

**...TO FORGIVE IS HUMAN**  
**Kol Nidre**  
**September 22, 2015 ☆ 10 Tishri 5776**  
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One of the most chilling passages in Holocaust memoir literature is in Simon Wiesenthal's, The Sunflower. Wiesenthal, who survived the Holocaust and devoted his life to bringing Nazi criminals to justice, tells of a young SS trooper named Karl in the concentration camp in Mauthausen, Austria. As Karl lay dying from head wounds, he grabbed Wiesenthal's wrist. He whispered that he had to talk to a Jew before he died to confess the horrendous things he had done and to beg forgiveness. Karl told of the events in a Russian village where his company packed a house with Jews, including children. They poured gasoline on the floors, locked the people indoors, and set the house on fire. Some, near the windows, tried to jump out, but the Nazis shot them before they landed on the ground – little children and older adults – machine-gunned as they tried to escape. Karl's dying request was to receive Wiesenthal's forgiveness. He could not die in peace without being forgiven by a Jew.

Wiesenthal listened, numbed. He said nothing. He pulled free of the SS trooper's hand. Wiesenthal survived, and would later ponder: "Was my silence at the side of the dying Nazi, right or wrong?" What would you have done?

Tomorrow we will hear the story of survivor Eva Kor during our afternoon conversation on "From Auschwitz to Forgiveness." Each Holocaust survivor has a unique and intimately personal story to tell. Most of us don't have to deal with the painful choices that confronted Simon Wiesenthal or Eva Kor. We may not have such a story of great wrong to tell, but we all have a story – a friend or sibling who hurt us, a spouse or a partner who cheated us, a parent or child who wronged us. We all have a story of someone who misunderstood us, overlooked us, betrayed us. Call to mind for a moment that person. Imagine him or her holding your hand. What would you do?

All of us, at some time or another, have to decide – will we forgive? Are there things that are unforgivable? Yom Kippur is not only the day of repentance, *teshuvah*; it is the day for forgiveness, *selicha*. What is forgiveness? How do we deal with the hurts inflicted upon us; how do we expect others to deal with the pain we might have inflicted on them?

The liturgy of the High Holy Days is suffused with the theme of forgiveness. In Kol Nidre we voice the hope that we be forgiven not only for the un-kept promises and transgressions that we performed from last year to this year, but for those we will surely commit from this year till the next. Kol Nidre ends with the divine affirmation – *salahti kid'varekha* – "I forgive as you have requested." Elsewhere in the liturgy after the confessional, we repeat the refrain: *S'lah lanu m'hal lanu kaper lanu* – "forgive us, pardon us, cleanse us."

At several high moments in our Yom Kippur liturgy, we recite the powerful verses from Exodus 34:6-7, the Thirteen Attributes of Forgiveness: "Adonai, Adonai, God gracious and compassionate, patient, abounding in kindness, faithfulness, assuring love for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and granting pardon." The Rabbis regard these verses as an invitation to us to act in Godly ways: "Just as God is gracious and compassionate, you be gracious and compassionate; just as God is forgiving, you be forgiving...." (B. Shabbat 33b)

The Mishnah teaches that "Yom Kippur atones for sins we commit against God, but sins committed against our neighbor are not forgiven unless we personally ask for or offer forgiveness." And so, at the beginning of this evening's service we read a declaration of communal forgiveness. We said: "As I forgive and pardon fully those who have done me wrong, may those whom I have harmed by word or by deed forgive and pardon me...."

Forgiveness is difficult. Cain asks God, after killing his brother, Abel: *Gadol avoni min'so?! "Is my sin too grave to forgive?"* (Genesis 4:13) We are descendants of Cain. We all commit wrongs. Forgiveness is the art of healing the wounds inflicted upon us by other people and, sometimes, the wounds we inflict upon ourselves.

There is a growing body of psychological research on the topic of forgiveness. Among psychotherapists there are different opinions regarding whether forgiveness requires forgetting and whether giving up vengefulness is a pre-requisite. One researcher's opinion is that forgiveness does not take place only "...when anger or hurt or revenge are spent. Rather, it involves the introduction of... a leavening agent, ... something new: a solution."

In a book entitled The Art of Forgiving, Lewis B. Smedes reminds us that "there is no delete key for reality. ...not even God can undo what has been done." Maturity is knowing that we cannot live the past again and make it turn out differently. We can't change what others have done to us; what we have done to ourselves. But we can change how the past continues to hurt us and embitter us. Forgiveness is the art of healing inner wounds inflicted upon us (by others or by ourselves), and moving on.

