

Finding a Way to Forgiveness

Kol Nidre Sermon

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim

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(With much gratitude to my colleague, Rabbi Jack Riemer)

There are so many wonderfully unique idiosyncrasies here at KKBE—but the most distinguishing by far, the one that sets us apart from virtually any other congregation I have ever served or attended, is this: People here not only come on time for services—which would be pretty remarkable in and of itself—people here actually come *early!* Chalk it up to parking concerns, or wanting to sit in a particular pew, or simply wanting to spend a little time schmoozing with family and friends before services. Whatever the reason, our temple is so vastly different than, say, a Conservative synagogue where if, for example, you came for a Bar Mitzvah service at the time noted on an invitation, you might very well be praying by yourself for a good hour or so before those “in the know” arrived.

Yet, believe it or not, there is one night of the year when Jews of all stripes the world over do traditionally arrive *before* the service is scheduled to begin—tonight. And when they do, they make the rounds—whispering something, very quietly to all the people seated in a row, then shaking hands and moving on to the next. It’s a practice called “*beyten michilah*”—giving and asking forgiveness from one another—and it’s part of a long, noble tradition in Judaism of apologizing to those whom we have hurt and making up with those who have done us wrong.

It is a tradition that started with Joseph in the Torah, who says to his brothers, the ones who sold him into slavery: “You may have meant it for evil, but God turned it to good, and therefore, I forgive you.” It continued with God, who forgave the people of Israel after the sin of the golden calf. It continued with the prophet Hosea, who was deeply in love with his wife, Gomer, and terribly hurt when she betrayed him for other men. Yet somehow Hosea was able to forgive her and take her back. It continued in the Talmud, which declares: “He who forgives shall be forgiven.” And it continued into the Siddur Ari, which contains the important words recited on Kol Nidre night: “*Hareni mochel lichol mi shechata negdi hayom* - I hereby forgive whoever has hurt me this day.”

And it’s a tradition that continues in each and every shul where men and women go up and down the aisles before Kol Nidre services begin, “*beyten michilah*,” asking forgiveness from each other. They do it because they believe that you can’t ask God to forgive you during these awesome days, if you carry a grudge against your fellow man inside yourself. They do it, because they feel that if you can’t forgive others, how can you expect God to forgive you?

And so, this is our task tonight and before the sun sets tomorrow evening: We are supposed to forgive each other for whatever insult, whatever gossip, whatever harm and

hurt, we have done to each other during this past year. That's the job we have to do, simple and straightforward. Yet, if we are honest, it's not a job we really want to do. It's remarkably hard to let go of the anger, the pain, the resentment we feel toward to those who have wronged us—and, what's more, if we're honest with ourselves, there's often a part of us that doesn't want to.

Let's be honest: Doesn't Judaism ask the impossible—or the nearly impossible—of us, when it commands us to forgive each other at this season of the year? After all, we're no saints; we're human beings—and therefore, if you spit in my face, I won't say that it's raining. If you hit me, I'll hit you back. And if you hurt me, I'll hurt you in return. So how can the Torah tell us that we have to forgive? Why should we? And how can we?

Michelangelo was surely one of the greatest artists who ever lived, a genius of the first order. He could carve statues that fill our hearts with amazement, paint pictures that fill our souls with wonder and write the softest, sweetest poetry that anyone ever wrote. But a friend once dared to criticize one of his works of art. Do you know what Michelangelo did to that man? When he painted the Sistine Chapel, he used that man's face as the model for the devil. So everyone who enters the Sistine Chapel to this day looks at a work which testifies to Michelangelo's genius as an artist, but also his inability to forgive. Dante—a genius with his pen, the greatest poet of the Middle Ages, had the same fatal flaw. When he wrote his masterpiece, the *Inferno*, and described the terrible torment that those who suffer in Hell will endure, he used the names of his enemies as all the examples.

But then there's Abraham Lincoln. No president in all of American history—even in our bitter and petty contemporary times—was as mocked and maligned as he was. Opponents ridiculed him, and called him names, all during the war. And yet, when the war was coming to its end, Lincoln gave his incredible Second Inaugural Address, in which he said: "With malice towards none, with charity towards all, let us go forward to bind up the wounds of the soldiers on both sides and to care for their widows and for their orphans."

How could Lincoln say that? How could he say, "With malice towards *none*? With charity towards *all* ... bind up the wounds of the soldiers on *both* sides...?" How could he say that after all they had said and done to him? Could you have said that? Could I? I don't think so. But Lincoln did.

And then there's Moses. As we considered on Rosh Hashanah, was there ever a Jewish leader who was rebelled against, betrayed, and criticized more often than he was? His brother, Aaron, and his sister, Miriam, both spoke out against him; his cousin, Korach, tried to overthrow him; the people of Israel rebelled against him over and over and over again for forty years in a row! And yet, somehow—I don't know how, but somehow—Moses was able to forgive his people and continue to lead them and love them until the end of his life. On the day that he died, the Midrash says, Moses made the rounds of the twelve tribes. He asked them to forgive him for having been too hard on them, and they asked him to forgive them for having rebelled against him. They made up with each other and then he died.

I ask you in all seriousness: Could you have done what Moses did that day? Could you have forgiven the people who persecuted you for forty years? I don't know that I could have. But I think that, deep down, we admire Moses for having been able to do what you and I probably could not have done. I think that, deep down, we admire Moses for having been able to forgive his people, for it could not have been an easy thing to do.

