

RH Sermon 5770/2009: How Forgiveness Can Redeem the World

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(Written for speaking purposes)*

About seven or eight years ago, I remember traveling on a plane and sitting by the window with two other gentlemen I did not know occupying the two seats to my left. I was in rabbinical school at the time and once the plane was at its cruising altitude I decided to take advantage of the flight to do some work for one of my classes. So I pulled out my notes and a Hebrew-English Bible and started to study.

After a couple of minutes I began to experience that feeling you have when you know someone is watching you, even if you can't actually see the other person's eyes focused on your face. So I turned towards the gentleman next to me and sure enough he was looking my way. But not at **me** exactly; he was staring at my Bible, my *Tanakh*. When he saw that I noticed his gaze, he turned a little red and said, "Excuse me, but I was wondering, is that a Hebrew Bible?" I told him that it was. He then asked me if I was

in a Bible study group or if I was taking a class at a university. So, not sure how he would react to it, I told him that I was studying at a seminary in New York, preparing to become a rabbi. Before I knew it we were engaged in an intense conversation about religion and God. These are the things that happen to a rabbi.

As we spoke I learned that he was an Evangelical Christian who was very involved in his church. He spoke passionately about Jesus and his saving power. He then asked me what **Jews** believe about Jesus. I told him that we believed that he was a Jew who preached many messages that were at odds with the Judaism of his time and that he was killed by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans. I added that we Jews also recognize that many miraculous stories have been told about his life and what happened after his death, although we do not believe in those stories. He looked at me incredulously, “Are you saying that Jews do not believe in Jesus’ Divinity? His ability to atone for our sins?!” “Correct”, I replied, “We believe our atonement comes directly from God, not through Jesus.” So **I** asked **him**, “Does that mean

that in **your** estimation I will not be able to be forgiven, saved or redeemed? Is the only way to receive salvation for me to believe in the divinity of Jesus?” Prepared for the answer I was sure would come based on previous conversations I have had with other evangelicals, I was surprised how he responded: “It is not for me to say”, he said, “It is not for **me** to judge who will be saved and who condemned. **God** will be the judge of such things”.

I have to tell you, while I have little doubt what he **suspected** the answer to my question would be, looking back on this conversation now, ironically, I can see that my Evangelical traveling companion had hit upon one of the most important underlying lessons of the Jewish High Holidays -- the belief that God **alone** is the true Judge. Here we sit, each year, on *Yom Hadin*, the Day of Judgment (one of the many names for Rosh Hashanah) and we recite the liturgy that fills the pages of our Mahzor, which essentially proclaims God as the ultimate authority and judge. Yet, despite this theme present in black and white before us, perhaps, we have never really considered what this

belief actually means, what the true significance of such a belief **is** to our lives, what unbelievable wisdom and freedom are inherent in holding such a belief as an essential truth. We all wish for redemption, we all seek atonement and we are all subject to judgment, yet how we relate these concepts makes all of the difference.

How many of us have heard the adage, “Do not do unto others what you would **not** like done to you” - the Jewish version of the Golden Rule? I know I heard it approximately a million times from my parents when growing up, usually after I had done something that was, lets just say, less than appropriate and usually to my brothers. How many of us accept this saying as wise and true? I would gather most of us do on one level or another.

Alternatively, how many of us like to be judged? How many like being around people who seem to judge us all the time? I imagine most of us do not. Yet, in truth, how many of **us** do in fact judge **others** quite often? Monthly? Weekly? Hourly? Even more frequently? Am I getting closer? In this particular area,

collectively, we have trouble following the Jewish Golden Rule, even though we profess to agree with it. We do not like being judged but we do it to others all of the time.

