



THE PERSON

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IN THE PARSHA

The Rich Fruits of Forgiveness

The spirit of forgiveness is in the air.

Since the beginning of this month, the month of Elul, Sephardic communities have been reciting *selichot*, prayers petitioning the Almighty for his forgiveness. They have been doing so each and every day, rising before dawn in order to get to the synagogue on time. Ashkenazic communities, following their custom, will delay the recitation of these petitionary prayers until the week before Rosh Hashanah.

No matter one's liturgical custom, the theme of forgiveness is uppermost in the consciousness of every Jew. For some, beseeching the Almighty for His forgiveness is their primary concern. Others focus upon obtaining forgiveness from those whom they have offended during the course of the past year. Still others struggle with that most difficult task: begging forgiveness from those whom they have offended. One way or the other, forgiveness is our dominant concern for at this time of year.

When we turn to the Torah portions during these weeks it is only natural

to search the text for references to this important theme. Sometimes those references are readily apparent. For example, last week we read this moving prayer: "Our hands did not shed this blood... Absolve, O Lord, Your people Israel...And do not let guilt for the blood of the innocent remain among Your people Israel...And they will be absolved of bloodguilt." (*Deuteronomy* 21:7-8).

But this week's Torah portion, *Ki Tetzei* (*Deuteronomy* 21:10-25:19), presents us with a challenge. Don't get me wrong. This week's *parasha* contains numerous laws about some very important topics, such as moral warfare, returning lost objects, proper treatment of runaway slaves, divorce, honesty in business affairs, and the concluding cautionary paragraph, urging us not to forget that vilest of our enemies, Amalek. But explicit references to forgiveness are absent.

Several years ago, I decided to meet the challenge and to burrow beneath the surface and find such references. The Talmud teaches us, "If you toil, you will find." Following this Talmudic advice, I toiled indeed. And I did not toil in vain, for I found quite a few hidden references to

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our central theme, one of which I hereby share with you.

There is a passage in this week's Torah portion which, far from exuding a spirit of forgiveness, reflects almost inexplicable harshness. Near the very beginning of our *parasha*, is the passage that deals with the *ben sorer u'moreh*, the wayward and defiant son. It reads:

"If a man has a wayward and defiant son, who does not heed his father or mother and does not obey them even after they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town...They shall say to the elders of his town, 'This son of ours is disloyal and defiant; he does not heed us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.' Thereupon the men of his town shall stone him to death. Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst..." (Deuteronomy 21:18-21)

There is no trace of forgiveness in these verses. Our Sages questioned the fairness of such a harsh punishment for such a young lad. Rashi, following Talmudic sources, reasons that this boy is not being punished for his current behavior. Rather, this behavior is indicative that he is headed for a life of great criminality, in which he will eventually steal and even murder in order to satisfy his gluttony and desire for drink. But those of us who read the text, especially if we are or have been parents ourselves, understandably search for some ray of hope for this wayward teenager.

One such ray of hope is found in this passage in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 88b: "This wayward and defiant son, this *ben sorer u'moreh*, if his parents

wish to forgive him, he is forgiven."

At first blush we wonder about this leniency. After all, if we are to follow Rashi's explanation of why he is so harshly condemned, we should be concerned that by forgiving him his parents have let loose a dangerous murderer upon society. The Torah seems convinced that this young lad is inevitably destined for a severely anti-social career. A strict reading of the text demands that we eliminate this potential murderous hazard from our midst. Why should parental mercy of a father and mother be allowed to endanger the welfare of society?

One approach to understanding the power of parental forgiveness is provided by Rabbi Chaim Zaitchik, in a collection of masterful essays, entitled *Maayanei HaChaim* (Wellsprings of Life). He argues that whereas it can generally be assumed that a young man so wayward and so defiant can never overcome his perverse tendencies, such an assumption must be abandoned if experts can testify that he can be rehabilitated. Asks Rabbi Chaim, "What greater experts can there be than this boy's own parents?" They know him better than anyone else and if they forgive him, it must be that they have detected in him the capacity to shed the passions of youth which have heretofore led him astray.

This is one lesson of forgiveness. If you know a person well, you know that he can change his ways, and hence merit our

Mazal Tov to
Arlene Friedson Saslow and Ruth Friedson
and family on the birth of their
great (great) granddaughter



forgiveness.

I would like to suggest another approach to understanding this passage in the Talmud. My approach rests upon my own observations during the course of my career as a psychotherapist. It was during those years of psychotherapeutic practice that I learned that forgiveness changes the behavior of the person who is forgiven. People who have offended others are often so moved by the fact that those others have forgiven them that they commit to a future of exemplary behavior. The experience of having been forgiven by the others signals them that those others trust them. They are so inspired by that new experience of being trusted that their behavior improves radically.

In the words of a preacher that I overheard on the radio long ago, “We don’t forgive people because they deserve it. We forgive them because they need it.”

Sometimes we think that there is a risk to forgiving those who have offended us. After all, we ask ourselves, “Are we not letting him ‘off the hook’? Are we not absolving him from his responsibilities? Does he not consider us ‘suckers’ for having forgiven him?”

But I have found that the opposite is often true. Forgiving the offender ennobles him, and sends him a message which enables him to correct his past habits. In the words of none other than Abraham Lincoln: “I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.”

I must conclude by citing a “higher authority” than the greatest of American presidents. I present you with a verse from *Psalms*, as explicated by the great medieval

commentator, Abraham ibn Ezra. The verse is *Psalms* 130:4, recited in many communities during the period from Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur.

The verse reads: ‘But with You there is forgiveness; therefore, You are feared.’”

As some of you know, I authored a volume of essays on the *Book of Psalms*. Here is how I phrased the difficulty of this verse: “How does God’s forgiveness lead to our fear of Him? Quite the contrary; one would think that we would be less fearful of a forgiving God, knowing that he would not punish us, but would readily forgive us?”

And here is how I presented ibn Ezra’s response: “He points out that if sinners were convinced that there was no forgiveness for their iniquities, they would persuade themselves that repentance is hopeless. Why reform one’s ways if one was damned to punishment anyway? Precisely the fact that God does forgive removes that hopelessness from them. They realize that if, out of fear of God, they approach Him and beg His forgiveness, they can be hopeful of attaining it. The fact that God forgives...motivates repentance and personal change.”

As we approach the High Holidays, Days of Awe, but also Days of Mercy and Forgiveness, let us be moved by the Almighty’s power of forgiveness to forgive others, to forgive ourselves, and to improve our ways so that we deserve His blessings for a blessed New Year. ■

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