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I. What's The Point of Forgiving?

Why are we in the business of forgiving?

- To heal ourselves?
- Because the person has paid their debt?

Isn't something still missing? It seems part of the point of forgiveness has to do with addressing the *rupture* in a relationship caused by wrongdoing.

Genesis 50

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!"

ויראו אחי יוסף כי ימת אביהם ויאמרו לו
ישטמנו יוסף והשב וישב לנו את כל הרעה
אשר גמלנו אתו:

So they sent this message to Joseph, "Before his death your father left this instruction:

ויצו אל יוסף לאמר אביך צוה לפני מותו
לאמר:

So shall you say to Joseph, 'Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.' Therefore, please forgive the offense of the servants of the God of your father." And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him.

כהתאמרו ליוסף אָנָּא שָׂא נָא פֶּשַׁע אַחֶיךָ
וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי רָעָה גְמְלוּךָ וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָא לְפָשַׁע
עַבְדֵי אֱלֹהֵי אֲבִיךָ וַיְכַדֵּךְ יוֹסֵף בְּדַבְרָם אֵלָיו:

His brothers went to him themselves, flung themselves before him, and said, "We are prepared to be your slaves."

וַיִּלְכוּ גַם-אֶחָיו וַיִּפְּלוּ לְפָנָיו וַיֹּאמְרוּ הִגַּנוּ לָךְ
לְעַבְדִים:

But Joseph said to them, "Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God?

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף אֵלֵי-תִירָאוּ כִּי הִתַּחַת אֱלֹהִים
אָנִי:

Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people.

וְאַתֶּם חִשַּׁבְתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה אֱלֹהִים חִשְׁבָה לְטוֹבָה
לְמַעַן עֲשֶׂה כִּיּוֹם הַזֶּה לְהַחַיֵּת עַם-רַב:

And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children." Thus he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

וְעַתָּה אֵלֵי-תִירָאוּ אֲנִי אֲכַלְכֵּל אֶתְכֶם
וְאֶת-טַפְכֶם וַיְנַחֵם אוֹתָם וַיְדַבֵּר עִלְיָהֶם:

So Joseph and his father's household remained in Egypt. Joseph lived one hundred and ten years.

וַיֵּשֶׁב יוֹסֵף בְּמִצְרַיִם הוּא וּבֵית אָבִיו וַיְחִי יוֹסֵף
מֵאָה וָעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָיִם:

II. The Space Between Us—Relationships and Norms

Bipolarity has been central: forgiveness occupies the space between wrongdoer and wronged.

Is it essentially about *transforming* that space? Why does it need to be transformed?

Recall Judy Thomson's idea about our occupying a *realm of rights*—we all are all bound in a web of rights and obligations to one another.

But maybe there is something beyond just *rights* narrowly understood. Maybe part of what it is to occupy *any* relationship is to inhabit a normative space with another.

- What is it to be a *friend* and not merely *colleagues*? To be a *partner* and not just a *roommate*?
- And likewise for finer-grained differences: between intimate friendship and more casual friendship.
- Relationships have “constitutive norms”—part of what makes it the relationship it is just is the way it shapes the norms between us.

Where do these norms come from?

- Explicit commitments , e.g., “yes, I’ll teach this class!” or “I do.”
- Subtle social cues: asking someone to lunch
- Sometimes we *do* something enough that it changes the relationship, e.g., being their for someone and thereby *becoming* a friend

Relationships are *malleable*—we change them all the time with our behavior.

III. Wrongdoing & Relationships

With this background in place, we can see that wronging another is not only important in and of itself—it also has effects on the *norms of a relationship* and so the *relationship* itself.

Wrongdoing matters in three ways:

1. The wrong matters in and of itself
2. Wrongdoing can “normalize” wrongdoing by *changing the terms* of a relationship
 - Running late
 - Ignoring a friend
3. Wronging *entitles* the wronged person to relate to the wrongdoer differently.
 - If I am wronged, I am warranted in things that would previously have been unjustified
 - Suspending trust
 - Being angry
 - Demanding apology
 - Putting distance
 - Ending a relationship
 - This is already a shift in norms—it makes the relationship one of wrongdoer and wronged (among other things)

Mishnah Bava Kamma 8:7

Despite the fact **that** the assailant who caused damage **gives to** the victim all of the required payments for the injury, his transgression is **not forgiven for him** in the heavenly court **until he requests** forgiveness **from** the victim, **as it is stated** that God told Abimelech after he had taken Sarah from Abraham: **“Now therefore restore the wife** of the man; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, and you shall live” (Genesis 20:7). **And from where** is it derived **that if** the victim **does not forgive him that he is cruel? As it is stated: “And Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech,** and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bore children” (Genesis 20:17).

אף על פי שהוא נותן לו, אין נמחק לו עד שיבקש ממנו, שנאמר (בראשית כ) ועתה השב אשת וגו'. ומנין שלא יקח המוחל אכזרי, שנאמר (שם) ויתפלל אברהם אל האלהים וירפא אלהים את אבימלך וגו'.

IV. Forgiveness as a Tool

Forgiveness can be understood as *waiving* (some or all) of these entitlements. It is a way of *shaping* a norm so that one is not relating as *wronged* to wrongdoer.

Unlike condonation/ignoring a wrong, it also involves a *mutual recognition* that a norm was violated

Forgiveness is in this sense in the same family of phenomena as *promising* or *consenting*: reshaping the norms between us.

Why forgive? On this picture the reasons to forgive are reason to *reshape a relationship*

- Who should we be? Should we be closer? Should we restore friendship?
- How do we get there?

Exodus 32

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.

Exodus 34

The LORD said to Moses: “Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה רְאִיתִי אֶת־הָעָם הַזֶּה וְהִנֵּה עִם־קִשָׁה־עֲרֹף הוּא: וְעַתָּה הִנְיָחָה לִּי וְיִחַר־אַפִּי בָהֶם וְאֶכְלָם וְאַעֲשֶׂה אוֹתָךְ לְגוֹי גָדוֹל:

וַיִּתַּל מֹשֶׁה אֶת־פָּנָיו ה' אֶל־לִהְיוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר לְמַה ה' יִחַרָה אַפְּךָ בְּעַמֶּךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּכַח גְּדוֹל וּבְיַד חֲזָקָה: לְמָה יֹאמְרוּ מִצְרַיִם לְאָמֹר בְּרָעָה הוֹצִיאָם לְהַרְגֵם אֹתָם בְּהָרִים וּלְכַלְתָּם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה שׁוּב מִחֲרוֹן אַפְּךָ וְהִנָּחֵם עַל־הָרָעָה לַעֲמָךְ: זָכֹר לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדְּךָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לָהֶם בְּךָ וּתְדַבֵּר אֲלֵהֶם אַרְבֶּה אֶת־זַרְעֲכֶם כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכָל־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי אֵתוֹ לְזַרְעֲכֶם וְנָחֳלוּ לָעַלְמִים:

וַיִּנָּחֵם ה' עַל־הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּר לַעֲשׂוֹת לַעֲמּוֹ:

שמות לד

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה פְּסֹל־לְךָ שְׁנֵי־לַחַת אֲבָנִים כְּרֵאשֹׁנִים וְכַתְּבְתִּי עַל־הֵלָחַת אֵת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל־הֵלָחַת הָרֵאשֹׁנִים אֲשֶׁר שִׁבַּרְתָּ:

V. Limited Forgiveness?

There are *many different* entitlements that arise in the wake of wrongdoing. Forgiveness can waive some or all of them?

VI. Three views

Forgiveness as:

- Waiving a debt
- Letting go of anger
- Reshaping a relationship