In fact, it is my experience that one of the great ills of our current society is how harshly and readily we are willing to judge and criticize others. How nasty we can be to each other with such little provocation and with such limited justification. We judge people, and choose to hate, based on such little evidence or over such insubstantial matters, seeing as slights, for example, things that were never meant as such. Hearing in people's words ill intentions that were never there. Witnessing people's behaviors and, of course, assuming the worst. Understanding anyone's disagreement with us as a sign that they are "bad" people or that they hate us, instead of because they happen to disagree with us in good faith for understandable reasons. This tendency to snap judgments leads us to hate in our hearts and speak evil about others, causing others, in turn, to hate and speak evil about us, in a cycle that has no clear end.

As you can imagine, such a destructive pattern could easily lead to a plethora of problems: to personnel issues at work that could distract the entire staff from the jobs they are supposed to be doing. I know some of you have experienced this in your workplace. It could distract the agenda of any governmental administration on any level of government from carrying out the task at hand. We have all seen this. It could ruin friendships and family connections, creating incredible and unnecessary emotional turmoil that spans generations. Sadly, we all know only too well that **this** occurs. Only God truly sees how often our feeling that we have the right to, the need to, judge and condemn others leads to these disastrous consequences. How often, I wonder, is **this** problem, of judging others, actually at the root of many of our **other** problems? How frequently is our “readiness to judge” the spark that is fanned into the destructive flame that ends up consuming so much before it is controlled?

In writing this sermon, I was moved when two weeks ago I read an article in the Tribune about a recreational adult baseball

league coach named Glynn Hall, who was **shot** by one of his own players, Deangelo Williams, because Williams was upset about his **lack of playing time**. My first reaction to the headline was to shake my head in sadness: in what kind of world, I thought, would a person shoot a fellow human being over something as trivial as playing time in a recreational baseball league? It was depressing simply to know that this had happened.

And then I read on. The journalist reported that despite four gun-shot wounds the coach survived and that amazingly as soon as he made it to the ambulance, right after the shooting, one of the first things he said was, and I quote, “I’m hoping and praying that D’angelo (the shooter) is going to be OK”. Unbelievable! I found it absolutely incredible that the first thought of this man, who was shot four times by his attacker for not putting him in a baseball game, was to pray for him, pray for the man who shot him. Instead of judging him harshly, castigating him for his actions, something **all** of us would have understood and possibly even encouraged, he reserved personal judgment and instead allowed his compassion to

steer his thoughts towards the turmoil that must have been inside this young man, which influenced him to commit such an unquestionably reprehensible act.

Yet, so that I am not misunderstood, the wisdom and power of this coach's actions do not rest on his compassion alone. I am not an advocate for simply "turning the other cheek". In an additional statement that probably seemed unremarkable to him, Hall actually brought up the most important point in considering this subject. He said I prayed for him "but at the same time I know he has to come to **justice**". In other words, this man's willingness to forgive and pray did **not** negate his conviction in the need for **justice**. This man's ability to withhold **personal** judgment was not going to prevent **society** from punishing the shooter as a wrongdoer, nor would Hall have wanted it that way. This man's personal forgiveness does not alleviate the offender from taking responsibility for his actions, from suffering the consequences of what he did and from having to prove to the world that he can be trusted again with his freedom. That is not what forgiveness

means. This man's compassion is **not** an example of a sheltered worldview that if we are just nice, everyone will be nice back.

Yet, his ability to be compassionate; his ability to personally forgive, leaves us with the hope of redemption. His withholding of his own judgment, his ability **not to hate**, despite the harm done to him, turned a depressing event into a story of hope. And by forgiving, by choosing compassion **along with justice**, he freed himself, as the victim, from the cycle of anger, revenge and woe that can be the added burden of one who suffers such a trauma. I became depressed as I began reading the article but after learning the response of the victim, I became inspired and filled with hope for the world.