If we are cutting an apple, and the knife slips and injures one hand, we do not take the knife with that hand and stab the other hand. Rather, one hand heals the other. Yet, we are so good at punishing ourselves with the pains of the past, not only as individuals, but collectively. We live in a world where "tribes slaughter tribes, ethnic groups assault other ethnic groups, and gangs shoot up other gangs" (Smedes), where one hand injures the other. There is no end.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was instrumental in the process of reconciliation following the Apartheid Regime in South Africa, tells us that "Forgiveness is taking seriously the awfulness of what has happened.... ...not pretending that things are other than they are. It is facing...what has happened and [creating]...the opportunity of coming out of that...situation." "Forgiveness is not amnesia. Amnesia is a most dangerous thing, especially on a ... national or international level. We must forgive, but...not forget...because if we do, we are then likely to repeat those atrocities."

Jewish moral tradition teaches that if a person offends someone else, only the offended person can forgive him. The offender must ask for forgiveness. If it is withheld, he should ask again. If it is withheld twice, he must once more ask for forgiveness. If it is refused a third time, then the person withholding the forgiveness bears the blame.

In the year 2000, during a speech in the German Parliament commemorating the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel said to the German leaders, "You have been helpful to Israel after the war, with reparations and financial assistance. But you have never asked the Jewish people to forgive you for what the Nazis did." Two weeks later, the Bundes president, Johannes Rau, went to the Israeli Knesset and did just that.

Let's clear up misunderstandings about forgiveness. Forgiving someone is not inviting that person to do us harm again; to say that the past didn't matter; that it wasn't that bad. Forgiving someone is not exempting that person from the demands of justice, nor is it an invitation to go back into an old relationship that is ruined or hurtful.

Forgiving one who has done you harm does not turn that person into a close friend, a loyal spouse, or trusting partner. In forgiveness we acknowledge the failings and humanity of the person who hurt us; we give up our right to revenge; we release and move on. In forgiveness we give up vengeance, but not necessarily justice.

I learned about forgiveness from a news report by our own Naomi Pescovitz of WTHR Channel 13. A couple of months ago (July 24, 2015), Naomi reported on Simeon Adams, who was sentenced to fifty-five years in prison for his 2014 murder of Nathan Trapuzzano. Adams was sixteen at the time of the crime. Nathan Trapuzzano was out for a walk on an April morning when Adams tried to mug him and ended up fatally shooting him. Shortly after Trapuzzano's death, his young widow, Jennifer, gave birth to their daughter, Cecelia. Adams, the murderer, smiled and laughed on the way to court. He did not hold Jennifer's hand; he did not seek her forgiveness. Yet, the young widow told Adams, "I offer you forgiveness today because that is the kind of man [Nathan] was." Jennifer reflected afterwards, "I look at him, he's a human being... created like God, like every single one of us." She added, "there is still anger.... There is still an immense pain.... A huge hole in my heart." Following the trial Jennifer admitted, "I don't think justice [can be fully] served. Nothing...in this courtroom would ever give Nate back to [me]...." I would venture that most of us here today might not have been able to speak the words that Jennifer Trapuzzano did in forgiving her husband's murderer. But notice that she distinguishes clearly between forgiveness and justice. She does not deny her anger, her pain.

A similar course of action took place in the events following the shooting of nine churchgoers at the AME Church in South Carolina. The church collectively offered its forgiveness of the accused murderer, Dylann Roof, but did not abdicate the right to bring him to justice.

Think of the possibility of an end to belligerencies between Israelis and Palestinians. So much pain. So much lost life. So much misunderstanding and hatred between two sides for such a long time. Making peace – forgiveness – will require, not forgetting the past, not pretending that nothing has happened, not ignoring the many injustices, the collective trauma, but precisely making a conscious choice not to be owned by the past, not to be owned by hatred, terror and revenge, but, despite it all, choosing the possibility of new life, and moving forward into peace – letting one hand heal the other.

In the best of circumstances forgiveness leads to reconciliation, but not necessarily. Forgiveness can be granted freely without the pre-condition of repentance or the expectation of reunion. Forgiveness is a liberating act for the aggrieved individual from the prison of emotional pain. It says to the offender, you are not going to control me or dominate my life. We say to ourselves – I am free to grow.

