

Selichah, Mechilah, and Kapparah

Yom Kippur 5765

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There are two Yom Kippurs. There must be. After all, you might have noticed that the Torah and the prayerbook call this day *Yom Kippurim* – in the plural, not just in the singular, “Yom Kippur.” Why might that be?

The answer is that there are two broad categories of sins that our tradition recognizes.¹ The first category is **בין אדם למקום**: Between us and G-d. These are so-called victimless crimes; except, of course, in all the ways that we hurt ourselves. These are the sorts of failures to live up to the best that is within us that every person is guilty of. For these sins, says the Tradition, Yom Kippur provides forgiveness and renewal. Hopefully, some of the quiet times during the day today will give you an opportunity to sort through this aspect of yourself: the peace that needs to be made between ourselves and G-d.

The second category is called **בין אדם לחברו**: Between us and other people. And for this category of sin, for the pain that we’ve inflicted inadvertently or purposefully on other, Yom Kippur can’t do a darned thing until we reach out to those whom we’ve hurt and ask for forgiveness, and repair what we’ve done.

Therefore, it stands to reason that forgiveness – both giving and receiving it – is an essential part of this day. But while seeking forgiveness from others may be hard, many of us find offering forgiveness to be a hundred times tougher. So part of today should be devoted to asking ourselves: Am I truly a forgiving person?

Let’s take a quiz to find out. Answer the following questions about forgiveness to yourself truthfully and honestly (after all, this is the day for being totally honest with ourselves):²

(1) You find yourself running late to school or to work, and you’re driving as quickly as you can allow yourself. Then, suddenly, another driver aggressively cuts you off in traffic. What do you do – honestly?

- (a) Lean on the horn, roll down the window, gesture profanely.
- (b) Tap your horn and mutter darkly to yourself.
- (c) Tsk, but don’t do anything.

(2) On the street, you randomly run into someone who you knew years ago in high school – someone who was a bully to you and others back then. What do you say to this person all these years later? Some options might be:

- (a) You pretend not to know them and walk aggressively by.
- (b) You greet them coldly, but are reserved, and end the conversation quickly.
- (c) You greet them and smile. After all, the past is past; it’s water under the bridge.

¹ Mishna, Yoma 8:9 in the name of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah.

² Modeled on a quiz called, “How Forgiving Are You?” on www.beliefnet.com/section/quiz/

(3) A basically decent person with whom you had a nasty personality conflict at a previous job shows up at your present company for an interview. The job is in a different section than yours; you wouldn't necessarily be interacting with this person every day. Still, the boss asks you your opinion – should we hire this person or not? What do you say?

(a) You tell the boss not to hire him.

(b) You say the person would do a good job, but mention that you had some personal issues with him.

(c) You know the person would do a decent job, and say so.

(4) You have a neighbor with whom you've argued repeatedly over the years: over everything from noisy pets to sloppy lawns to your children stepping on his property. The neighbor has never been less than hostile and obnoxious to you. Then one day you spot that very same neighbor on the side of the road with a flat tire. The weather report says it is about to start pouring. What do you do?

(a) Smile to yourself, knowing that he's getting what he deserved.

(b) Pull over and help change the tire before the rains come.

There aren't "right" answers to this quiz – but it is a gauge to see how willing we really are to forgive people. How did you do? Most of us think of ourselves as pretty forgiving people; no one wants to be known as someone who can carry a grudge like luggage, from one end of the earth to the other. And yet, the muscles of forgiveness are ones that, for most of us, don't get regular exercise. Real forgiveness, in the spirit of this day, can often be quite a difficult thing to do.

Because there is nothing natural about forgiveness. It goes against the grain of everything that we expect or desire. We want crimes to be punished. We want wrongs to be righted. Forgiveness is, in many ways, the opposite of justice.