And in part, that is what I want to speak to you about today. The connection between forgiveness, compassion, redemption AND hope, well being and goodness. It may seem counterintuitive to some, but our ability to forgive others actually helps us, individually and as a community, to achieve well-being and to maintain optimism and hope. Everyone is aware that it has been a

difficult year. Negative forces seem to abound on all sides. We do **not** need to add to them. Quite the opposite, we need to realize that hope, goodness and redemption are ours to choose. That while there **are** many things we do **not** control, there are plenty of **other** things we **can**. We can choose, for example, compassion over hate, graciousness over harshness, forgiveness over judgment.

We all know that the High Holidays call on us to ask for forgiveness for **our** sins, to seek the atonement of God and others. We hear this message repeatedly at this time of year. Yet what we often forget is that these holidays also call on us to *grant* forgiveness and to *let go* of the sins of **others**. Jewish law actually obligates us to do so. And as hard as the task of **asking** for forgiveness from others certainly is, I imagine that it is even harder to forgive someone else when they ask us for **our** forgiveness -- let alone to forgive those who don't even bother to ask. Yet, it is quite possible that our **willingness to forgive** others is just as important as our attempts to ask *for* forgiveness for ourselves.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who played such a large role in the transition of South Africa in the post-Apartheid era, famously wrote, “Without forgiveness, there is no future”. The truth of such words is both powerful and profound. He is saying, that if we cannot forgive, we cannot truly move forward. If we cannot forgive than we become mired in our hatred. We see a world whose inhabitants cannot be redeemed. We lower the bar all around for what the future can be, for not to forgive condemns us to a future that can never be better.

For those who may be thinking, “Yes rabbi, that may be true theoretically but there are so many people whose actions dictate that they should not be forgiven, there are those who have gone beyond the pale, both on the world scene and in our personal lives” -- I hear you. Even more so I would be the first to say that there is certainly a difference between taking a stand against the truly reprehensible actions of a person who causes great harm to the world and being judgmental about why someone seemed to ignore me at last night’s party. However, in principle, I do believe that

forgiveness needs to have a role in both types of examples. For hope to reign, our anger needs to remain focused, at all times, on the actions and not on the person, allowing us to forever condemn the behavior while giving the person the opportunity to redeem himself. As a justice oriented people, we Jews need to remember that in Jewish terms when we say forgiveness we are not talking about something that replaces justice. For me, for us, justice and forgiveness run along side each other, each there to protect us in its own way. So if you can, I ask that you remain open. I hope that you consider the words of C.S. Lewis who said, “If we really want to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo.” What he means, of course, is that if we start with the most extreme example, the hardest to grapple with, we may use it as an excuse not to go any further. Whereas considering the less extreme situation first, might allow us to learn *how* forgiveness can play a larger role in our lives, *before* we consider its possible limitations. For forgiveness is not just a value but a skill and it can only be mastered through time, consideration,

practice and the cultivation of a community of people who model together forgiving behavior. Appreciating the power of forgiveness must be the beginning, what I hope will happen today, becoming ready to actually forgive may take more time.

In that regard, it is clear from our Mahzor, in fact we recite over and over again, that **God**, the **ultimate** being in the universe, our greatest role model, is indeed willing to forgive **us** for just about anything. According to our tradition, if we express contrition and seek His atonement, we believe that God is willing to accept our repentance, give us another chance, and redeem us so that we can build a brighter future. That is part of the reason we are all here today.

At the core of our belief system, therefore, are the concepts of hope, renewal and redemption. And if God is the model as the ultimate Judge, it follows that we must learn from God how **we** should act in our *own* lives towards forgiveness, judgment and redemption. If God can forgive us each year, each day, for the multitude of misdeeds we perform on an on-going basis, should **we**

not consider forgiving each other? Should we not attempt to be less harsh in our judgments? Should forgiveness and hope not at least be our starting point, if in the end not our destination?

