

Make Yourself Available to Forgive¹

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Yom Kippur offers us an opportunity to renew our relationship not only with God, but also with our fellow man. However, repairing damaged relationships with other people is often more complicated and demanding than atoning for our sins against God. The Mishnah in *Yoma* 10:9 spells this out:

Yom Kippur atones for transgressions between man and the Omnipresent. Yom Kippur does not atone for transgressions between man and his fellow until one pacifies his fellow. This was learned from a verse by R. Eleazar b. Azariah: “*From all your sins before Hashem you shall be purified*” (Leviticus 16:30) - Yom Kippur atones for transgressions between man and the Omnipresent but Yom Kippur does not atone for transgressions between man and his fellow until one pacifies his fellow.

Yom Kippur is sufficient to atone for most sins that one commits against God. However, sins one has committed against other people require that one first ask them for forgiveness before procuring atonement. While the wrongdoer may have felt himself superior when putting down his fellow, the wrongdoer now ironically takes on the inferior position since his fate lies in the hands of his victim.

The Gemara (*Bavli Yoma* 87a) commenting on this Mishnah subdivides the sins we commit against others into two categories of verbal sins and monetary sins:

¹ This article is based on a lecture given by Moshe Halbertal on December 3, 2005 at Sephardic Synagogue and sponsored by Merkaz Moreshet Yisrael.

R. Isaac said: Whoever offends his neighbor, even if he does it only through words, must pacify him, as it is said: “My son, if you have [indebted yourself and] stood surety for your fellow, given your hand for another, you are snared by the words of your mouth...do this, then, my son, and deliver yourself, for you have come into the power of your fellow. Go, grovel and badger your fellow” (Proverbs 6:1-3). If he has a claim of money upon you, open the palm of your hand to him, and if not, send many friends to him.

For monetary wrongdoing, one must repay the damage or the debt. For verbal wrongdoing, one must apologize so that the victim will be pacified from the insult he has received. The Gemara further recommends that one apologize not directly but through intermediaries:

R. Hisda said: He must pacify him through three rows of three people each, as it is said: “He declares to people, ‘I have sinned and perverted what was right, and it did not profit me’” (Job 33:27).

Why does the Gemara recommend sending three groups of three people rather than apologizing directly? Often, the victim is so hurt and angry that he does not want to see the wrongdoer. If the victim is not ready to forgive, then he will be even more angered by the wrongdoer just showing up and apologizing, even if it is sincere. In other words, the victim must be available to forgive even before any meeting takes place or else the meeting may only add insult to injury. By using a third-party, however, the wrongdoer is able to express his remorse without being so presumptuous as to expect immediate forgiveness.

Until now, the Gemara has focused on the responsibilities of the wrongdoer to repay or apologize with sensitivity and patience. The next line of the Gemara shifts to the less obvious responsibility of the victim:

R. Yose b. Ḥanina said: One who asks forgiveness of his neighbor need not do so more than three times, as it is said: “*Forgive (sa na), I urge you (ana). . . therefore, please forgive (sa na)*” (Genesis 50:17).

And if he [the person who was wronged] had died, he [the wrongdoer] brings ten people and stands them by his grave and he says: “I have sinned against Hashem, the God of Israel, and against this one, whom I have hurt.”

Just as the wrongdoer has a requirement to apologize, so does the victim have a responsibility to forgive. He may not be ready to forgive after the first or second approaches, but by the third attempt, assuming that the apology is heartfelt, the victim must find it within himself to let go of his anger and accept his friend’s apology. If he does not, the wrongdoer is absolved of his obligation and the sin now lies in the hands of the victim (cf. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshubah* 2:9).

The next law in the Gemara deals with another person who is also not available to forgive, but this time it is not because of his stubbornness but rather because he has passed on. In such a case, the wrongdoer must demonstrate his remorse in a public quorum, which stands in the place of the deceased victim.

Up until this point, the Gemara has been using the genre of law. The Mishnah stated one legal principle and the Gemara elaborated on that law with further details and prooftexts formulated as additional legal statements. Next, the Gemara turns to a series of narratives that serve to bring the law to life, show real examples, and bring out further some of the complexities involved in the process of forgiveness. Here is the first story:

R. Abba felt aggrieved by R. Jeremiah. He [R. Jeremiah] went and sat down at the door of R. Abba and as the maid poured out water, some fell on his head. Then he [R. Jeremiah] said: “They have made a dung-

heap of me,” and he applied this passage about himself: “He raises up the poor from the dung-heap” (Psalms 113:7). R. Abba heard that and came out to him. He [R. Abba] said to him, “Now I must appease you, as it is written: “Go, grovel and badger your fellow” (Proverbs 6:3).

R. Jeremiah caused R. Abba to feel hurt. R. Jeremiah wished to apologize but was apparently apprehensive about doing so. Notice that R. Jeremiah does not knock on the door but only sits on the stoop waiting for something to happen. He must have felt too ashamed to face R. Abba, perhaps because he was afraid that R. Abba might not be ready to forgive him in which case R. Jeremiah would only be further insulting him.

