

What is Forgiveness

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I. Getting The Phenomenon In View

What Forgiveness is *not*:

- a) Justification
- b) Excuse
- c) Condonation

Central Question 1: What is it?

Central Question 2: Why forgive?

We'll Consider three views:

- 1) The legalistic approach
- 2) The sentimentalist approach
- 3) The "tool for relationships" approach

II. The Legalistic Approach

Talmud Bavli Yoma 23a

And Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak: Any Torah scholar who does not avenge himself and bear a grudge like a snake when insulted is not considered a Torah scholar at all. The Gemara asks: But isn't it written explicitly in the Torah: "You shall not take vengeance nor bear any grudge against the children of your people" (Leviticus 19:18)? The Gemara responds: That prohibition is written with regard to monetary matters and not personal insults...

But does the prohibition against vengeance really not relate also to matters of personal anguish suffered by someone? Wasn't it taught in a *baraita*: Those who are insulted but do not insult others, who hear themselves being shamed but do not respond, who act out of love for God, and who remain happy in their suffering, about them the verse states: "They that love Him be as the sun when it goes forth in its might" (Judges 5:31). The Gemara responds that the prohibition against taking vengeance and bearing a grudge indeed applies to cases of personal anguish; however, actually, the scholar may keep resentment in his heart, though he should not act on it or remind the other person of his insulting behavior. The Gemara asks: But didn't Rava say: With regard to whoever forgoes his reckonings with others for injustices done to him, the heavenly court in turn forgoes punishment for all his sins? The Gemara answers: Indeed, even a scholar who is

ואמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי שמעון בן הוצדק: כל תלמיד חכם שאינו נוקם ונוטר פנקש — אינו תלמיד חכם. והקתיב: "לא תקום ולא תטור" — והוא, כמזון הוא...

וצערא דגופא לא? והא תניא: הנעלבין ואינן עולבין, שומעין חרפתן ואינן משיבין, עושין מאהבה ושמתין בנסורין, עליהן הכתוב אומר: "ואוהביו כצאת השמש בגבורתו!"

לעולם דנקיט ליה בליביה.

והאמר רבא: כל המעביר על מדותיו — מעביריו לו על כל פשעיו!

דמפיסו ליה ומפיס.

insulted must forgive insults, but that is only in cases where his antagonist has sought to appease him, in which case he should allow himself to be appeased toward him. However, if no apology has been offered, the scholar should not forgive him, in order to uphold the honor of the Torah.

רש"י דמפייסו ליה - לבקש מחילה:

This reflects an extremely influential approach to forgiveness. Roughly:

Forgiveness is waiving the *moral debt* incurred by wrongdoing

Here is Maimonides articulating a similar view (Teshuva 2.9-10):

Teshuvah and Yom Kippur only atone for sins between man and God; for example, a person who ate a forbidden food or engaged in forbidden sexual relations, and the like. However, sins between man and man; for example, someone who injures a colleague, curses a colleague, steals from him, or the like will never be forgiven until he gives his colleague what he owes him and appeases him.

אין התשובה ולא יום הכפורים
מכפרין אלא על עברות שבין אדם
למקום כגון מי שאכל דבר אסור או
בעל בעילה אסורה וכיוצא בהן. אבל
עברות שבין אדם לחברו כגון החובל
את חברו או המקלל חברו או גזלו
וכיוצא בהן אינו נמחל לו לעולם עד
שימון לחברו מה שהוא חייב לו וירצהו.

[It must be emphasized that] **even if a person restores the money that he owes [the person he wronged], he must appease him and ask him to forgive him....**

אף על פי שהחזיר לו ממון שהוא
חייב לו צריך לרצותו ולשאל ממנו
שימחל לו....

If his colleague does not desire to forgive him, he should bring a group of three of his friends and approach him with them and request [forgiveness]. If [the wronged party] is not appeased, he should repeat the process a second and third time. If he [still] does not want [to forgive him], he may let him alone and need not pursue [the matter further]. On the contrary, **the person who refuses to grant forgiveness is the one considered as the sinner....**

לא רצה חברו למחל לו מביא לו שורה
של שלשה בני אדם מרעיו ופוגעין בו
ומבקשין ממנו. לא נתרצה להן מביא לו
שניה ושלישית. לא רצה מניחו והולך
לו וזה שלא מחל הוא החוטא....

