

The Art of Forgiving
Kol Nidre, 7 October 2011
Beth Shalom Cambridge

As I hope we are all aware, a central rabbinic teaching about Yom Kippur is that before we are entitled to seek atonement with God on this day, we must first try to rectify any wrongs we have done to our fellow human beings, setting things right and asking forgiveness of our loved ones, our neighbours, our associates, even our enemies. Only then do we have the right to ask forgiveness from God. If we have neglected to do this during the past week, it's not too late to do it in person, or to use the telephone for this sacred purpose. Remember, *Ne'ilah* comes more quickly than we might expect.

But asking for pardon of those we may have offended is only one part of the preparation for atonement. The other aspect, which I would like to discuss tonight, is every bit as important. This is that we ourselves must be prepared to forgive those who have done wrong to us. Only when we have shown that we are capable of forgiving can we hope that by the end of this day we too may be forgiven.

This idea may be familiar from what is called the "Lord's Prayer": in one translation, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who have trespassed against us." But of course Jesus of Nazareth was not introducing this as a novel "Christian" idea; he was merely emphasizing what was standard Jewish doctrine. His words may well have been based on a passage from the Book of Ben Sira, written 200 years before Jesus was born: "Forgive the wrong done by your neighbour, and when you ask it your sins will be remitted. Will a person nurture anger against another person and seek pardon from the Lord?"

The Talmud tells us of a Babylonian Rabbi, Mar Zutra by name, who used to say each night before going to bed, "I forgive all who have caused me pain" (bMeg 28a). And this theme, frequently repeated in the rabbinic literature, goes back to the commandment of our Torah, *Lo tikom ve-lo titor*, "You shall not take vengeance, neither shall you bear a grudge" (Lev. 19:18). How did the rabbis explain this? "Taking vengeance" refers not only to an act that would punish someone who did you wrong, but refusing to lend something to a neighbour who had refused to lend you something previously.

And "bearing a grudge" according to the rabbis would be to say, "Last month you refused to lend me an axe, today you ask me for a hoe: I will show that I am not like you by lending what you want." Even mentioning a past offense violates the spirit of the commandment by getting back at the wrongdoer in a subtle way. The Torah instructs us to strive to be like God, quick to forgive, ready to wipe the slate of past hurts completely clean.

Needless to say, this is a pretty tall order; indeed it may be one of the most difficult commandments in the entire Torah. Each of us knows how rare it is for us to be able to fulfil it in the rabbinic spirit. We usually feel a sense of pleasure in striking back, even verbally, a delight in getting even. A friend does something insensitive or mean-spirited that hurts me; even if he says he is sorry and tries to make amends, I

feel that something has changed between us, and when the occasion arises, I am sorely tempted to let him know that I have not forgotten.

I wonder how many of us sitting here tonight have extended families where one member is not speaking to another. (I know of this from experience with members of my own extended family.) In how many cases was it because of a disagreement over a business arrangement 30 years ago; or someone asked someone else for a loan and it was not extended; or someone's children were not invited to a celebration when the parents thought they should be. In how many cases do people not even remember in detail the cause of the feud, only that Uncle Joe and his wife don't speak to Uncle Louis and his?

Of course there may be serious provocations. But these tragic ruptures, which unravel and destroy the fabric of what were once the closest of relationships—even between brothers and sisters, or parents and their children—result from our propensity to harbour a grudge, from our unwillingness or reluctance to forgive and forget. Can we not make it part of our Yom Kippur experience during the next 24 hours to try and make peace within our own families through forgiveness?

But there are also situations where real and lasting harm has been done, and little if any remorse on the part of the perpetrator is evident. Can we be expected to forgive even then?

- Someone who cheated a business associate who trusted him out of life-savings. Who among his victims can forgive Bernie Madoff?
- Someone who caused a traffic accident because of driving while intoxicated, resulting in a permanent injury or even the death of a young child or a devoted parent,
- A parent who has neglected the children who desperately needed his or her guidance and approval, or persistently insulted and demeaned these children; a parent who may have been physically harmful to children or spouse.
- A husband who suddenly announces he is leaving his wife to move in with an attractive young colleague from the office.
- A paedophile who exploited a position of trust—as teacher, or coach, or scout leader, or priest, pastor, yes or rabbi—to abuse children who may bear the emotional scars of that experience for decades.
- Rebels from Rwanda and the Congo who have used mass rape of civilian women as an instrument of terror?
- Arab rulers who have ordered “security forces” to shoot peaceful demonstrators on behalf of basic human rights?
- The assassin of Yitzhak Rabin, who—though in prison—still seems to be proud of his act of murder?

- The settlers responsible for the uprooting of olive trees belonging to their Palestinian neighbours on the West Bank dependent on these trees for their livelihoods, or the right wing Israelis who burned and desecrated a mosque this past week in the eastern Galilee?

Where does forgiveness fit in here?

There are people who do not deserve to be forgiven, especially if they have done irreversible harm and show no desire to repent. The victims of such people are entitled to their anger. To feel angry, hateful, eager to inflict pain on someone who has torn a hole in our lives is a normal and perhaps even a healthy response to our own pain—a response that reasserts our own dignity and our commitment to the principle of justice in the world. But it is normal and healthy only for a while.