One of the core prayers of the High Holidays is the recitation of the thirteen attributes of God. Over and over we proclaim, “God is a God of graciousness and compassion, patient, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, full of forgiveness and love recalling our pious deeds to the thousandth generation and granting atonement for sin, iniquity and transgression. God is a God of pardon.” In a passage in the Talmud that I wish more people knew, our great sage from the 3rd century, Rava, comments on the concepts in the this verse from Exodus in an interesting way. He wrote: “For anyone who relinquishes judgment of those who have wronged **him**, God passes over **his** sins. For as the prophet Micah proclaimed, “He who bears iniquity and passes over sin”. For **whom** does God bear iniquity? For the one who “**passes over sin**”.

Interpreting God's mercy as a model for human beings, Rava draws a relationship between our own ability to **be redeemed** and our willingness to redeem **others** through forgiveness. In short, he is saying that the Torah is teaching us that people who **forgive**, are the type of people who will surely **receive** the forgiveness of God. In creating such an interpretation, Rava has clearly placed a hefty premium on the quality of mercy. Forgiving others becomes an action that is valued at the highest level and actually works to benefit not only the person being forgiven but also the person engaging in the act of forgiveness. For according to this teaching, the act of forgiveness redeems the one who **grants forgiveness** as well as the one who receives it. This interpretation lays down a religious framework for our understanding that forgiveness is something from which **everyone** benefits.

Placing this interpretation in context we must remember once again that on Rosh Hashanah we are asked to stand in judgment before God. This notion of God as the ultimate judge should at least encourage us to see that one who is in the process of **being**

judged is not really in a position to be the judge of others. In fact, just the opposite should be true; our standing in judgment should invoke in us the feelings of mercy and compassion that we are hoping to receive ourselves from God. We **should** have a **particular** sensitivity at this time to the values of mercy and forgiveness, a sensitivity that may only be felt this keenly at this point in our year. The key is to **use** this sensitivity, inspired in us by the themes of these holidays, to help motivate us down the road to forgiving others and to seeing our judgmental thoughts as an obstacle to our **own** process of teshuva, our **own** process of return and atonement, which is supposed to be accompanied by humility and a sense of compassion. By allowing God, and not us, to sit in judgment, we can release our **need** to judge and rise above our resentment and anger, bringing us the sense of freedom, blessing and peace we so desperately desire to begin a new year refreshed and renewed. Forgiving **others**, as God forgives **us**, propels us towards achieving our own spiritual goals of atonement and renewal on these High Holy Days.

However, to truly understand the degree to which engaging in forgiveness can enhance our lives, how granting forgiveness to another can actually free us, how the act of forgiving is not only noble but beneficial, I turn again to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who said: “Forgiving is **not** forgetting; it’s actually remembering - remembering and **not** using your **right** to hit back. It’s a second chance for a new beginning. And the remembering part is particularly important. Especially if you don’t want to repeat what happened. In many ways . . . forgiving is **not** being altruistic; it’s the highest form of **self-interest**. If you cannot forgive, if you are nursing a grudge, then you are actually at the **mercy** of the perpetrator. **You** remain locked in your victimhood. If you don’t forgive, you are tied up in knots. And yet, if you forgive, you free yourself.”

These statements resonate so strongly with Jewish thinking. Tutu’s remarks affirm the strong value we have, as Jews, in remembrance. In fact, from this perspective remembering is absolutely necessary for forgiving. We must not forget. He is also

not denying that when we are hurt we have the **right** to hit back. He does not refute, and neither do I, the justice of that pattern. Tutu simply makes the case that it is not in our, or anyone's, best interest to do so. Further, he is eminently realistic about human nature, just as Jewish writings so often are, and thus he understands that we will not consistently engage in an activity which does not benefit us. So he presents us with the ironic and powerful truth that forgiveness actually helps the one who forgives much more than the one who is forgiven. He reminds us that when we forgive we sever the hold the perpetrator's act has on our life. When we forgive we can let go of the hatred and corrosive feelings associated with the act and move on, even though we will never forget, and should never forget, what was done to us. When we forgive, **we control the memory; we control the consequences of the sin.**

Sins already committed clearly cannot be undone; forgiveness does not make that claim. However, forgiveness is what takes the power away from the evil act, to destroy us, to

extinguish our love for others and to harm the relationships that we cherish so deeply. Whether we like it or not, when we do **not** forgive we are inescapably stuck in the role of reacting, often in a way that may only bring delight to the one who sinned against us. As actress and activist Della Reese was once quoted as saying, “Believe me, you can fret and fume all you want, but whoever it was that wronged you is not suffering from your anguish whatsoever.” In most cases, it is the one who denies forgiveness who suffers the most from his own denial.

