

On Forgiveness:
How Do We Forgive?
(Genesis 3:1-21; Ps 27:1-4)

Malinke was a small, curious child, who went to bed with hunger her constant companion. Her mother, unable to sell her last chicken in the marketplace, decided that if the scrawny fowl couldn't bring her family money, it could at least bring them pleasure. She announced a rare treat—she would make chicken soup for the Sabbath dinner. Her mouth watering, Malinke imagined chicken fat floating on the surface and morsels of meat in the broth. But upon preparing the chicken, they discovered to their horror, a wire in the gizzard. Fearing that the chicken may be *treif*—unclean, so it couldn't be cooked or eaten in a kosher home—Malinke took the chicken and raced to the rabbi. He looked at the bird and he looked at his books. He looked at both again. It was a close call. “*Treif*” he declared. There would be no special Sabbath feast with this bird.

As Malinke ran home, a terrible thought came to her. Nobody knew of the rabbi's decision but her. She uttered a quick prayer, “Good God, if the chicken is *treif*, punish me, and nobody else. Amen.” “Kosher,” she breathlessly declared to her mother. At sundown, dressed in her best clothes, Malinke started to eat her soup. And then she began to choke. A neighbor dashed over, held the girl upside down and dislodged a bone. “God has punished me.” Malinke moaned. Her lie tumbled out. Oy! Her penniless mother's kitchen was defiled. The whole town buzzed with word of Malinke's sin, and the family's disgrace. In the middle of the night, Malinke, tormented, took her only Sabbath dress and her most prized possession—beautiful, nearly new boots she inherited from a cousin who died of cholera, and went down to the river. She prayed, “Good God, I have nothing to sacrifice except this. I don't know how to do it. I'll just tie a stone to it and throw it into the river. I beg Thee to pardon me and accept my sacrifice like a real one. I would pray from the prayer-book, but it's at home, and there's nothing in it about atonement in the middle of the year. Forgive me for everything. Amen.”

Malinke's makeshift atonement, in this story by Mary Antin, highlights how profoundly we human beings yearn for rituals that would guarantee forgiveness. If only we could take the wrong and make it right. If only we could throw our best clothes in the river and be our best selves again. If only

we could intone the right words and the wrong ones would be forgotten. If only we could limit the fallout of our mistakes to the unconsidered first syllable and erase the paragraphs which multiply the damage. Like Malinke's utterly understandable (and later in the story, forgivable) lie, without our realizing it, so many of our sins, blunders, and frayed relationships deepen quickly beyond the momentary, beyond our intentions, beyond an initial fib or casual cattiness or careless slight. And the consequences are not easily contained; rather they expand exponentially so that seeking and granting forgiveness can seem monumental.

Sometimes the enormity of those unintended consequences overwhelms us and has us convinced that forgiveness is an illusive dream. This was true for Katherine Ann Power, a promising college student whose passion and commitment to end the Vietnam War went tragically wrong.

Perhaps you remember her story. I offer it not because it's typical—it's certainly not—God willing none of us bears the burden of shame that she describes. I offer it because through many years and much soul searching, she managed to lurch toward forgiveness. She fitfully but finally peeled back layers of deception and denial. Her experience, different though it may be from our own, illustrates what may make it possible to forgive ourselves, and may help us to forgive others.

In the late Sixties, Katherine Ann Power, a valedictorian from a strict Catholic Colorado family became radicalized at Brandeis University. Fervent in her efforts to stop the Vietnam War, romantically involved with a fellow radical and convinced that "liberating funds for the revolution," would interrupt the war effort, they joined a group planning a bank heist. Power drove a getaway car. But the bank robbery went disastrously awry and one of her co-conspirators shot a police officer, Walter Schroeder. He died of his wounds the next day, leaving nine children and a bereft and stunned community. Katherine Power ran away. She went underground, and with an alias, made her way across the country and tried to build a normal life in Oregon. She owned a restaurant. She became active in her community. She had a son. Cut off from her family, she would go to the library and search the phone book to learn if they were still alive. Eventually, she realized that she couldn't overcome her shame; she couldn't outrun her past. After twenty-three years as a fugitive, in 1993, Katherine Ann Power surrendered to the Boston police.