If the anger remains unabated, if the hatred grows in intensity, if the desire to hurt begins to occupy too much of our thought, if we lie awake at night fantasizing about how great it would feel to get even, then our lives begin to be poisoned and stunted. Resentment becomes a burden that will wear us down, thereby giving the wrong-doer the power to control us long after he or she are physically removed from our lives. A close friend of mine used to say, “Bearing a grudge, harbouring a vendetta, is giving someone we don’t like free storage space in your mind.” When we say, “I can never forgive So-and-so for what he did to me,” it doesn’t hurt So-and-so, who may feel no need for our forgiveness—it hurts us.

I have read recently of some extraordinary models for a very different response to having been hurt or aggrieved.

Les Persaud lives in Croydon. In 2005, his 16-year old son Stefan, who hoped some day to become a lawyer, was brutally, savagely beaten by 10 members of a Croydon gang, and died after 17 days in hospital. Devastated by his own grief, he was afraid that his son’s friends would take vengeance and more lives would be lost or ruined. And so he decided—not to forgive those responsible for his son’s death—but to become a mentor and father-figure to 15 of his son’s friends.

12 of them have now finished College, and 7 of them have become mentors themselves, going into primary schools to work with 11-year olds. One of them was quoted as saying, “I was raging after Stefan died. Someone killed my friend and all I wanted to do was get back at them. But Les [the father] made me realise I didn’t have to do that. . . I could do more with my life.” The looting and destruction in Croydon last summer shows that problems remain, but here is a man who channelled his devastating loss into something constructive that has changed lives for the better.

No less impressive is the story of **Izzeldin Abuelaish**, a Palestinian obstetrician and infertility specialist living in Gaza. Twelve weeks after his wife had died of leukemia, three of his daughters, aged 20, 15 and 14, and one niece were killed and other children severely injured by Israeli shelling in January 2009 during the Gaza campaign—something a legal advisor to the Israeli Ministry of Defence described as “collateral damage.” Take a moment to process that. Can we begin to imagine how we would respond to such an experience? I certainly can’t be sure what it would do to me. But this is a man who not only continues in his professional medical work of

bringing new life into the world, but who also has gone on speaking tours to many countries, trying to promote the values of justice and mutual respect.

In an article he published on the *Observer* last April, he wrote that during a radio interview in Philadelphia, a caller from Bosnia said that he was filled with hatred toward the Bosnian Serbs who had killed the members of his family. Dr Abuelaish wrote, “I would have liked to have had the opportunity to . . . help him understand that healing comes through doing good things in the memory of those we love. Conversely, hatred keeps us blind and prevents us from seeing any good in life. Through doing good deeds, we keep them blessed and alive. I implore Israelis and Palestinians to develop the necessary moral courage and responsibility to move forward with actions towards a process that would save the lives of families, and most important, children. Instead of moving tanks, there needs to be a movement of hearts. . . . Justice for my daughters is striving to ensure that more young lives are not lost.”¹

Yom Kippur provides us with an opportunity to abandon our petty angers and forgive in order to make reconciliation and reweave the frayed strands of our interpersonal relationships among colleagues, friends and family. It also provides an opportunity for us to abandon our deepest angers and move on, so that we can divest ourselves of the oppressive burden of resentment and bitterness, so that we can be truly free to live and to grow, so that—like Les Persaud and Izzeldin Abuelaish—we can transform grief and despair, fury and rage, into the energy to make the ourselves and our society a better place in which to live.

Immediately following the *Kol Nidre* this evening we heard a request and a response: “As you have been patient with this people from Egypt to the present day, so in your great love may you forgive this people now.” And God replies, “*Salahti ki-dvarekha*” (Num. 14:19–20). . The original context of this passage in the Bible adds a dimension of dramatic pathos to these words. After the spies return from their reconnaissance of the land of Canaan with their pessimistic report about the strength of the inhabitants and the fortifications of the cities, the Israelites once again turn against Moses, complaining that he never should have brought them out of Egypt, actually suggesting the appointment of a new leader to take them back.

This time God loses patience with the fickle and ungrateful rabble, threatening to destroy them all with a plague and make a new, mightier and nobler people out of the descendents of Moses. But despite the repeated insults that he has suffered at their hands, Moses pleads to God on behalf of the people, imploring God to forgive them.]

God’s response, *Salahti ki-dvarekha*, is usually translated, “I have forgiven according to your word, in accordance with your request.” But the two words might also be translated differently, and I believe more profoundly, “I have forgiven just as you have done.” In this reading, God is saying to Moses, “The fact that you asked me to spare this people despite its deplorable behaviour toward you shows me that you have forgiven them. If you can forgive, Moses, so can I.”

So may it be with us. There is so much rancour and vindictiveness in the world, so much contention and spite. Let us learn and practice on this Yom Kippur the art of forgiveness, cleansing pettiness from our hearts, starting anew with our loved ones and our friends, the slate of past wrongs wiped clean in the ledgers of our souls.

Then perhaps we can expect to hear God's compassionate response before the setting of tomorrow's sun: *Salahti ki-devarekha*.

¹ *Observer*, 24 April 2011; see also his book, *I Shall Note Hate: A Gaza Doctor's Journey on the Road to Peace and Human Dignity*. The morning after this sermon was delivered, the *Guardian* published an opinion piece written by Michael Mansfield, identified as a human rights lawyer ("Sleep Easy, War Criminals," *Guardian*, 8 October 2011, p. 43), which devoted two central paragraphs to the tragic experience of Dr Abuelaish, using it to beat up on Israel, by providing "evidence" that Tzipi Livni should indeed be arrested and prosecuted in the Hague for war crimes. This is of course antithetical to the way I have used this experience and, I believe, antithetical to Dr Abuelaish's own purpose as expressed in his public speaking and writing.