This is a sermon about forgiveness. But there are many caveats and disclaimers that have to be made in advance. This sermon is not about forgiveness for the Germans and Poles after the Holocaust, nor is it about finding forgiveness for the terrorists of 9/11, or the perpetrators of the Intifada. It is not about other types of the most sadistic acts of violence that human beings are capable of inflicting on one another. While the topic of whether or not forgiveness is applicable in those realms is interesting, that's not what we're going to talk about today.

No, instead this is about the simple hurts that we all are capable of causing each and every day of our lives, because we're human and we're imperfect. We've all experienced both sides of the equation: we've hurt people and we've been hurt by people. We have been victims and we have been perpetrators. We've all experienced it, because we have chosen to have relationships with others. Relationships by their very nature are risky, because we make ourselves vulnerable to getting hurt when we open ourselves up to others and let them in. And yet, when we think about it, would anybody really choose the alternative? It is far too lonely.

Now, the climax of the Yom Kippur liturgy is the *Vidui*, the "Confession." It might seem strange to us this notion of confession in Jewish prayer; it seems so... *Catholic*. But that is merely our Diaspora bias. *Vidui*, confession, is inherently Jewish.

When we say these prayers, we peer straightforwardly into the mirror; we stop lying and fooling ourselves. We come clean with our authentic selves. And then, hopefully, we ask for forgiveness.

We are not alone when we do this. You may have noticed we recite these prayers in the plural. That means our family and friends and neighbors in the seats all around us are traveling a similar path, and likewise asking forgiveness. Who are they asking it from? From us.

There are three Hebrew words connected to forgiveness, and all of us know them. That's because the words of the Vidui are punctuated by a refrain that we know well – we've already sung it several times today:

וְעַל כָּלֵם אֱלֹהֵי סְלִיחוֹת
סְלַח לָנוּ, מְחַל לָנוּ, כְּפָר לָנוּ.

**For all of these, O G-d of Forgiveness,
Forgive us, Pardon us, Grant us atonement!**

We say: *S'lach lanu* – Forgive us! *M'chal lanu* -- Pardon us! And *Kapper lanu* – Grant us atonement! While we may readily see these three things as synonyms, a poetic passage in our prayers, they are not. They represent three kinds of forgiveness to which all of us, to some degree or another, can relate.

Selichah is the forgiveness that wipes the slate clean of the petty insensitivities we all commit.

Mechilah is more profound: it releases us from the control of those who have hurt us deeply.

Kapparah is the transformation that occurs when our wounds are fully integrated into who we are, and we emerge as stronger, fuller individuals.

We say, *S'lach lanu*, and pray for סְלִיחָה, for forgiveness.

S'lichah is a common modern Hebrew word. (Well, in all candor, many Americans who have spent time in Israel feel it's not a *common enough* word!) It's the word that you hear when an old woman elbows you out of the way in the Israeli *shuk*, or when the bus driver nearly closes the door on you. They say: *Selichah!* Pardon me!

In our prayers, *s'lach lanu* is the first request in the Vidui: Forgive us!

S'lichah refers to the basic day-to-day slights we all commit, most easily and most typically to the people whom we love. It is *selichah* that we ask for when we've been short and curt with people because we've been having a bad day; when we've been cold or distant from people who desired our attentions; when we've been harsh or callous or sarcastic or indifferent. These are the daily cruelties that every human being does, and, without forgiveness, they can fester and linger.

It is said of Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, one of the great Chasidic masters of the 19th century, that each Friday he would ask for forgiveness from everyone in his household. He would go to each servant, each child, and to his wife, and beg them to forgive him for anything he might have done – intentionally or not – to hurt them.

So we ask forgiveness from one another, and we grant forgiveness back.

We say: It hurt me when you were like that, but your apology makes all the difference. I can wipe the slate clean.

Real friends, real partners, real lovers, real neighbors, have been there many times. The hurts are real, but when someone apologizes, we can say, "It's over and done." And it truly is.