When the maid of R. Abba, presumably by accident, threw the sewage water on the head of R. Jeremiah (throwing waste out of the window was the normal way of taking out the garbage in Roman cities) the tables were turned. R. Jeremiah who at first owed R. Abba an apology for a previous wrongdoing now has a right to receive an apology from R. Abba. This should not be understood as an act of revenge – i.e., R. Abba was insulted so he in turn humiliates R. Jeremiah – first, because it was done by mistake, and second, because R. Abba recognizes that the two actions do not cancel each other out but rather that he must now apologize.

This story does, however, encapsulate the element of shame that is present and required in the act of apology. A victim who has been humiliated by a wrongdoer is not likely to be pacified until he sees the wrongdoer put himself down by asking for mercy. At the same time, the self-humiliation of the wrongdoer in his act of apology almost forces the victim to accept the apology or else he will seem stubborn and hard-hearted by ignoring the display of shame presented by the original wrongdoer. This is the psychological mechanism that is behind the legal principle

noted above—that one who refuses to be pacified even after three apologies incurs the guilt upon himself.

R. Jeremiah's apprehensiveness about apologizing is understandable and common. R. Zera, in the next story, addresses this problem:

When R. Zera felt aggrieved by any man, he used to walk back and forth before him and would make himself available to him so that he [the wrongdoer] would come and appease him.

R. Zera did not want to hold a grudge against those who did him wrong. However, recognizing that it is difficult for people to gain the courage to apologize, often because they are afraid of being turned down or unwilling to humiliate themselves by asking for mercy, he would make himself available—both physically and psychologically—to receive the apologies of those who harmed him. R. Zera certainly possesses the highest degree of self-effacement as well as kindness and caring, even for those who harmed him. R. Zera made it easy for his wrongdoers to apologize by indicating in advance his willingness to accept and by requiring from them only the most minimal display of regret. Even though by law, a victim only has the responsibility to accept an apology after three times, this story shows an example of a victim who goes beyond the letter of the law.

The next story picks up on this theme of going beyond the letter of the law but shows the complexities and pitfalls involved in the process of forgiveness:

Rab once felt aggrieved by a certain butcher. The butcher did not come [to appease Rab]. On the eve of Yom Kippur, he [Rab] said: "I will go to him to pacify him." Rav Huna met him [Rab] and asked: "Master, where are you going?" He replied, "To pacify that man." He [Rav Huna] said [to himself]: Abba [=Rab] is going to kill someone. He [Rab] went there and stood

before him [the butcher]. [The butcher] was sitting and splitting open an [animal's] head. He raised his eyes and saw him [Rab]. He [The butcher] said to him: "You are Abba! Go away. I have nothing to do with you." While he was splitting open the head, a bone flew off, struck his throat, and killed him.

Rab, one of the most important *Amoraim* in Babylonia, felt insulted by a butcher, a profession reserved for crude and low-class people in Babylonian culture. Rab acted beyond the letter of the law just like R. Zera in the previous story by going out to the butcher to show his availability to forgive. When Rab bumps into his student Rav Huna, Rav Huna is able to foretell that the outcome of Rab's actions will be disastrous. What did Rav Huna see that Rab did not?

We noted above that a wrongdoer can act presumptuously by coming into the presence of his victim to apologize before the victim is ready to receive the apology. Rab here seems to have been caught in the opposite problem. He has acted presumptuously by coming into the presence of the butcher and assuming that the butcher was ready to recognize his own wrongdoings and would be willing to apologize. Rab's display of availability, which was meant to make the butcher feel at ease, ironically backfires when the butcher takes his approach as an accusation of guilt. The crude butcher, who would not admit any wrongdoing, interprets Rab's attempt at reconciliation as an attack, which causes the butcher to lash out at Rab. The butcher is immediately punished for disrespecting so great a sage.

As in other stories involving disastrous interactions between great sages and vulgar commoners (cf. Ketubot 67b), it is not clear who here is at fault. Certainly, the butcher should not have been rude to Rab and should have recognized his own wrongdoings and apologized for them. But Rav Huna foresaw that Rab's actions would be met

with such a reaction and cause the butcher's death. Therefore, Rab also should have foreseen what might happen and taken steps to avoid such a confrontation. Apparently, Rab was not able to forgive the butcher without some sign, even if small, of recognition of guilt and regret by the butcher. But perhaps he could have waited longer (although, time was running out before Yom Kippur when the fate of the butcher would be decided) or sent messengers as a buffer. Even doing nothing and letting the butcher be judged without atonement for whatever previous insult he had committed would have led to a better outcome than his instantaneous and self-inflicted death.

While the legal principles set out in the Mishnah and the beginning of the Gemara lay out the basic framework of responsibilities of the wrongdoer and the victim, the subsequent stories flesh out those principles, showing that each situation requires careful calibration and application of those principles. The complexity in understanding the psychological makeup of one person is multiplied exponentially when we try to evaluate the dynamics between two people in tension. Sometimes, as in Rab's case, even the best of intentions can lead to disaster when all factors are not considered carefully enough. The complexity of this *sugya*, which intertwines law and narrative and interchanges victim and wrongdoer, reflects the complexity of the reality of our relationships.

Yom Kippur is the day when Hashem approaches us and shows that He is available to receive our repentance. But atonement from Hashem is only granted after we put in the careful planning and hard work necessary for repairing our relationships with others. May we have the courage and humility to apologize with sincerity to those we have harmed and the compassion necessary to make ourselves available to forgive.