Perhaps a more relatable story of forgiveness is this incident in the world of sports. In 1965, San Francisco Giant's Juan Marichal and Dodger John Roseboro, in the heat of the pennant race, engaged in a fierce 14 minute brawl captured in an iconic image on the cover of Sports Illustrated. Marichal responded to having his ear clipped by Roseboro's throw by clobbering Roseboro with his bat. Marichal was fined, suspended by the league and sued by Roseboro who continued to suffer headaches for the rest of the season.

Ten years later the two men met at an old-timers game, shook hands and during a TV interview Marichal apologized to Roseboro, who graciously accepted.

Seven years after that, Roseboro was instrumental in advancing Marichal's admission into the Baseball Hall of Fame, from which he had apparently been excluded because of the 1965 incident. Roseboro traveled to the Dominican Republic for Marichal's golf tournament and proclaimed to the world their reconciliation and renewed friendship. At Roseboro's funeral in 2002 Marichal was an honorary pall bearer and delivered a moving eulogy for his friend. A beautiful example of the power of forgiveness.

As we enter this season of the year we realize all too well that there are no relationships without misunderstandings and tensions, no interactions without pain, no love without hurt, no joy without suffering. If it weren't for forgiveness we would live lives of caution, distant and safe. The

possibility of forgiveness frees us to interact genuinely, authentically, “to risk being fully present with each other.” The popular saying goes “... to err is human, to forgive divine.” But, in truth, to forgive, too, is human, not only out of benevolence but of concern for self, as well.

We must distinguish between true forgiveness and false forgiveness. Pastoral psychotherapist, David Augsburger, reminds us that forgiveness is frequently practiced as a process of denial, distortion, isolation and avoidance. Forgiveness is sometimes offered from a stance of superiority, super-spirituality or self-sacrifice. He cautions:

When “forgiveness”  
puts you one-up,  
on top,  
in a superior place,  
as the benefactor,  
the generous one,  
the giver of freedom  
and dignity –  
Don’t trust it,  
don’t give it,  
don’t accept it.  
It’s not  
forgiveness;  
It’s sweet  
saintly  
revenge.

Sometimes forgiveness develops from a denial of anger and pain:

When “forgiveness”  
denies  
that there is anger,  
acts  
as if it never happened,  
smiles  
as though it never hurt,  
fakes  
as though it’s all  
forgotten –  
Don’t offer it.  
Don’t trust it.  
Don’t depend on it.  
It’s not  
forgiveness  
It’s  
a magical fantasy.

Forgiveness is not magical. It is a process that begins inside the person who offers it. It takes one person to forgive; two to be reunited. Forgiveness emerges freely from the wounded person; reconciliation, reunion happen in a relationship between people.

We cannot change another person through our forgiveness. We can forgive a person who is unwilling to say he or she is sorry. But we cannot be reunited with that person unless he or she is honestly sorry. Forgiveness can be offered even to a person we don’t trust. But reunion, reconciliation

can only happen when trust is restored. Forgiveness is offered freely, with no strings attached. Reunion, reconciliation has strings attached.

So let me go back to Simon Wiesenthal; his encounter with Karl; his decision to walk away; to let go of Karl's hand; his misgivings about not having offered forgiveness. It appears to me that what Karl, the SS soldier, was asking of Wiesenthal was not forgiveness, but magical absolution. Karl was guilty of the murder of dozens if not hundreds or thousands of people. He was part of a machinery that killed millions, six million Jews, eleven million human beings. Could Wiesenthal as an individual have forgiven him for his sins against humanity? Can A forgive B for a sin against C? Perhaps the silent, unarticulated prayer in Wiesenthal's heart was: "I trust your repentance is sincere. May God have mercy on you."

On this day we are asked to turn to God in repentance. We are also challenged to find ways to offer and to receive forgiveness from our neighbors and loved ones, to let go of the emotional and spiritual burden that keeps us anchored to yesterday's errors and bad habits, to past mistakes and offenses. Imagine the possibilities if we could use the intense emotional energy that we expend on our anger at another's wrongdoing in affirming life rather than nurturing resentment.

As this New Year begins, what will we hold on to and what will we let go?

Each of us must find his or her own way to the release, the renewal and the possibilities for new life to which this season calls us.

May the New Year usher blessings of renewal, reconciliation and peace. Amen.

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The following sources were helpful and have been quoted, adapted or referenced in the preparation of this sermon:

David Augsburger, Caring Enough to Forgive/Caring Enough To Not Forgive (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1981)

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