One profound definition for forgiveness that I have come across states that forgiveness is: “the ability to let go of the prospect of a better **yesterday**” (repeat). Brilliantly insightful, such a perspective reinforces the hopeful and future-oriented qualities of forgiveness. The past will not change; it is how we create a productive future from that past, which is the key. As the great rabbi, Joseph Baer Soloveitchik wrote, “The fundamental principle of the essence of repentance is that the **future** will rule and govern the past **unrestrictedly**. Repentance shapes and

creates time in the **order** of **future**, past, and present.” In a radical re-read, Soloveitchik is proposing that the **future** direct our past, instead of the other way around, and that this new future-directed past be what creates our present.

In other words, the **way** we recall our **past** must be dictated by the kind of **future** we want for ourselves. The fact is, forgiveness and teshuvah are inherently hopeful – their goals are to *improve* the condition of the world and subsequently the condition of our individual lives. Judaism, as is clear through the entire High Holiday liturgy, believes in our ability to change and believes in the idea of *teshuvah*. The Torah recognizes that the possibility for us to achieve ultimate holiness is dependant on that belief. Granting forgiveness is essential in allowing us to actualize our need to change and renew. It is a holy act and one that benefits everyone involved.

And for those to whom this is important, this wisdom about forgiveness does not just come from religious sources. Modern psychologists, justice experts and business professionals all point

out, in their own way, the virtues and benefits of forgiveness. If you cross reference forgiveness and self-help, forgiveness and psychology or forgiveness and better businesses you will get a plethora of hits on Google that lead you to articles which, in their own language, all preach the same lesson. For example, Dr. Howard Zehr, a professor of Criminal Justice wrote: ‘Without the experience of forgiveness . . . the wound festers and takes over our lives. It, and the offender, are in control. To forgive a person is to let go. It is to say that I will not define myself by your actions towards me. Real forgiveness allows one to move from victim to survivor’. In a Time magazine essay, journalist Lance Morow wrote: “The psychological case for forgiveness is overwhelmingly persuasive. Not to forgive is to be imprisoned by the past. Those who do not forgive are...least capable of changing the circumstances of their lives. In this sense, forgiveness is a shrewd and practical strategy for a person . . . to pursue, for forgiveness frees the forgiver”. Jim Cosedine, a restorative justice advocate adds, “Though the public perception is the exact opposite, the truth

is that the primary beneficiary of forgiveness is **the person who does the forgiving**. The person forgiven may or may not appreciate what has happened. But the one who does the forgiving will **always** be rewarded with a greater degree of empowerment and personal growth in love and self esteem.” Sound familiar? I have now said this in many different ways, but the bottom line is that granting forgiveness is not only the right thing to do, the Godly thing to do, it is an act that benefits anyone who is willing to do it. It is the ultimate win-win.

Yet, I will admit it is hard to forgive. Despite the case I have made for the virtue and benefit of forgiveness, it is hard to let go of the pain and hurt when we have suffered at the hands of another. Sometimes, our whole identity has been affected by the trauma we have endured and we are not ready to move on. It is therefore important to remember that forgiveness is not a feeling, nor an event. It is a process, which begins as a decision of the mind and hopefully becomes a truth that lives in our heart. Remember, Aristotle said, “A person is to be praised who is angry for the right

reasons, with the right people, in the right way, and for the **right length of time.**” Anger need not vanish immediately in the face of forgiveness. Anger is important at certain times. However, at some point, anger must cease to prevail.

So *how* do we forgive when we have been so hurt, so angry, so wronged? There is no one answer, but we must begin with the recognition that we are all human, that we all sin. Ecclesiastes says, “There is none on earth who is all good and has done no wrong.” If I remember that I too have hurt people. If I understand that I need forgiveness as well, then I might be a little more willing to forgive. Next, as we have mentioned, it is easier to forgive if we leave judgment to God. When we can release our right to judge, eventually, we might be able to muster some empathy. That empathy will enable us to try to understand what might have driven the offender to carry out those actions. Again, I am not talking about condoning the act – just about taking a more human approach, seeing the person as a complex being. Finally, today’s theme, *Teshuva*, can also help. *Teshuva*, which literally means

“turning”, can be the ability to turn away from past hurts and focus on living “fully in the present”. It can be a turning toward a better future. Specifically, the Rosh Hashanah custom of *Tashlikh* provides a hands-on ritual that can be a useful tool for forgiveness. This year, at our *Tashlikh* service, which will be held tomorrow (today) at 6pm, when throwing your bread into the water consider casting out not only your **sins**, but also your **resentments** and old **grudges**. Remember, God is willing to forgive us – use God’s example as inspiration and for courage to forgive others.

Well, I said I would save the most difficult example for last. However, on this matter I will let Simon Wiesenthal speak for me, because I admit on such subjects I am way out of my league. Wiesenthal, a Polish Jew, survived two concentration camps. One day he was taken from his labor brigade to talk with a mortally wounded Nazi soldier named Karl. When Wiesenthal came to his bedside, Karl explained to Wiesenthal how he had helped round up two hundred Russian Jews and forced them into a building that was set on fire. He stood outside and shot those who tried to

escape. For this hideous event, he explained, he needed the forgiveness of a Jew.

Wiesenthal had lost nearly **ninety** members of his own family in the Holocaust. He couldn't believe this request. Wiesenthal stared at the dying man for a moment, and then he turned and left the room without saying a word. **Ever since**, Wiesenthal has wondered about the limits and possibilities of forgiveness. Publicly he has asked the question, should I have forgiven that man? And more generally, **must** we, **can** we, forgive a penitent criminal, even one who committed such a heinous crime?

Twenty-five years after the Holocaust, Wiesenthal was still struggling with his own question. So he asked a variety of leading intellectuals and religious leaders what they would have done in his place, whether they would have forgiven and why. He wrote up the results and edited it into a book, called *The Sunflower*. The views presented by the respondents are both fascinating and insightful. You will have to read them for yourself. I note only

this: that if Wiesenthal, who lost so many of his own family in the most reprehensible event in all of Jewish history, is even *considering* the question of forgiveness in this most extreme case, we may want to at least consider forgiveness, as well, in regard to the situations we confront in our own lives.

It is clear to me that we are overly critical of others in our lives, too quick to judge and bring other's down. Maybe it is because we can't forgive ourselves for our own faults and weaknesses. So we rush to find the faults in others. Maybe we think it will make us feel better about ourselves. It doesn't. Today we affirm that on a personal level every single one of us has the need to be forgiven. We all seek renewal and a chance to be better than who we are. We all wish to be unchained from the misdeeds we have committed in the past. What we must resolve on this Rosh Hashanah is to remember these feelings, these thoughts, when we consider granting forgiveness to others. Using God as our model, the High Holidays as a motivation, our own well-being as a rationale, we should at least start with the easy ones, use our

power to forgive as much as we can and try to gather the strength to continue on that path. Through our willingness to forgive we can take on the holy task, and contribute in our own way, to the redemption of the world. Maybe through the granting of forgiveness, through our act of hope, we can pave the way to a brighter and more promising future for everyone. Shanah Tovah – I wish for all of us a New Year that ushers in hope and goodness, renewal and redemption, purity and blessing, Amen.