

"Withholding Forgiveness"

When I worked at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires, I noticed a strange and wonderful sight one summer. Counselors were bringing the mail to their bunks, and they were carrying immense loads of small rectangular priority mailboxes. In the days following this sight, campers were carrying the newly printed Harry Potter books in their hands all over camp, at all times. In some cases the camper was not much bigger than the book. I decided that summer that in order to communicate with the kids, I would have to start to read what they were reading, and wasn't it amazing in the first place that the kids were bursting with excitement about reading. It did not take long for me to become a fan of the series, to the point that I pre-ordered the final book of the series six months in advance, as much for the pure joy of waiting for it to arrive as the price discount offered. These books captured the kids' attention in a transformational way.

And while the High Holidays are a magical and potentially transformational time for us, we must also confront what is known as "Dark Magic" in the world of Harry Potter. For us, in our world, "dark magic" is the way that others and we feel frustration, pain, suffering, and loss in this world, as a consequence of what others and we do and say.

The world of Harry Potter is one in which magic, just like the words we speak, can be used for good or for evil. Throughout the stories of Harry and his friends, there are moments when friendship and forgiveness can turn dark into light, but there are moments when wicked witches and wizards use spells, curses, that are called "unforgivable". Three unforgivable curses include: The Imperius Curse that allows the caster to control another person like a marionette. The Cruciatus curse, that inflicts terrible pain on another person. And perhaps the worst of them all, the killing curse, that takes the life of the victim. And as an aside the incantation for this last curse is Avada Kedavra, which means I destroy as I speak in Aramaic, one of the ancient languages of the Jewish people.

These three curses are unforgivable, and that means that according to the Law in author J.K Rowling's magical world, there is not even a chance that one could be forgiven for using one of them. When we think about these curses, it begs a question about Judaism that is relevant for Yom Kippur: and that question is, Are there sins for which a person cannot or should not be forgiven?

Our tradition teaches us to have a big heart, to be forgiving. We are supposed to pursue putting things right. But Jewish tradition also acknowledges the limits of forgiveness as well, and teaches

us that sometimes we must withhold forgiveness until the individual who has wronged us has gone through a complete process of *teshuvah*, repentance. Let us explore together the meaning of forgiveness, repentance, and the dynamics of those moments when the rejection must stand, at least, for the time being.

Rabbi Mark Dratch heads an organization called Jsafe. The goal of JSafe is to “create an environment in which every institution and organization across the entire spectrum of the Jewish community conducts itself responsibly and effectively in addressing the wrongs of domestic violence, child abuse and professional improprieties— whenever and by whomever they are perpetrated.”

Rabbi Dratch has a mission of pursuing justice, and in this mission he confronts issues of sin, repentance, and forgiveness. He teaches that forgiveness, *selichah* in Hebrew, is a gift that God gave us as imperfect human beings. From the beginning, human beings were never meant to achieve the status or knowledge of God. God created us in God’s image, and so it is through forgiveness that we can work to overcome the imperfections that result from being flesh and blood. God grants compassion and forgiveness, and so we can increase the holiness in our lives through granting forgiveness.

We read in the Talmud in the name of Rabbi Yosi son of Chanina that it is up to us to request forgiveness three times from a person whom we have wronged just as Joseph’s brother’s begged him three times to absolve them of their crimes against him. Joseph did forgive them, and they came to live together in Egypt.(Genesis 50)

Rabbi Yosi even provides us a way to seek forgiveness even if the person we wronged has died. We gather a minyan, ten people, at the grave and recite the formula: I have sinned against Ado-nai, the God of Israel, and against this person whom I wronged.”(Yoma 87a)

The Rabbis who taught the stories and lessons of the Talmud seem to accept the idea that we *must* make an effort to forgive. But our Rabbis at the same time teach us a more complex story about the human condition.

There is the story of Rav who was interpreting the Torah, and as several esteemed Rabbis entered the room, he stopped his lecture and started from the beginning. When Rabbi Hanina son of Hama entered, Rav did not return to the beginning. Rabbi Hanina was insulted, and would not accept Rav’s requests for absolution.

Rabbi Dratch teaches us from the Rema, Rabbi Moshe Isserles, in his commentary to the main Code of Jewish Law, "the injured party may withhold forgiveness if he/she does so with the intention of benefiting the offender." (SA OH 606:1) What benefit could be had from withholding forgiveness? Perhaps helping the instigator to become more humble or helping that person to see his or her evil ways, or even for personal benefit, perhaps our own emotional benefit.

