel recounts the story of the Brisker Rebbe.

The Brisker Rebbe was a great scholar, well-known all around Eastern Europe. One day he boarded a train in Warsaw and found himself seated with three, rather tipsy traveling salesmen. They invited him to join as a fourth in a game of cards, but he said he never played cards. Not recognizing the small, plainly-dressed stranger, the three men on the train grew more and more annoyed with his refusal, eventually one of them grabbed him by the collar and pushed him out of the compartment, where he stood for hours in the cold until they reached the city of Brisk. Upon arrival a large group of students were waiting to greet their beloved Rebbe. The salesman, *mortified*, realized whom he had offended. He quickly went to the rabbi to ask for forgiveness. But the rabbi declined to forgive him. The salesman begged him again, but the rabbi uncharacteristically, turned away. The salesman could find no peace. He came back to the rabbi

and said, “I am not a rich man but I have saved 300 rubles and I will donate them to charity if you forgive me.” But the rabbi refused, even then.

Finally, the salesman went to the Rabbi’s son – who was surprised that his compassionate father was being so unforgiving. He went to his father and asked him why. The Brisker Rebbe replied: “I cannot forgive him, because he didn’t offend me – the Brisker Rebbe. He never would have treated me like that. He offended a commoner, a stranger. Let the salesman go and ask *him* for forgiveness.”

This story helps explain many of the Jewish responses to Wiesenthal’s question: In the Jewish tradition, no one has the authority to forgive sins committed against other people. You cannot confess to your rabbi and be absolved. Even God doesn’t claim that authority. How could Wiesenthal be expected to grant forgiveness for crimes committed against so many?

While Wiesenthal’s story is one of unthinkable, perhaps unforgivable sin, the Brisker Rebbe shows that we are each responsible for asking forgiveness *directly* for the more typical slights we humans do to each other all the time – the daily indignities, insults and injuries that litter our lives. The Mishna we read earlier states it clearly. Transgressions between people and God, Yom Kippur atones for them. Transgressions between people Yom Kippur does not atone for, until he reconciles with his friend.

And why is it that the onus is on the offender? Because in Judaism, even the act of offending another is viewed in economic terms. When someone harms another, they have stolen

something from that person. Therefore the victim is owed a debt. Forgiveness is mostly about cancelling the debt of what someone else owes me.

In her book “Why Won’t You Apologize?”, psychologist and author Harriet Lerner points out that a sincere apology can be powerful medicine with surprising value for both the giver and the recipient while a poorly worded apology, instead of eradicating the emotional pain the affront caused, can result in lasting anger and antagonism, and undermine an important relationship.

Dr. Lerner points out that apologies followed by rationalizations are “never satisfying” and can even be harmful. Similarly, when ‘but’ is tagged on to an apology, it’s an excuse that counters the sincerity of the original message. Similar to what Maimonides taught almost 900 years ago, the best apologies are short, they don’t include explanations that can undo them, they state exactly what it was that the offender did and includes a promise that you won’t ever do it again. And then, as Maimonides goes on to say, we can only demonstrate *teshuva gemura*, complete atonement, when we are in the same situation with the same opportunity to do wrong and we choose another path.

As to why many people find it hard to offer a sincere, unfettered apology, Dr. Lerner points out that “we humans are hard-wired for defensiveness. It’s very difficult to take direct, unequivocal responsibility for our hurtful actions,” she says. “It takes a great deal of maturity, integrity, humility and courage, to put a relationship or another person before our need to be right.”

Offering an apology is an admission of guilt that admittedly leaves us vulnerable. There's no guarantee as to how it will be received. It is the prerogative of the injured party to reject an apology, even when sincerely offered. Perhaps this is why Maimonides tells us that there is a limit to the number of times we can truly ask for forgiveness. Three times is the limit. More than that looks like we are groveling. Begging for forgiveness diminishes our own kavod, our own dignity. Apologizing should leave us vulnerable but apologizing should never diminish our own sense of self.

Even so, I am sure there are things we have done that eat at our souls; actions taken, words said that keep us up at night; guilt that sits as a stone in our stomachs where we have to keep going to the ones we have wronged to seek their forgiveness because we know that without their forgiveness, our lives, our souls will not be whole. So we keep going back, even if it diminishes our own sense of self a little, to somehow make it right, to somehow put the boulder down. One never knows when you might break through, to soften the heart of stone, to pierce the armor that has calcified the soul. When we do, our hearts and souls can become whole again. And then we can move forward. When it comes to apologizing for our misdeeds, stop at three times, as Maimonides suggests, and know, intellectually, that you are within the bounds of Jewish tradition. Or keep going back - if that is what your soul asks you to do.

In Judaism, the clear onus to atone is on the offender, not the offended. Transgressions that are between people and God, Yom Kippur atones for them. Transgressions that are between people Yom Kippur does not atone for, until he reconciles with his friend.

But what about the offended? What does it take to truly forgive, to let down the baggage of the hurt we carry, to allow those wounds to heal? And here I come back to the question in that email, “have you forgiven the driver of the truck who hit you?” It would be natural for me to be angry, to blame, to demand an apology, even for what I assume was an unintentional wrong. So what do I do? Just as I can be the one to ask for forgiveness to those I have wronged, I can be the one to let down the hurt.

One thing I love about Judaism, especially the Talmud, is that it contains differing opinions, even contradictory ones. In one place in the Talmud we read our text: Transgressions that are between people, Yom Kippur does not atone, until he reconciles with his friend. In another we read, “the victim of an assault should pray to God to have mercy on his assailant even if the assailant has not requested that he do so.”¹ It’s worth repeating: “the victim of an assault should pray to God to have mercy on his assailant even if the assailant has not requested that he do so.”

It doesn’t go as far as to say that we should forgive those who trespass us but it does say something profound. It says that we, the victims, the ones who may want retribution to be meted out on the perpetrators should ask God to have mercy on that assailant. The assailant still has to seek forgiveness from us; he still has to right the wrong but we have an opportunity to be compassionate. Justice still needs to be served but however God chooses to punish those who hurt us, in this world or the next, we, the victims, have the power to ask that this justice be tempered. It alters the narrative. It changes us, from victim, to hero. Praying to God to have mercy on the assailant empowers us to put down some of the hurt. I know this is not possible

¹ Tosefta, Baba Kamma 9:29

for all of us. I know that some carry such deep wounds that it is downright impossible to let go of that hurt, let alone to ask God to be merciful towards those who victimize us but this text reminds us that we can turn some of our victimhood into something redemptive.

Everett Worthington is an experienced, respected leader in the emerging field of forgiveness practice. Ten years after initiating his work, he was severely tested when his mother was brutally murdered in her own home on New Year's Eve in 1995.

Worthington recalls his response: I heard myself say “I'd like to have him alone in a room with a baseball bat for thirty minutes. I knew the arguments in both the do-forgive and don't-forgive stories... Lots of thoughts flashed through my mind. . . . I didn't evaluate them like Mr. Spock or Data [of *Star Trek*]. I considered point and counterpoint, but my thoughts were jumbled. On the whole, I thought that I *ought* to forgive. Honestly, though, I did not *want* to forgive. Even if I came around to wanting to forgive, I did not know if I *could* forgive. At the emotional crest of that difficult, dark night, I wanted relief from my anger. I needed something that would steady my reeling views of the world and myself. I wanted to forgive if it would help me deal with my pain, anger, hurt, and sadness. If only I could forgive, I thought, I could have peace in my heart. I wanted a powerful emotional chemical that could neutralize the acid of hate and rage that gnawed at me.”