Let's be honest. There is something inside of us that enjoys the taste of revenge. It's a pleasure to get even with someone who has hurt us, to strike back at someone who has injured us, to make those who have gossiped about us eat their words. And refusing someone's apology gives us a certain amount of power over that person—power that feels good.

The halachah understands this feeling. That is why the law is that, if you hurt someone, you only have to apologize three times. If he refuses to accept your sincere apology after three tries, then it is on his head, not yours; if she refuses to acknowledge your genuine contrition after three tries, our tradition says you have done your share; the guilt is now on the other person—and so are the consequences.

A true story of a man who—when he was younger, just starting out in business—was cheated in a business deal: Someone took advantage of him and cost him a lot of money, money that he did not have to spare in those days and so he was angry, REALLY angry—and rightly so.

The man lived in New Jersey and worked in New York; and so every single day, five days a week, for many years, he drove to and from work on the New Jersey Turnpike. And every time he did, he had to pass exit 9, the New Brunswick exit, which was the exit where the man who had cheated him lived. And every time he passed that exit, he would think of this man, and of what this man had done to him, and he would curse him. He would let out a string of profanity. He would say: "I hope that that no good so-and-so gets what he deserves for what he did to me." And he would rant and rave until his face got red. And he would slam his fist into the driver's wheel. That is how angry he would get whenever he drove by exit 9 on the New Jersey Turnpike.

It got to the point where his wife began to worry about his health. She could see how agitated and how aggravated he would become. She could see his nostrils flare with anger and she worried about his blood pressure. She was afraid that he was going to have a stroke. But there was nothing she could do that would stop him from ranting and raving every time he passed Exit 9 on the New Jersey Turnpike and thought about the man who had done him so much harm.

Then, one day, this man happened to meet somebody who knew the person who had done him wrong. And so he asked, "Do you remember so-and-so? Do you happen to know whatever became of him? Do you know what that no good so-and-so is doing now?" And he was told, "HIM? Sure I remember him. But he died about fifteen years ago."

For fifteen years, this man had been working himself up into a frenzy, risking his health, and cursing his head off—for a man who was long since dead. On that day this man realized that there has to be a statute of limitations on keeping a grudge, because he wasn't hurting his enemy with his cursing; he was only hurting himself.

If forgiveness is impossible, or beyond the strength of most of us, then the High Holy Days are a waste of time, and we would be better off spending the days somewhere else other than here in the synagogue. But if forgiveness is possible, and within our power to give and receive, then we ought to set about working to do it right now, so that we do not have to go through the new year—much less many years—carrying the burden of unresolved anger and bitterness and pain inside that weighs us down and only hurts ourselves. If those who have hurt us do not feel the need to apologize? Nu, that's *their* loss. Let us forgive them anyway, not because they deserve to be forgiven, but because we deserve to be able to live our lives without wallowing in the past, without living with self pity, without being burdened by anger and without brooding over revenge.

A recent study published in a medical journal revealed that bearing a grudge adversely affects our psychological and spiritual well-being, to be sure—but more than that. The burden of carrying resentment can raise blood pressure; introduce and intensify symptoms of depression, anxiety and chronic pain; increase the risk of alcohol and substance abuse. Why would we allow anyone, especially those who have already harmed us through their actions, to continue to hurt us in such damaging ways?

So this is my wish for you, for all of us, these next 24 hours or so: If you have hurt someone in the past, may you somehow find within yourself the ability to say so and to ask forgiveness for what you did. And if someone has hurt you in the past, may that person find within him- or herself the strength that it takes to admit it and to ask for forgiveness from you. And if they can't, or if they don't? May you and I find within ourselves the ability to let the past be the past, to put what they did behind us, and to go forward and live, unencumbered by the burden of anger and resentment, whether they apologize to us or not.

Let us somehow find the strength to do this for the sake of those who have hurt us, though they may or may not deserve it; for our own sakes, that we may live lighter and better lives; and for the sake of God who forgives us for our sins, whether we deserve it or not, and waits for us to repent on these holy days.

A final story... Long ago, two friends traveled from town to town. While traveling, one of them fell into a river, and the other leaped in and saved him from drowning. The friend who had almost drowned had his servants carve these words on a large rock nearby: "Traveler! In this place, Nagib risked his life and saved the life of his friend Mussa."

The friends then resumed their journey—only to find themselves, on the return trip, at the very spot where the one had saved the life of the other. As they sat and spoke, a difference of opinion turned into a quarrel. Words were exchanged and the one who had almost drowned was hit in the face by his friend. He picked himself up, took a stick,

and wrote these words in the sand: “Traveler! In this place, Nagib, in a trivial argument, broke the heart of his friend Mussa.”

Mussa was asked by one of his men why he would carve the story of his friend’s heroism in stone, but tell the story of his cruelty only in the sand. He responded, “I will always cherish the memory of how my friend Nagib saved me in a time of danger. But the grave injury he just gave me—it is my hope that I will forgive him for it, even before the words fade from the sand.”

My friends, on this day of forgiveness, before the words fade from the sand, before the Book of Life is sealed, may we all find the will, the strength, and the ability to forgive. *Kein y’hi ratzon*, for this is indeed God’s will. Amen.