At the next level, we say *M'chal lanu*, and pray for *הַחַיִּימוּ*, another dimension of forgiveness that is far more difficult.

There are wrongs that have been committed against us that are harder to shake off. It is one thing to forgive people in our daily lives their errors and mistakes. It is something far more to forgive those who hurt us more deeply.

I think of a woman I know named Leah who had been married to her husband for twenty-five years. She and her husband quite genuinely loved one another and shared many of life's passages together. They had two sons, who grew up active in the Hebrew school and who, as adults, were both committed to Jewish life. But as their kids grew into adulthood, Leah and her husband Jack grew steadily estranged from one another, and the last ten years of their marriage were very painful. Jack was downsized from his job and then found it impossible to re-enter the field he thought he knew. For several years, he went from one job to another. I suspect that during this time, he had some adulterous affairs as well. There was no physical abuse in their relationship, but I have no doubt that verbal and emotional abuse was part of their daily existence for far too long. Eventually he moved out of the family home and filed for divorce.

Leah remained active in Temple life, especially in social action. But she was miserable. She suffered her own financial setbacks. She gained weight. She smoked way too many cigarettes. And, when the pressure got to be too much, she would release it by sharing stories with anybody about "that *momzer*" to whom she used to be married.

Six years passed. Life went on, with its ups and downs, but these basic facts of Leah's life did not change all that much. She remained an angry, victimized woman.

When people urged her to move on, she was defensive: "Do you know what he did to me?!" Six years after the divorce, the anger was still so raw. Jack had moved on, Leah had not.

One day, when she was talking about her divorce, her rabbi asked her if she had ever received a *get*, a Jewish divorce. She replied that she hadn't, and the rabbi prodded her a bit. "Why not?" he asked. "After all, when you got married, you received two documents: a license from New York recognizing that you were legally married in the eyes of the state, and a Ketubah recognizing that you were legally married in the eyes of the Jewish people. But your divorce – that only dissolved your legal marriage. Perhaps you need some sort of release from this power he still has over you, making you so angry and holding you back."

Leah was intrigued. So, ever so gently, the rabbi guided her through the process of a *get*. The ex-husband agreed to the process, which was not confrontational in the least. A traditional *get* was written up; it was delivered to Leah in the presence of kosher witnesses.

And after the *get* was concluded, there was one more step for Leah. The rabbi made an appointment for her at the local *mikveh*. Together with a friend, Leah went to the ritual bath, removed her clothes, and immersed herself in its warm waters.

Today she talks about the *get* and the *mikveh* in this way: "It was about freedom. When I left the Rabbi's study after the *get*, and after I came out of the Mikveh, I felt like the weight of the world was taken off of my shoulders." I'm not surprised. She had finally made the long road to *mechilah*. Her ex had done some lousy things to her. A big part of her insisted on remaining angry, on desiring some form of *justice* in the world to cause him to suffer the way she had been suffering!

What the ritual of the *get* did for Leah was this: it allowed her to see that her anger, her bitterness, her refusal to let go of all the things he had done to her, was inhibiting her. Even though he had moved away, she was still being manipulated by her anger. Stepping out of the

waters of the Mikveh, she said, in essence, “*Machalti*: Today I forgive. Today I let go. Today I am a free woman.”

This is a spiritual truth: Until we can forgive, we are still being controlled and hurt by the person who has hurt us. That takes time; sometimes, years. Yet only when we can forgive and let go are we able to say: “You no longer have that power over me. I hereby release my anger, my rage, my resentment, my bitterness, and all the rest of the negative energy that has been reverberating back towards me and preventing me from moving on. Today I say: *machalti*; I have done *mechilah*; I have let go.”

The best reason for finding *mechilah* is that it is good for us. Jewish tradition knew it; modern psychotherapy knows it as well.