Worthington went through his own forgiveness process, drawing on all he had learned in his ten years of helping others and he came to the following conclusions: “All our positive emotions, such as love, affection, empathy, compassion, pity, and sympathy, are in a huge tug-

of-war with the negative emotions such as resentment. To win the tug-of-war requires hard emotional work. We cannot see how close we are to the precipice of forgiving. When we step over the edge though, our momentum pulls the negative emotions into a cool bath of forgiveness. We are surprised by joy. Love is possible again. Forgiving is like a flood of light at sunrise. Darkness has covered the sky, but the sun suddenly peeks over, the sky is afire with colors. This is the relief of forgiveness after wrestling with resentment.”

Why does it help us, the victim, to ask God to have mercy on our assailants, even if they have not requested that of us? How does it benefit us to let go of some of the resentment we might carry? Because, as Worthington so powerfully puts it: *“Resentment is like carrying around a red-hot rock with the intention of someday throwing it back at the one who hurt you. It tires us and burns us. Who wouldn’t want simply to let the rock fall to the ground?”*

Again and again, I see the burdens that people carry when they choose *not* to forgive, when they choose to carry around that red hot rock. We hold onto slights we’ve endured at the hands of our family, co-workers, and friends who excluded us, judged us unfairly, took undue credit or were unappreciative. We have been undermined, cheated, lied to. We have been scarred by emotional or even physical abuse. We have *real grievances*. And our tradition understands the limits of forgiveness. But we also must ask while the gates are open – what would be possible *if we could forgive, if we could set down that red hot rock?*

The Torah commands us to say the Sh’ma when we lie down and when we rise up. The Rabbis debated when these times should occur. Is it literally upon one’s waking and going to sleep or is it when you are truly awake and preparing for bed? So they compromised. You say

the Sh'ma when you wake up, as part of the morning prayers, as part of the evening prayers and again, just before you go to sleep. This daily bedtime Sh'ma prayer, the same Sh'ma a person recites at the moment of death includes the phrase, "Master of the Universe, I hereby forgive anyone who angered or antagonized me or who sinned against me ... whether through speech, deed, thought or notion. Whether in this life or another life." We have the power to forgive. We have the power to set down that red hot rock. Not only for those who mistreated us in this life but also, for those who mistreated us in another!

Of course, one of the most challenging parts of offering forgiveness is the sense that the offender doesn't deserve and hasn't earned our forgiveness. But forgiveness is not about what you are offering someone else – it is, what Maya Angelou called, "one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself." Forgiveness is a decision about how *you want to live*. It's taking control of how much power you allow someone *else's* actions to have over *you* and how much power you want to have over your own life.. It is a mistake to confuse forgiveness with justice, to think that withholding your forgiveness is a form of punishment for the person who hurt you. In fact the opposite is often true: as the saying goes, "holding onto anger is like drinking poison, and expecting the other person to die." It never works that way.

This Yom Kippur, as you go about seeking forgiveness, think about who you might forgive, think about those red hot rocks you carry and ask, can I put these down? How would it feel to put these down? How will putting these down change my life? And if I don't, do I really want to walk around with burns on my hands?

You may ask, have I forgiven the driver of the truck that hit me? The scars are still visible. I live with chronic pain and stiffness. I haven't found the courage to get back on a bike. I remember clearly what happened that day in July but then, remembering is a very Jewish concept. But have I forgiven? Well, if forgiveness means not carrying a red hot rock around, if it means not allowing a grudge to take up valuable real estate in my brain, not allowing the actions of another to control me, not to feel like a victim, then I have traveled far down that road. Forget? Never. Forgive? I'm getting there.

It is said that when God ascends the Throne of Judgement on Yom Kippur, that God also prays². What is it that God prays for? While God is seated in Judgement, God prays for compassion and mercy and the ability to overcome anger so that *God can be more forgiving*. Forgiveness is a hope and aspiration. Forgiveness is a prayer – even for God; Forgiveness can be that prayer - maybe even for each of us.

Conclude with cantor singing, "The Heart of the Matter," by Don Henley

² Based on Berachot 7a