It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and refuse to be appeased. Rather, **he should be easily pacified, but hard to anger.** When the person who wronged him asks for forgiveness, he should forgive him with a complete heart and a willing spirit. Even if he aggravated and wronged him severely, he should not seek revenge or bear a grudge.

אסור לאדם להיות אכזרי ולא יתפס
אלא יהא נוח לרצות וקשה לכעס
ובשעה שמבקש ממנו החוטא למחל
מוחל בלב שלם ובנפש חפצה. ואפלו
הצר לו וחסא לו הרבה לא יקם ולא
יטר.

III. Rights and Wrongdoing

Lots of ways of getting more precise on this idea; here is one way, drawing on the work of Judy Thomson:

- 1) We occupy a *realm of rights*—a world in which moral agents are bound together by relations of rights
 - a) The basic form of such relations: A has a right against B that p; or B owes it to A that p.
Ex: I have a right against you that you not disrupt the zoom class.
You have a right against me and Leah that we be present and prepared.
 - b) To *wrong* another person is to violate such a right.
 - c) When a right is violated, there is “moral residue”—new rights to compensation
Ex: If you disrupt the class, you *owe* me an apology (I have a right....)
Ex: If I didn't show, I'd *owe* you... (you'd have a right...)
 - d) Each of us has a kind of *normative power* over our rights.
Ex: I might *open the class up* to full discussion and *waive* my right to silence.
 - e) To forgive is to waive a subsidiary right to revenge or recompense.

Why do Teshuva and Yom Kippur only atone for sins between man and God? Why also *forgive*?

- f) Because rights are *bipolar*—they bind *two agents*
Ex: Leah's right against me that I show I up (I owe it to Leah...)
Ex: And each of you has a right against me that I show up (I owe it to you...)

There are *two* moral relations at stake: that with God and with the wronged! To sets of rights. So two forms of redress are needed.

Let's put it all together:

Talmud Bavli Taanit 20a-b

An incident occurred in which Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, came from Migdal Gedor, from his rabbi's house, and he was riding on a donkey and strolling on the bank of the river. And he was very happy, and his head was swollen with pride because he had studied much Torah.

He happened upon an exceedingly ugly person, who said to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, but Rabbi Elazar did not return his greeting. Instead, Rabbi Elazar said to him: Worthless person, how ugly is that man. Are all the people of your city as ugly as you? The man said to him: I do not know, but you

מעשה שבא רבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון
ממגדל גדור מבית רבו והיה רכוב על
חמור ומטייל על שפת נהר ושמח שמחה
גדולה והיתה דעתו גסה עליו מפני שלמד
תורה הרבה

ונדמן לו אדם אחד שהיה מכוער ביותר
אמר לו שלום עליך רבי ולא התזיר לו
אמר לו ריקה כמה מכוער אותו האיש
שפא כל בני עירך מכוערין כמותך

should go and say to the Craftsman Who made me: How ugly is the vessel you made.

When Rabbi Elazar realized that he had sinned and insulted this man merely on account of his appearance, he descended from his donkey and prostrated himself before him, and he said to the man: I have sinned against you; forgive me. The man said to him: I will not forgive you until you go to the Craftsman Who made me and say: How ugly is the vessel you made.

He walked behind the man, trying to appease him, until they reached Rabbi Elazar's city. The people of his city came out to greet him, saying to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, my rabbi, my master, my master. The man said to them: Who are you calling my rabbi, my rabbi? They said to him: To this man, who is walking behind you. He said to them: If this man is a rabbi, may there not be many like him among the Jewish people. They asked him: For what reason do you say this? He said to them: He did such and such to me. They said to him: Even so, forgive him, as he is a great Torah scholar. He said to them: For your sakes I forgive him, provided that he accepts upon himself not to become accustomed to behave like this.

