

On Forgiveness: Should we Forgive?

Jonah 1:1-2; 3:1-10; 4:1-11

The images nearly jump off the television screen, computer monitor or newspaper, piercing our hearts. 9/11. The Virginia Tech shootings. The gunning down of Representative Gabrielle Giffords and her constituents at “Congress on your Corner” outside the local Safeway. And most recently, in Norway, a bloody rampage in what was once an idyllic island. When we try to absorb such acts, we can barely grasp them. What monsters or sociopaths could commit such atrocities? What could they possibly have told themselves to explain or justify their behavior? Can such evil acts ever be forgiven? We know that such depravity tears a giant hole in the fabric of humanity. Forgiveness is a delicate needle that we take up to try painstakingly to mend moral rifts. But, when that rift is such a jagged, gaping hole, can it ever be rewoven? Should we forgive? How can we reconcile our demand for justice with our impulse to compassion?

For some, the answer is straightforward. Their sacred teachings and community elders counsel forgiveness even for the most dreadful of crimes. Five years ago, on a cloudless autumn morning in the Amish town of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, a neighborhood milk truck driver entered a one-room schoolhouse with an arsenal of guns. Charles Roberts IV took ten girls aged 7 to 13 hostage. He bound their legs together and lined them up against the chalkboard. He planned to molest them, and then to kill them. He wanted to punish God for the death nine years earlier of his newborn daughter. He called his wife. Then he dialed the police dispatcher. Rattled by the arrival of police, he threatened to shoot all the girls on the spot if the cops didn't leave the premises within two seconds. With scarcely enough time to decide whether to accede to his demands, the momentary pause was shattered by gunfire. Charles Roberts shot the girls. Then he killed himself. He murdered five girls and wounded five others, including one who still suffers significant brain injuries from that tragic morning.

What we saw that day, as the images of a violated schoolhouse replayed in our living rooms, was not just the wanton violence of one cruel and perhaps deranged man with ready access to lethal weapons. We also witnessed its opposite—a nearly incomprehensible expression of radical forgiveness. By the afternoon of the shooting, family members of the murdered girls had announced that they forgave Charles Roberts. They embraced the wife of the murderer and they comforted her. Members of the Nickel Mines Amish later attended Roberts' funeral.

The Amish understanding of radical forgiveness is deeply rooted in their own history, in their everyday life in a close-knit community and in Christian theology and sacred texts. Amish children first learn the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6 in German at their mother's knee. They recite it at every worship service. Parents

pray it with their children as they tuck them into bed and as they send them off to school. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." These are no idle words. They carry the force of obligation. What the Amish mean is that they must forgive others if they want to be forgiven themselves. Woven into worship and ritual are oft-told stories of their Anabaptist forbears, heroes who suffered as martyrs, wronged people who yet offered grace and forgiveness, even in the face of hardened hearts. Although the price of that forgiveness was their lives, their commitment to forgiveness endured and inspired their descendants long after their deaths. For the Amish, the individual yields to the authority of the community. The community embraces forgiveness. Only a person with a forgiving heart is prepared to participate in communion. Theologically and communally, for the Amish, the possibility of being forgiven themselves is inextricably tied to forgiving others.

Broadening our picture of the Amish beyond buggies, beards and bonnets, we were astonished and stirred by this commitment to forgiveness. For some of us, their offering of radical forgiveness felt heroic, herculean, admirable, but unalterably beyond our own experience. How could they find it within themselves to forgive a man who had just murdered their daughters? Where does such unending compassion and generosity abide? Some of us aspired to identify with the Amish despite how different they looked and how much they seemed to embody an older, less complicated time. "If they can forgive so readily for such a monumental and irreparable act, surely I can find forgiveness within myself for far less consequential offences."

Yet, for some of us, this capacious and uncomplicated grace displayed by people wary of the spotlight raised once more age-old nagging and problematic questions: Should we forgive? Is radical forgiveness a good thing? Is every act forgivable? How do we reconcile the welcome arms of forgiveness with the crossed arms of justice?

While the Amish commitment to forgive is deeply rooted in Christianity, even some faithful Christians expressed alarm for such unconditional forgiveness. As a Roman Catholic theologian, Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete appreciates that radical forgiveness is a mystery, touched by awe. But he remains troubled nonetheless. He says, "...to me, it's dangerous...What happens to the feelings of anger, of great loss? Of desire to reverse time, of regret...of the absence of someone you love? Part of your life has been taken off. You are less. Can this radical obedience fulfill those needs? I don't think so. You could only deal with them by, in some way, suppressing them. I think that is violence. Violence done to yourself, above all."

Those words of Monsignor Albacete echo in an exchange of two young Amish boys. Ten days after the shooting, late at night, the children watched transfixed as their parents razed their schoolhouse. An eight or nine year-old boy wide-eyed at the destruction said to his friend, "They can take down our school. They can take away our school, but they can't take away the things we remember." His companion silenced him, "You'd better be quiet. Don't let people hear you say that. We're supposed to forgive..."

Ray Gingerich, a man who was raised in the Amish world but left it to become a scholar and a theologian, chose not to be quiet. He was troubled by the coercion implicit in that boy's admonishment, "We're supposed to forgive." He explained, "Every time I read or hear the Amish say, "Forgive those who sinned against you, for if you do not forgive them, neither will your Father in Heaven forgive you." [I have to ask,] Is that really life giving? If I do it, just so I can be forgiven? It feels legalistic. It feels as if its not coming from the depths, but rather the demands of religion, rather than the life that religion brings."

Not only Christians, but Jews, as well, were unsettled by this ideal of Amish forgiveness. I absorbed this moment of tragedy and grace with admiration suffused with horror. And when I saw a column by Boston Globe journalist Jeff Jacoby, I felt like he put into words my conflict. He writes, "I can't deny that it is deeply affecting to see how seriously the Amish strive to heed Jesus' admonition to return good for evil and turn the other cheek...But hatred is not always wrong, and forgiveness is not always deserved. I admire the Amish villagers' resolve to live up to their Christian ideals even amid heartbreak, but how many of us would really want to live in a society in which no one gets angry when children are slaughtered? In which even the most horrific acts of cruelty were always and instantly forgiven? There is a time to love *and* a time to hate, Ecclesiastes teaches. If anything deserves to be hated, surely it is the pitiless murder of innocents."

Jacoby continued, "To voluntarily forgive those who have hurt *you* is beautiful and praiseworthy. That is what Jesus did on the cross, what Christians do when they say the Lord's Prayer, what observant Jews do when they recite the bedtime *Kriat Sh'ma*. But to forgive those who have hurt -- who have murdered -- *someone else*? I cannot see how the world is made a better place by assuring anyone who would do terrible things to others that he will be readily forgiven afterward, even if he shows no remorse."

For Jeff Jacoby and for me, the answer **in this case** to "Should we forgive?" has to be "No." No, not if we also believe in balancing justice and mercy. Don't get me wrong. Forgiveness is valued and inspiring in Jewish tradition, as it is in Christianity. There is an entire season devoted to forgiveness, culminating in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year. Yet, Jewish tradition teaches, forgiveness is not always possible. Forgiveness is not unconditional.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel devoted his life to "moral grandeur and spiritual audacity." The man with the long white beard, who marched with Dr. King, protested the war and wrote about the Hebrew prophets looked like the embodiment of a prophet himself. Jews and non-Jews alike regarded him as one. Rabbi Heschel had been rescued from Europe a few scant weeks before the Nazi invasion. His family did not escape. His mother and sisters were killed in the Holocaust.

When he was asked, "Should we forgive the Nazis," Rabbi Heschel answered with this story.

"There once was a rabbi travelling on a train through Russia. He was shabbily dressed, small in stature and quietly studying his holy books. Two boorish salesmen travelling in his compartment made fun of him. They cursed him. The rabbi ignored the men and continued to study. Disturbed by his equanimity, the men took his suitcase and threw it on the floor. He gathered up his possessions and ignored them. They pulled him up by his collar and threw him out of their compartment. He spent the remainder of the trip standing. When the train arrived at their destination, a large crowd had assembled, waiting for an important dignitary. The two men then learned, to their astonishment, that the little old Jew they were taunting was an esteemed and revered rabbi. Ashamed, they asked him to forgive them for their taunts and jeers. The rabbi said he couldn't forgive them. "You are asking the rabbi to forgive you, but I'm not the one you wronged. Go find the little old Jew in the railroad car. He is the one who you injured by your insults and jeers. He's the one who can forgive you."

And so, Rabbi Heschel teaches only the victims themselves can grant forgiveness.

So one condition of forgiveness is that it be sought directly from the one who is wronged. But what if that person has died? Forgiveness is so prized within Jewish tradition that even death does not, in and of itself, preclude the granting of forgiveness.

The medieval philosopher Maimonides describes a process of forgiveness beyond the grave. If the person who has been wronged has died, the penitent gathers ten people—the minimum number of people who constitute a public community. Together they visit the tomb of the deceased. At the grave, the one seeking forgiveness confesses and apologizes in their presence (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance, 2:9-11).

If an individual who was wronged is incapable of granting forgiveness, a doppelganger cannot forgive. But, the community itself can be constituted to witness the repentance of the offender and to forgive. Why should the community be able to grant forgiveness? Because the community makes justice, visible. They represent what it means to reweave the social fabric. The offender's culpability is explicit. "What I did was wrong. I rent asunder the moral fabric of the community and I want to weave it back together." The community holds the threads to enable the warp of justice to be woven together with the woof of compassion.

The Amish survivors also offered forgiveness as a community. But the duty forgive is predicated on the duty of the wrongdoer to seek forgiveness, to repent. Charles Roberts did not, could not repent. And where there has been no repentance, how

can there be an obligation to forgive? Where there is no remorse, how can compassion be balanced by justice? How can things be made right?

So should we forgive? For most of the offences in our lives, the answer still is a resounding yes. Forgiveness may not be unconditional, but it is still desirable. While there are unforgivable acts, most of us can relinquish our resentment. Most of us can forgive much more readily and more often than we do.

On the afternoon of that holiest day in the Hebrew calendar, on Yom Kippur, when the liturgy is infused with pleas for forgiveness, tired and hungry from standing and fasting, Jews read the book of Jonah. Jonah, the prophet who runs away. Jonah, who is swallowed by a fish. Jonah, who sulks under the shade of a castor bean plant when God accepts the repentance of the Ninevites and grants them forgiveness. The story is both funny and telling. Jonah is committed to justice. He doesn't want his justice diluted by compassion. He doesn't want repentance to undermine the retribution that he believes that the Ninevite sinners deserve. Too often, we take our cue from Jonah. We sulk like him. We hold onto our resentment like him. We perceive God's compassion as an affront. When we resist forgiveness, it is likely due to our own shortsightedness, to our very human impulse to nurse our grudges. Even the Amish of Nickel Mines admitted that forgiving Charles Roberts was easier than forgiving a fellow church member for a petty, run-of-the-mill offense. (p. 178)

This is when God, the educator, steps in. God metaphorically sits us in the corner, and challenges us to think about how to deepen our compassion. God reminds us that we, and even those we resent, are all created in the Divine image. God offers us a change in perspective. God believes that we have the capacity to accept the goodness even in those who have let us down. God helps us to be forgivers as well as penitents.

Let me conclude with one of my favorites prayers in the season of forgiveness, written by Rabbi Jack Reimer.

To everything there is a season

And there is an appointed time for every purpose

Under heaven.

Now is the time for turning.

The leaves are beginning to turn

From green to red and orange.

The birds are beginning to turn

And are heading once more towards the South

The animals are beginning to turn

To storing their food for the winter

For leaves, birds, and animals

Turning comes instinctively.

But for us turning does not come so easily.

It takes an act of will

For us to make a turn

It means breaking with old habits

It means admitting that we have been wrong;

And this is never easy.

It means losing face;

It means starting all over again;

And this is always painful.

It means saying: 'I am sorry.'

It means admitting that we have the ability to change;

And this is always embarrassing.

These things are terribly hard to do.

But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever

In yesterday's ways.

God, help us turn--

From callousness to sensitivity,

From hostility to love,

From pettiness to purpose,

From envy to contentment,

From carelessness to discipline,

From fear to faith.

Turn us around, O God, and bring us back towards You.

Revive our lives, as at the beginning.

*And turn us towards each other, God,
For in isolation there is no life.*

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