Forgiveness then is not an automatic response. Like siblings sitting in the back seat of a car, we cannot hit our brother or sister over and over again, say sorry after each time, and expect to be forgiven. We have to *earn forgiveness through our actions*.

Can it be that though that there are some deeds for which no forgiveness is possible, for which the level of evil is so great that we cannot fathom how the victimizer could repent? Some Holocaust victims like Gertrude Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, does not forgive, she says that she does not hate all Germans, quote, "it's only those Germans my age or older who I avoid meeting for fear that I might have to shake hands with someone who may have killed or tortured my parents and friends or others."(theforgivenessproject, com)

And what can we say about victims of crimes, domestic violence, child abuse? -- The Rema goes on to teach at the end of the passage we studied that if for example someone creates for us a *shem ra*, a bad reputation, among the public, we are not obligated to forgive. Other teachings from our tradition as we will see corroborate the possibility that forgiveness can be withheld altogether in serious cases.

It is important for us to guard against our own inclinations to withhold forgiveness to please ourselves with power or to torment a person who comes to us with sincere apologies, having gone through a real process of *teshuvah*, repentance.

Acting in this way puts us in league with the Dark Wizards of the Harry Potter world, those who inflict pain on others out of a desire only to cause hurt.

The reason is that as I mentioned just before our tradition does recognize that there are sins, that like the curses in the world of Harry Potter, are unforgivable. The Talmud teaches that if one causes others to sin, then he or she loses the ability to do *teshuvah*, to repent. Maimonides offers 24 different actions that prevent or make *teshuvah* extremely difficult to achieve.

It is possible, though according to the Rabbis, that someone might present themselves as having repented not out of their

own convictions, but from outside pressures.(SA HM 34:29) As the great thinker Maimonides, wrote in his laws of teshuvah, the sinner must demonstrate that he or she will not do the same thing when faced with the same circumstances. The sinner must exercise the free will that the Rabbis teach us we have as part of the order of Creation, he or she must exercise it for good, and demonstrate honesty and commitment.

The fact that our tradition does not necessarily demand that we grant forgiveness in all cases is not an idea that my contemporaries or I created, it is not a 21st century innovation, but something that the Rabbis of our tradition created centuries ago. They realized from the stories in the Torah for example that God is forgiving, but at the same time God expects accountability and responsibility from the people. God expects the people to change their ways, and that is an expectation for us as well.

Yom Kippur is the right time for us to think about issues of this magnitude, since today is the day when we stand before God, and before our fellow human beings, with all that we have done wrong and with all that we have done right, we are ready for judgment. Like any system of judgment though, between the areas that are black and white, there is gray—and when we confront the issue of withholding forgiveness, we must deal with all these three shades of color.

Facing these issues and the decisions that they entail is an important part of what it means for us to observe Yom Kippur. The fasting, the custom of not wearing leather, these things are meant to allow us to think about the larger issues and concerns of life, such as the dynamics of forgiveness, to give us a perspective that we might otherwise miss on other days of the year.

The magical world of Harry Potter and the three unforgivable curses that exist within it help us to confront the question of whether in Judaism there is an option of withholding forgiveness to someone who has wronged us. And we even confront the question of whether we might never grant forgiveness.

To the first question, we have explored the sources in our tradition that suggest that there are situations and good reasons that we may withhold forgiveness. On the second question, we have seen that there is a precedent for withholding forgiveness altogether, that is, that we will never grant forgiveness or absolution—and we heard the testimony of a Holocaust victim on this question as well.

All that we have explored about the nature and limits of forgiveness is meant for us to be a source of reflection and contemplation today and into the New Year.

We know from our tradition that God forgave the sins of Israel each year. Each year the High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies and there perform the rituals that would lead to reconciliation between God and the people of Israel, and without fail the High Priest would emerge, alive and well, and the people would then celebrate.

But the Rabbis were aware that when it comes to sins between people, that the day of Yom Kippur, the rituals and prayers that we offer, these cannot purge sins committed among people. The responsibility falls to us, and the Rabbis were also aware that there are limits to forgiveness—just as in the stories of Harry Potter and his companions there are limits to the power of magic. Magic cannot achieve or transform everything in that world. And so in many ways, this fictional world is not so unlike our own.

May we all have an easy and meaningful fast this Yom Kippur, a fast in which we open ourselves to the nuances of forgiveness so that we can create a more just world.