אָמַר לוֹ אִינִי יוֹדֵעַ אֲלֵא לָךְ וְאָמַר לְאוֹמֵן
שֶׁעָשָׂאֲנִי כְּמָה מְכוּעֵר כְּלִי זֶה שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ

בֵּינוֹן שֶׁיִּדְעַ בְּעֵצְמוֹ שֶׁחָטָא יָרַד מִן הַחֲמוֹר
וְנִשְׁתַּטַּח לְפָנָיו וְאָמַר לוֹ נִעַנֵּיתִי לָךְ מְחוּל לִי
אָמַר לוֹ אִינִי מוֹחֵל לָךְ עַד שֶׁתֵּלֵךְ לְאוֹמֵן
שֶׁעָשָׂאֲנִי וְאָמַר לוֹ כְּמָה מְכוּעֵר כְּלִי זֶה
שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ

הָיָה מְטַיִל אַחֲרָיו עַד שֶׁהִגִּיעַ לְעִירוֹ יֵצְאוּ
בָנֵי עִירוֹ לְקִרְאתוֹ וְהָיוּ אוֹמְרִים לוֹ שְׁלוֹם
עָלֶיךָ רַבִּי רַבִּי מוֹרֵי מוֹרֵי אָמַר לָהֶם לְמִי
אַתֶּם קוֹרִין רַבִּי רַבִּי אָמְרוּ לוֹ לְזֶה שֶׁמְטַיִל
אַחֲרֶיךָ אָמַר לָהֶם אִם זֶה רַבִּי אֵל יָרְבוּ
כְּמוֹתוֹ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אָמְרוּ לוֹ מִפְּנֵי מָה אָמַר
לָהֶם כִּךָ וְכָךְ עָשָׂה לִי אָמְרוּ לוֹ אַף עַל פִּי כֵן
מְחוּל לוֹ שְׂאֵדָם גְּדוֹל בְּתוֹרָה הוּא אָמַר לָהֶם
בְּשִׁבְלֵיכֶם הָרִינִי מוֹחֵל לוֹ וּבִלְבַד שְׂלֵא יִהְיֶה
רְגִיל לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן

What's happening in this case?

IV. Why forgive?

Why Should We Forgive?

Because the debt is paid.

Because the moral *threat* is gone—the need for revenge or to take recompense is gone.

Not an “option” to be exercised or not by the wronged party; if the conditions are met, the *wrongdoer* has a *right* to be forgiven.

V. What's Missing

Many people are happy with this picture; others think it is not only wrong but *completely* off on the wrong foot.

What is *missing* from this picture of forgiveness?

Exodus 32

The LORD spoke to Moses, “Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely. They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!’”

The LORD further said to Moses, “I see that this is a stiffnecked people. **Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them,** and make of you a great nation.”

But Moses implored the LORD his God, saying, “**Let not Your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against Your people,** whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. Let not the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.’ **Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people.** Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever.”

And the LORD renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people.

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר כִּי שָׁחַת עַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר
הֵעֲלִיתָ מִמִּצְרַיִם מִצְרַיִם: סָרוּ מִהֵר מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ
אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָם עֲשׂוּ לָהֶם עֲגֹל מִסָּכָה
וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ־לוֹ וַיִּזְבְּחוּ־לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֵעֲלוּנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם מִצְרַיִם:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה רְאִיתִי אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה וְהִנֵּה
עַם־קֹשֶׁה־עֲרָף הוּא: וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיחָה לִּי
וַיִּחַר־אַפִּי בָהֶם וְאֶכְלֵם וְאַעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָם לְגֹי
גְדוֹל:

וַיִּחַל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־פְּנָיו ה' אֶל־לִהְיוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר לְמַה ה'
יִחַרָה אַפְּךָ בְּעַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ מִמִּצְרַיִם
מִצְרַיִם בְּכַח גְּדוֹל וּבְיָד חֲזָקָה: לָמָּה יֹאמְרוּ
מִצְרַיִם לֵאמֹר בְּרָעָה הוֹצִיאָם לְהָרִג אֹתָם
בְּהָרִים וְלְכַלְתָּם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה שׁוּב מִתְרוֹן
אַפְּךָ וְהִנָּחֵם עַל־הָרָעָה לַעֲמָדָה: זָכַר לְאַבְרָהָם
לְיִצְחָק וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לָהֶם
כִּי וַתְּדַבֵּר אֲלֵהֶם אַרְבָּה אֶת־זַרְעֲכֶם כְּכֹכְבֵי
הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכָל־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי אֲתוֹן
לְזַרְעֲכֶם וְנָחֲלוּ לָעָלָם:

וַיִּנָּחֵם ה' עַל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת
לַעֲמֹו: