

Yom Kippur 5783 – The Boys

Just over two years ago, I was working from my home office, and I heard the heavy thump thump of helicopters close by. Alarmed, I remembered the sounds of helicopters fighting the Woolsey fire just a couple of years earlier. But on this day, these helicopters were not scooping up water from our nearby reservoir. These helicopters were just hovering. An even deeper sense of dread descended. Both working from home, Ken and I looked out the windows, and then outside, we saw neighbors, and went outside and inquired as to what they might know. Tidbits of information dribbled in. Streets were shut down, traffic re-routed. It seemed like hours went by. We turned on the local news. Two boys, 9 and 11, were struck and killed by a speeding car crossing the boulevard near Westlake Lake, as they walked just ahead of their mother. These two boys and their family lived in our neighborhood. In the weeks and months that followed, a large poster sized picture of the two boys was placed at the intersection, flowers, and more flowers were laid there, forming a huge pile. Eventually, a large signal light for cars to stop for pedestrians was put in place. I think of them every time I drive that way. An investigation revealed that the driver never applied brakes, and didn't stop afterwards. The car eventually shut itself down because its computer sensed an impact.

A two year anniversary vigil was recently held just down the street in the park where Ken, Shira and I walk almost every morning, and the same park where the two boys used to play.

The vigil was well attended, and covered by the news...The vigil was remarkable. It was a beautiful, blessedly cool Thursday afternoon, on the lawn in the park. Ken and I, with our dog Shira, we sat on the grass with about two hundred people. The boys' family were seated in rows of white chairs facing a speakers area and microphones. The family was surrounded by extended family and friends from church and from the school the boys had attended. What we heard from the family's pastor and church leaders was nothing short of amazing. Gratitude for life. For the life the boys had, for the joy they brought to their family, to friends at school. How they inspired a young woman to become a Sunday school teacher. How they played baseball and told jokes. They sang songs, and they prayed. The boys death has inspired family and friends to create a foundation in their name that supports causes locally and around the world.

On our walk back home, Ken and I remarked that they spoke only of gratitude and joy for the lives their boys had, and the lives they touched. What about the anger and blame at the driver? Had they just forgiven the driver? The person responsible for the deaths of the two boys has not expressed remorse.

As Ken and I spoke about this, I thought about this from our Jewish perspective. It honestly took me a bit to get there. The following thoughts came to mind.

I have come to understand that for those who are wronged and are angry, holding on to anger and blame just burns and scalds the vessel that holds it. And that vessel is you and me. Just try holding to a boiling hot potato, that's what it is, just with emotions. And, while we do need to mourn, we cannot let the things that happen in life darken our very souls.

Our tradition instructs us, for those who have wronged, the offender has a responsibility to do whatever possible to set things right. A person should strive for repentance, and here is the process. Repentance has five steps, and they can begin in any order:

1. Recognizing the wrong one has done – this is an act of moral conscience
2. Remorse – regret, seeing failure in maintaining one's moral standards, a clear chasm between who we know we can be and who we are being
3. Not Repeating – Do not repeat the transgression, not ever
4. Repair – Do the best to repair the damage that has been done. If one has stolen, return the object or pay compensation. If one has damaged another's reputation, one must attempt to correct the injury to the person.
5. Confession – I know I have wronged you this year in doing XYZ, and I am really sorry. I will try to do better in the year to come.

The offender has an obligation to set wrongs right. And, the offended has a responsibility to allow the offender to do so.

Forgiveness is understood on at least three levels in our tradition. One is *slichah*, the second is *kapparah*, or atonement, and the third is *mechilah*, "forgoing the other's indebtedness."

The first form of forgiveness, *slichah*, does not mean condoning or justifying any misdeeds, or pretending it didn't happen. It can mean seeing the person who hurt you as a hurt person. Forgiveness that is *slichah* is an act of the heart. It's giving up your desire for revenge, giving up resentment. It's untying the knots that keeps us emotionally entwined and prevent us from healing.¹

¹ Adapted from <https://aish.com/6-jewish-ways-to-respond-to-anger/>

The next kind of forgiveness is “atonement” (*kapparah*) or “purification” (*tahorah*). This is a total wiping away of all sinfulness. It is an existential cleansing. *Kapparah* is the ultimate form of forgiveness, but it is only granted by God. No human can “atone” the sin of another; no human can “purify” the spiritual pollution of another.² And, God does not forgive a wrongdoing that was done against another until that person forgives him first. In other words, if one wrongs another, it is a double transgression, against another as well as against God who forbids us to mistreat others. Only after one has corrected the damage and has been forgiven by the one who suffered, does God forgive.

The most basic kind of forgiveness is “forgoing the other’s indebtedness” (*mechilah*). If the offender has done *teshuvah*, and is sincere in their repentance, the offended person should offer *mechilah*; that is, the offended person should forgo the debt of the offender, relinquish their claim against the offender. This is not a reconciliation of heart or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender no longer owes one anything for whatever it was that they did. *Mechilah* is like a pardon granted to a criminal – the crime remains; only the debt is forgiven.³

Maimonides adds that if the injured party refuses to forgive, the sinner should repeat the apology again and once again. If the other still refuses, then the person who apologized is released from their obligation to make peace with the victim—and the injured party is acting wrongly.

I remain affected by the story of the two boys, as in Jewish thought, only the victim has the right to forgive the debt incurred by the offender. *And*, the offender must take the steps of repentance toward the victim before *mechilah*, this forgiveness is offered. If the victim is dead, they are unable to forgive, the debt cannot be forgiven.⁴ The driver has not expressed remorse. The boys are not alive to forgive the driver if ever remorse were expressed. The sense of injustice remains.

