

Kol Nidre 5780

Forgive and Forget

Yom Kippur, as we know, is a holiday on which we seek and grant forgiveness. This year, I have been curious about the ways in which we are used to thinking of “forgive and forget” together. I did some research, and I found that this pairing was popularized in English about five hundred years ago, in a famous line from Don Quixote when he says “let us forget and forgive injuries.”¹ It also made a famous appearance in the fourth act of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, when the king seeks reconciliation with his daughter, Cordelia.² In both cases, this famous pairing implies that part of accepting an apology is forgetting, returning to how things were before the offensive action took place.

The “forgetting” part of this equation has always presented a real challenge for me, as I imagine it might for many of you. Recall the story of the woman who loved to gossip. She sat in the town square all day listening to her neighbors’ news and passing on all the juiciest details. She knew it was wrong and she tried to stop, but sometimes she just could not help herself. One day, the rabbi came to her to tell her enough is enough, she has caused her neighbors all kinds of pain and trouble. This one lost business. That one lost a friend. All as the result of the woman’s gossip. She was devastated, so sorry for the hurt she had caused. As Yom Kippur approached, the woman grew more and more concerned about what she had done and how she could make amends.

¹ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*.

² William Shakespeare, *King Lear*. "Pray you now, forget and forgive."

So she went back to the rabbi and asked for his help. “I’ll do anything!” she said. “I am truly sorry and I want to make it right.”

The rabbi considered her plea and told her, “Go home and get a feather pillow. Then meet me in the town square.” Puzzled, she nonetheless walked home and retrieved a pillow.

A little while later the woman and the rabbi met in the town square. He handed her a pair of scissors. “Now, cut open the pillow and shake out the feathers.” The woman found this instruction odd, but she trusted the rabbi and did as he said. They watched the feathers fly about in the breeze. Then the rabbi nodded and said, “Now, gather all the feathers and put them back inside the pillow. Make sure you retrieve every single one.”

“But rabbi,” she protested, “I can’t do that! I’m sure I can get some of them, but many have flown away to goodness knows where.”

“Exactly. That is how it is with a rumor or gossip. Once it leaves your mouth, you don’t know what will happen.” The rabbi’s point was that the gossip could not be undone, unheard, or forgotten. But this cautionary tale ends at a very unsatisfying moment. Although the woman cannot take back her gossip, there must be some way for her to do teshuvah.

This is one of the questions before us on Yom Kippur. As we are called on to seek and grant forgiveness, what do we do with sins like this, big or small, that can be forgiven but not forgotten? I remember having particular trouble with this very scenario, minus the feathers, a few years ago, and the questions that came up in that one relationship still bother me today. My friend Liz and I were very close, we talked all the time and shared almost all the details of our lives. I told her something that I wanted her to keep private, but she told one friend who told another and the information ended up making its way around our whole social circle.

This actually happened right before the High Holy Days. Liz apologized for violating my trust, and told our friends to stop talking about it. I appreciated that she was sorry for what she had done, and that she took whatever steps were available to mitigate the damage. But, of course, the information couldn't be un-shared. As the holidays approached, I struggled with how to forgive her when I couldn't really forget what she had done.

The idea that forgiving and forgetting go together is also popular in the classical Jewish understanding of *teshuvah*. Many of us might be familiar with Maimonides' definition of *teshuvah*. He writes, "Who has accomplished complete *teshuvah*? A person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned, and has the potential to commit the sin again and, nevertheless, abstains."³ According to Maimonides, the way to complete repentance is to face the very same situation as when you sinned, and to behave better.

But how do you find yourself in that exact same situation again? Who is giving you a second chance to commit a crime or a sin? There's a quote I really like from Benjamin Franklin, that says the definition of foolishness is doing something over and over again expecting a different result. After Liz told my secret to all our friends, that's kind of how I felt about talking to her about any sensitive information. Why would I share something private with someone who I knew had blabbed once before? The truth is, I didn't.

I genuinely accepted Liz's apology, and I wasn't angry with her after that. We still spent time together and enjoyed each other's company. But I am no fool, and I didn't tell her anything secret anymore. She didn't betray my trust ever again, because I didn't ever give her the chance to. This is the part of the story that I have the most trouble with. By not sharing any

³ Rambam Mishneh Torah Hilchot Teshuvah 2:1

further information with her, I was denying her a chance to complete her *teshuvah*. Remember that Maimonides says *teshuvah* is only complete when we face the same situation and behave differently. Liz didn't face that same situation in our group again, so she didn't have the chance to show all of us how resolute she was in her commitment to avoid repeating this mistake. Ever since then, I've wondered if that is my fault and my responsibility.

I got to this point writing this sermon and found myself stuck. So I showed it to my teacher, Rabbi Rim Meirowitz, who reminded me of another important mitzvah. Leviticus 19:14 tells us “ולפני עור, לא תתן מכשול”, do not place a stumbling block before the blind.” This is a literal commandment not to place an obstacle before a person who cannot see it, but Rashi and other commentators also understood it to mean that we should not give bad advice or lead someone into a situation in which they might have the opportunity to sin.

I found his suggestion fascinating and also, of course, more challenging than what I had before! Now I was faced with these two interpretations in tension. On the one hand, Rashi wants us to do as much as we can to keep people out of tempting situations. On the other hand, Maimonides believes that we should strive for a world in which we can trust one another to learn from mistakes, and that we ought to give people the opportunity to show how they have grown.

After thinking about it for a good long while, I've reached a conclusion I am comfortable with, at least for now. I share it with you in hope that it helps you on this day of apologies and forgiveness. Maimonides and Rashi both have valid approaches because we need different responses to different sins. Some things can be forgiven right away, others over time,

and others not at all. We should be as generous as our hearts will allow us to be, while also holding on to the common sense that protects us from future injury.

As I stand here on Kol Nidre, I have apologized to those I know I've wronged. My friends and family have apologized to me. In some of those situations we are ready to move on. And in some, we are not. All I can say now is that we have done the best we can. As God forgives me, we can strive to forgive one another.