For instance, Everett Worthington, Professor of Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University, has researched extensively the impact of forgiveness on a person’s mental health. His results are fascinating. He has found that:

People who won’t forgive the wrongs committed against them tend to have [all sorts of] negative indicators of health and well-being; more stress-related disorders; lower immune-system function, and worse rates of cardiovascular disease than the population as a whole. **In effect, by failing to forgive, they punish themselves.**³

In fact, when we insist to ourselves, “No – that person has hurt me too badly. I refuse to forgive!” we just might be denying ourselves chances of future happiness. Journalist Gregg Easterbrook has written:

Increasingly, psychological research has begun to show that being a forgiving person is essential to happiness. Even when someone wrongs you, feeling anger or hatred only causes your life to descend into misery and resentment. You are the one who suffers, not the person you’re angry at. Forgiving, on the other hand, can lift the burden.

Third: We also say *Kapper Lanu*, and pray for הַכִּפּוּרִים , for atonement.

The incredible thing about Teshuvah is this: it doesn’t erase things and make them as if they never happened; it transforms us into something different than what we had been. *Kappara* means “to be whole again.” Forgiveness does not always mean a renewal of the relationship as it was before. Sometimes sin destroys, and the connection that once was cannot be rebuilt.

Instead, something new appears in its place. That is what healing is all about. Instead, it is like spiritual scar tissue – we incorporate it into who we have become, as we move forward into the future.

A story is told of a father who had a rebellious teenage son. This boy would never listen and would often cut school. He got in trouble with the police and was a source of great pain to his parents. Finally, the father was so frustrated that he could deal with it no longer. He went to the garage and grabbed a hammer and a sack of nails. Each time the boy did something wrong, the father would take the a hammer and pound a nail into the large oak door that was outside his study. Day after day, more and more nails were pounded into the doorframe. Finally, the son

³ Gregg Easterbrook, “Forgiveness is Good for You,” online at www.beliefnet.com/story_10281_1.html
Beliefnet.com has other articles about the healing benefits of forgiveness as well.

took notice of what his father was doing, and as the nails grew more and more numerous, he began to see the scope of his deeds, and the hurt they were causing his parents. He looked into himself, tried to change his ways. His father saw this change, and each time the son performed an act of kindness or decency, he turned the hammer around and pried one of the nails from the door. And after some time had elapsed, all the nails were gone from the doorframe.

The father took his son aside that day and said, "My son, I am very proud of you." The boy looked at the door that was now nail-free, but he was still disturbed. "Father," he said, "The doorframe is still full of holes where the nails once were."

"True," said his father. "There is nothing I can do about that. It is one thing to seek forgiveness. But the consequences of your actions still remain. These holes are a reminder of who and what you once were."

That might sound painful. But each of us is full of holes. Scar tissue has grown over them, and we are wiser, stronger, nobler for the mistakes we've made and the forgiveness we've shared.

Today is a day for seeking out forgiveness, and for truly letting go and forgiving others. The Torah calls this day not Yom Kippur, in the singular, but Yom Kippurim, in the plural, for there are different kinds of sins. What is so fascinating is that G-d can only make this day a Yom Kippur (in the singular). Only we, only people, have the ability – through the act of forgiveness – to turn it into a *Yom Kippurim*.⁴

We say: *S'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kapper lanu.*

This is a day for *selichah*: a day when our relationships with people whom we care about are renewed, thanks to forgiveness.

This is a day for *mechilah*: a time when we free ourselves from the power others have over us, by releasing anger, resentment, and bitterness. We are free, thanks to forgiveness.

This is a day for *kapparah*: a moment to appreciate how our lives have been transformed; how our past hurts have been integrated into our whole beings, and we are deeper, stronger, wiser because of it all. Thanks to forgiveness.

And that, the Rabbis of the Talmud might have said, is worth celebrating as a day of joy. For it is the day on which we become truly free.

Kein yehi ratzon. Amen.

⁴ Rabbi Benjamin Blech, in *More Secrets of Hebrew Words*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Books, 1993, p.43.