She surrendered. She acknowledged to herself and to the government that she had done something irreparably harmful. Yet, there are startling

photos at the arraignment of Katherine Ann Power with a smile on her face. She became an overnight celebrity. She made the cover of Newsweek Magazine. Was she a hero for “facing the music” or a villain for contributing to the death of an innocent man and then running from it? Or both?

Katherine Power was prepared to admit that she was involved in the bank robbery, but she was not yet able to see herself as responsible for a moral failure. She later said, “I had prepared a statement for my surrender that was really full of defensiveness, that contextualized my acts in the violence of the Vietnam War, that took credit for my intention, which was not to harm anyone, rather than the fact, which is somebody was killed.”

For all the courage that it took to surrender, Power was not yet ready to accept her own culpability. While the magnitude may be vastly different, this is not an unfamiliar stance. How often do we accept that we did something wrong, while in the same breath, deny that we’re really at fault? “Yeah, what I did was wrong, but others have done things that are much worse.” “My supervisor asked me to do it. I didn’t have a choice” “Nobody obeys the speed limit.” “I didn’t intend to hurt you.” How difficult it is to offer an unvarnished, “I did it. I was wrong. I’m sorry. I will work hard not to do that again.” without contingencies, without conditions, without flinching.

It’s easy for us to see in Power’s case why her assertion, “I didn’t intend for anyone to get hurt,” would be feeble and even maddening to Officer Schroeder’s family. At Power’s sentencing, Walter Schroeder’s daughter Claire, herself a Boston police officer, listened in vain for some shred of remorse, for an apology for the harm that Power had caused her, her siblings, her mother, her community. It wasn’t there.

Remorse is not about knowing; it is about feeling. And feelings of remorse can be overwhelming. Too often we fuse ourselves and our deeds with the Crazy Glue of shame. Once we do that, it’s a short skid into self-loathing and a paralyzing fear that we can never make things right again. Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change. Decoupling what we have done from who we are is literally life-giving.

I learned this invaluable lesson from my rabbi, Eddie Feld. He was able to convey that while something I had done was wrongheaded, I was not the sum total of my misstep. He helped me to face what I did without feeling shame. When we can begin to see ourselves as separate from our deeds, there is the space to awaken regret for what we have done. When we feel remorse, we

can recognize not only that what we have done was wrong, but that within us is also a person who knows what is right. We can aspire to be that person. We can identify with our moral self, our better self, rather than with the one who acted badly. It's no wonder that judges give harsher sentences to people who enter their courtrooms without remorse. Remorse is our second chance to do the right thing.

Through years in prison in Massachusetts, close to the scene of her crime, unable to run away from herself, Katherine Ann Power continued to peel back her own layers of defensiveness. She overcame the comfort of looking away from what she had done. She not just heard the words, but she came to feel the impact of the harm that her behavior had caused in the Schroeder's lives and in their community. She shuddered at the fear her actions had created in the lives of others. And she confronted her own worst fear—the fear that she was a monster, that she was irredeemable, that she was unforgivable. She related, “I tore something that can never be untorn. Walter Schroeder died, young. And that doesn't go away. No matter what I do. It lives with me.” She experienced remorse.

Katherine Ann Power yearned to be forgiven. But, paradoxically, she was unable to forgive. For all the self-reflection she had done, she couldn't get beyond one last, “Yes, but...” Yes, I was complicit in a plan in which an officer was killed and then I ran. But, why weren't the generals who were responsible for all the deaths in the Vietnam War being held accountable? Why is there an unjust order where people in power get away with things that those without power can't? Why were the prostitutes in prison with me but not the Johns who benefitted from their prostitution?

She knew that she was stuck. Writing about this one day in her cell, the quiet chant of her Catholic upbringing played in her head. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Those familiar words vanquished the “Yes, but.” Forgiveness needed to be reciprocal. She said, “And that was it. I forgave those generals for being where they were, doing what they did. I saw a world of forgiveness where we are all in the embrace of that forgiveness, of that forgiveableness. And I couldn't get myself there, until I got those people I hadn't forgiven there. And I was through.”

