

Rosh Hashanah Second Day 2008
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Two brothers bought land in the city of Ashkelon and worked hard to produce crops. They built a fine house and prospered. They yearned for the time that they would be able to leave their farm for a short pilgrimage to the Holy City to pray at the Temple.

“This Passover let’s go to Jerusalem and celebrate the holiday with our people there,” said one brother. “Then we could sacrifice the purist white lamb at God’s altar.” “Yes, it’s time,” said the other brother. “But we can’t leave our house and lands unattended.” “We can ask our neighbor to watch our property for us,” said the first brother. “Even though he is an idol-worshipper, he is friendly toward us.”

Their neighbor seemed pleased to help the brothers, and so they told him of their plans to leave the next day. The brothers did not know that their neighbor had grown jealous over the years as he watched them work and prosper. Now, with the brothers gone, he could at last put his plan into action. He would take what he wanted from them and invent a story about a band of thieves passing through the city.

The next morning, the two brothers awoke early, said their morning prayers, and in good spirits headed for Jerusalem with their animals and baggage. Their neighbor awoke later and strode over to the brothers’ house. To his surprise he saw the two brothers working in their fields. Perhaps they were too afraid to leave their property in my care after all, he thought. Each day when the neighbor looked at the brothers’ house he saw them working, going to and fro, smiling and waving.

Days passed and one evening there was a knock on the neighbors’ door. When he answered it, he saw the two brothers laden with packages. “For you,” said one brother. “For watching our house and our lands while we were away,” said the other. “Everything is just as we left it,” said the first. “But, but...” sputtered the neighbor. “You never left. You were here all the time.” The brothers looked questioningly at each other. “We did leave, just as we told you,” said the first brother. “We spent the Passover holiday in Jerusalem,” said the other. “There were so many people there with their animals. No inn had an empty room. No house was without a guest.” The brothers showed the neighbor the cloth and baskets and jars they had brought for him. “Then who did I see coming in and out of your house? Waving and smiling? Working the fields?” the neighbor wondered aloud. “Did the two men look just like us?” asked the first brother. “Yes,” answered the neighbor. He grew fearful as he looked at the gifts from the distant city and saw that the brothers had indeed been away.

“I cannot accept these gifts. Please forgive me.” Their neighbor tried to control his quivering voice. His hands shook as he covered his cheeks with them. “I planned to rob your house while you were away,” he continued in a whisper. “Your God must have been watching over you.” Then the brothers understood. “Blessed is God who looks after us,” said the first brother, “and sends angels to guard us from evil.” “And know that we forgive you your evil thoughts,” said the second brother to the neighbor. “Let us live in peace.”

This heart-warming story from Midrash Rabbah Song of Songs has a lesson in it about forgiveness. The neighbor, when treated generously by the brothers, could no longer hang on to his evil thoughts, or for that matter, to his guilt. He confessed his intentions and was ashamed of his behavior. Faced with the neighbor’s humanity, the

brothers forgave him. The key here is that the neighbor made an internal change – he struggled with keeping the secret of what he had intended, realized the presence of God in the situation, and was willing to ask for forgiveness. This process, whether it takes a few minutes or several years contains the essence of what people go through when asking for forgiveness.

The High Holy Days offer us a chance to reflect on our behaviors and the events of the previous year and to look forward to starting anew with a fresh slate. God will forgive the flaws in our character. But God does not forgive sins in which a person has caused pain to another. It is our responsibility to personally seek out those whom we have harmed and offer an apology. Only in this way can we be forgiven for what we have done. A great teacher of ethics once said that if we seek forgiveness from God, we need seeing eyes, hearing ears, and an understanding heart. We need eyes which can clearly see what we have done, ears which can truly hear the words we have spoken, and a heart which can understand the consequences of both our words and our deeds. The same can be said when we look to bring forgiveness into our lives.

Forgiveness has two sides. The first side is asking for forgiveness. The second side is giving forgiveness. The first side of forgiveness is called repentance. It is a fuller and richer concept than simply asking for forgiveness. The Hebrew word is *teshuvah* which means turning back or returning. Repentance is turning back from evil toward the good. Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages recognized four parts to repentance: first – regret and remorse for the sin committed; second – renunciation of the sin; third – confession and a request for forgiveness; and fourth – a pledge not to repeat the offense. In fact, the highest level of penitence is achieved when the person finds him or herself in the position to repeat the sin and refrains from doing so. In Jewish thought, forgiveness depends on repentance. No repentance, no forgiveness. It is repentance which triggers the act of forgiving.

It is difficult to admit we have done something wrong and to ask for forgiveness. What is required is the genuine humility to see ourselves as we are – with our flaws – and to surrender our idealized image of ourselves. We must also humble ourselves to plead for forgiveness. Forgiveness is not something we can demand. It is a gift of mercy from the injured person. The conviction of our tradition is that forgiveness is always possible as long as the repentance is genuine.

The second side of forgiveness is giving forgiveness. Being injured does not free one of the obligation to respond constructively to genuine repentance. The Talmud says, “A person should be pliant as a reed, not hard like the cedar” in granting forgiveness. One of the traits that characterizes Jewish people is the capacity to forgive. The rabbis said that if the injured party refuses to forgive even when the sinner has come before him three times in the presence of others and asked for forgiveness, then he is judged in turn to have sinned. God requires that we meet genuine repentance with the gift of forgiveness.

Cold, calculating revenge is often the response to injury, like the ex-wife who says, “I don’t get mad, I just get even.” We have been hurt and we want to hurt in return. We have been attacked, and we want to attack in return. We want to get even. It is also our tendency to condemn the other; to make them out to be an evil person. We want them not only to admit to being guilty of a particular act, but to be guilt-ridden. Blaming to the point of condemning is another form of vengeance.

In order to forgive, something has to break the deadlock. We have to be able to put aside our hurt and anger and see the humanity in the other person. We have to put ourselves in their shoes and see things from their perspective. It is difficult to lay aside our own feelings of righteousness. Yet there is a hardness in hanging on to those feelings and an amazing softness when we let another person in to our hearts. Giving forgiveness is so hard because we have to act helpfully toward someone who has just hurt us; we have to re-establish a relationship with someone who has shaken the relationship. We have to believe again in someone who has failed us and give them another chance. Giving forgiveness is a triumph of the human spirit – it is a victory of mercy over revenge.

What enables us to forgive? Generally, we forgive for two reasons. The first is that we remember our common humanity and our own need to be forgiven. While justice is crucial to uphold values, standards, and fairness, we know that a strict application of justice alone would be devastating in our relationship both to God and our fellow human beings. We would be buried under the burden of guilt and punishment. Mercy tempers strict justice. The second reason we forgive is our desire to repair relationships. Our love overcomes our anger and we give love in response to frailty or misdeed. This is what is meant by mercy.

We achieve genuine forgiveness when both sides, asking for forgiveness or repentance, and giving forgiveness, are realized. Genuine forgiveness leads to the repair and deepening of relationships. Our love is strengthened by the gifts of patience and forgiveness we have received. We don't "forgive and forget." Instead we are forgiven and remember. We should remember with gratitude those acts of forgiveness which not only restored, but deepened a relationship. Were forgiveness to wait for forgetfulness, reconciliation would rarely occur. Forgiveness is knowing that something happened which made us furious and then deciding, in spite of everything, to deny anger its power. Reconciliation becomes a possibility when a person realizes the emotional cost of being stuck in a painful past. Forgiveness is also essential to the growth of the soul. Failure to ask for forgiveness leads to unresolved guilt and self-hate. Failure to grant forgiveness when it is asked for leads to smoldering hatred and feelings of vengeance. Such guilt and hatred deform the human spirit.

Let us rise to the spiritual stature of asking forgiveness of those we have wronged and of responding to those who seek our forgiveness with genuine pardon. Let mercy overcome our anger. And may these High Holy Days bring us blessing and peace.
Shanah tovah.