Some sins, transgressions, wrongs, no matter how sincere the confession, have lasting consequences. We pray that healing comes through Divine compassion. Loss though, can be transformed into a commitment to help others, and even heal oneself.

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/is-forgiveness-necessary/>

³ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/is-forgiveness-necessary/>

⁴ For more on this I recommend “The Sunflower” by Simon Wiesenthal.

There are wrongs, injustices, brutality, and evil in the world, and we can get angry over things that happen. An angry response is a measure of the discomfort we have with what is or has happened. But we need to use anger, not have anger use us. Anger, as in using our voices to speak up, is a tool. We can *look as if* we are angry. This is very different from “being” angry. Indeed, we should fight against injustice, and speak up, even looking *as if* we are angry, if necessary. It is up to us to speak up for human dignity, an earth that should be cherished and protected, and work for the right for all children and adults to learn, love, work and live in peace. Justice comes from taking what is broken and bringing repair anywhere that we can. When we see others suffering, it pulls at our souls and we are called to help and to repair, because we know what it is to suffer.

There is an old tale about a woman whose only son died. In her grief, she went to the Rabbi and asked, "What prayers can be said, what can you do to bring my son back to life?" Instead of sending her away or reasoning with her, she said to her, "Bake a cake. *And*, you must seek out the ingredients from others, only it must be from those who have never known sorrow. This cake will drive the sorrow out of your life." The woman went off at once in search of the ingredients.

She came first to a splendid mansion, knocked at the door, and said, "I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? It is very important to me."

They told her, "You've certainly come to the wrong place," and began to describe all the tragic things that recently had befallen them.

The woman said to herself, "Who is better able to help these poor, unfortunate people than I, who have had misfortune of my own?"

She stayed to comfort them, then went on in search of a home that had never known sorrow. But wherever she turned, in homes and inns, and other places, she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune.

The woman became so involved in helping others cope with their sorrows that she eventually let go of her own. She would later come to understand that it was the quest to find the ingredients for the cake that drove away her suffering.

I often repeat the quote, “Be kind to all you meet, for everyone is waging a great battle.”⁵ It doesn’t take a lot of living to realize that we all have our tragedies, sorrows and heartbreaks.

⁵ Often mis-attributed to Plato, the earliest publication of a version of this dates to 1898, attributed to Scottish minister and author John Watson (pen name Ian Maclaren).

This story begins with the woman in such suffering that's all she could see, and ends with the woman seeking out others, speaking with them, and helping them cope with *their* suffering. And that's what's so beautiful about this story. The pain and grief is real. Our tradition gives us rituals and teaches us to experience our loss, truly grieve, not gloss over it or push it away.

But then we can walk forward, together. We can turn and work towards a better future.

We can focus our energies on a world that can be. We can even begin to appreciate the little gifts and miracles in everyday, and live our lives in a context of gratitude.

In "Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times," Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l makes a compelling case for gratitude:

"Gratitude encourages the savoring of positive experiences. It bolsters feelings of self-worth. It helps people cope with stress. It inhibits invidious comparisons with others. It encourages moral behavior – grateful people are more likely to help others. It tends to dissipate negative emotions such as anger."⁶

One of the most accessible and basic ways that we Jews have to foster and practice gratitude is in prayer and blessings. Indeed, we traditionally recite 100 blessings a day, thanking our Creator for everything from the ability to get up in the morning, the food we eat, to seeing an ocean or a rainbow, and even going to the bathroom.

Gratitude is conveyed also in the way we speak with one another, as in an attitude of gratitude. There is an old *yiddish* folk tale called, *Good People*:

An old man sat outside the walls of a great city. When travelers approached, they would ask the old man, "What kind of people live in this city?" The old man would answer, "What kind of people live in the place where you came from?" If the travelers answered, "Only bad people live in the place where we came from," the old man would reply, "Continue on; you will find only bad people here."

But if the travelers answered, "Good people live in the place where we came from," then the old man would say, "Enter, for here too, you will find only good people."

The Hasidic teacher Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught, "Gratitude rejoices with her sister joy and is always ready to light a candle and have a party. Gratitude doesn't much like the old cronies of boredom, despair and taking life for granted." We can choose the way we view life.

⁶ Morality, Ch 7, p 112.

On this day of Yom Kippur, choice lies before us. In Deuteronomy it says, “I have set before you life or death, blessing or curse; choose life, therefore, that you and your descendants may live.” (Deuteronomy 30:19)

The 12th century philosopher, physician and rabbi, Maimonides⁷ teaches that in every act of good, there is an element of choosing life; in every act of evil, there is an element of choice of death. With this in mind, our Sages said, “The righteous even in death are called living, while the wicked even in life are called dead.”⁸ Let us choose life and do acts of goodness.

Throughout the year, we are taught to regard ourselves as equally balanced between merit and sin. With one act, you can tip the balance for yourself, and for the world. Every good deed makes a difference. And so it is written: “A righteous person is the foundation of the world” – for one who does good tips the balance of the scales and can save the world.⁹

May we live with awareness and a conscious desire to do good. May we mourn, but not suffer. May we be willing to apologize, and willing to forgive, and be forgiven. Let us use anger, but not be angry people. May we, in partnership with the Divine, work for justice and improve the world, both within our selves and out in life, whether it is simply turning off the faucet when we brush our teeth, or driving safely, slowing down in our cars and saving lives.

We can shape our lives for the good. We can, do, and must work for justice and healing. If we are wondering what we should do, it’s usually right in front of us, it’s right there.

Let us be grateful for the blessing and wonder of life. Choose life. Do good.

G’mar chatimah tovah, May you be well sealed in the Book of Life.

Rabbi Lisa Bock

⁷ Guide for the Perplexed, Part 1, Ch 42

⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 18a

⁹ Pg 312, Mishkan HaNefesh Yom Kippur, Machzor for the Days of Awe