Can we, in what I hope are less extreme and egregious situations, relinquish our justifiable resentments? Can we ask to be forgiven when our own fists are clenched tight in self-righteousness? Can we stop replaying the unforgivable actions of others and imagine that they too might regret what they

have done? Reb Shlomo Carlebach was once asked how he lived his life without hating those who deeply harmed him. He replied, “if I had two hearts, I could use one for love and one for hate. But since God gave me only one heart, I will use it for love.”

When we open our one heart, when we seek forgiveness, we are asking to be accepted as the remorseful person we now are, rather than the hurtful person we once were. When we ask for forgiveness, we offer our hands and our hearts to repair a relationship or a connection or a circumstance that we have damaged by our deeds, our words, our callousness.

Five years into her incarceration, when Katherine Ann Power entered the room for her parole hearing, it was clear that something had shifted. She apologized to Officer Schroeder’s family. She was contrite. She no longer justified or contextualized what she had done. The family liked what they heard...but they weren’t convinced. Wouldn’t anybody seeking parole put on a show of remorse? Power’s initial sentence of eight to twelve years already felt insufficient to them, and now she balks at even serving that time? It was hard not to be cynical.

Words of apology are a beginning. But only actions can demonstrate a real commitment to make right what had been unalterably wrong. As she listened to the Schroeder family’s doubts about her apology, as she felt wash over her their sense of injustice over shortening her prison sentence, as she witnessed with her heart open the pain she had caused, Katherine knew what she needed to do. She revoked her request for parole. She willingly returned to her prison cell. “I told them that as long as my statement of remorse and accepting responsibly for what I’d done was attached to my asking to get out of prison at this time, that it couldn’t be seen. It couldn’t be heard. So I would detach it from that. And I withdrew my request for parole. I was wrong. I was slow to admit it. I admit it now. I’ll serve out whatever time I need to serve out.”

Katherine Anne Power couldn’t change the past. She couldn’t revive the dead. She couldn’t arrange for nine children who grew up without a father to have had one. All she could do was the hard work of *cheshbon hanefesh*, literally the accounting of one’s soul. The best she could offer was to take the measure of her own soul, to convey how thoroughly she accepted responsibility for and understood the harm and suffering she had caused, and to try, with her whole heart to offer what she could that might, in some small way, be beneficial to those she had harmed. The closest thing she could offer as restitution would

be calculated not only in her years behind bars, but also in a living the rest of her life taking care to do as much right as she possibly could.

Jewish tradition calls one who does the hard work of earning forgiveness, a new creation. Some who repent choose to adopt a new name, as a way to reflect the profound process of moral transformation. A recovering alcoholic once explained, “The person who did those things was me, but I am no longer that person.” Earning forgiveness is not a quick or easy process. It is not a one-time epiphany. It is not as simple as sacrificing our best clothes in the river. Yet, one who seeks forgiveness, who accepts culpability and feels remorse, one who confesses, apologizes and makes restitution, one who engages in soul-reckoning and the profound effort of moral transformation becomes, if not literally, a different person, then certainly, a radically different sort of person.

Isn't that what we all hope for as we seek, and offer, forgiveness? That a clean slate might be possible? That we be measured by the best we are rather than the worst we've been? That we can believe in others and grant them the space to repent?

From the beginning of humanity, from the opening chapters when Adam and Eve were first in need of forgiveness for eating the forbidden fruit, God asked, “*Ayeka?*” “Where are you?” This is the first conversation in the Bible between God and human beings, but it is not about information. God wasn't in need of GPS. God asked, not because God couldn't find them, but because Adam and Eve ran away. They were hiding from God. They were hiding from their actions. God asks, where are you, so that they can accept responsibility, so that they can know that forgiveness is possible. Like our first ancestors, we, too, have the potential to hide, but we also have the power to seek—to seek forgiveness and to come into the light, to embrace the quest for wholeness, and to “live in the house of the Eternal, all the days of our life.”

As we remember how to forgive,
May we come out of hiding,
May our hearts be open to those who have wronged us.
May our arms reach out to those we have pushed away.
May our ears hear the promise of forgiveness
And our mouths speak words of reconciliation and of love.

Ken yehi ratzon. So may this be the will of the Holy One.

Works referred to or relied upon:

Mary Antin, “Malinke’s Atonement”

Louis Newman, *Repentance: The Meaning and Practice of Teshuvah* and
“Forgiveness: A Time to Love and A Time to Hate” a documentary film by
Helen Whitney