

Sermon Series
On Forgiveness: Why Forgive?
Genesis 44:18-34; 45:1-6

I can see them in my mind's eye: one small group huddled around the gravesite under the blazing California sun; the other group, even smaller, watching silently from across the narrow road that runs through the cemetery. When the short service ends and the coffin is lowered, the sounds of the Kaddish can be heard from both sides of the road -- out of sync, echoing. No one from the far group crosses the road to shovel earth on the coffin. They walk away slowly, looking back several times, but the people at the grave pay no attention.

So my friend describes her Uncle Saul's funeral. Shortly after she was born, Uncle Saul embezzled money from the family business -- that's her parents' story -- and the business went under for lack of capital to pay the workers. Saul claimed he used the missing money to expand the business, but was thwarted by his partners—her father and grandfather --and because of their shortsightedness, the business failed.

Saul never spoke to his parents again, did not come to his father's funeral, closed his eyes and refused to speak when his mother and sisters visited him in the hospital days before he died. Thus, his survivors stood apart at the funeral, unreconciled even after his death.

A sad tale, but not an unusual one-- am I right? I bet if I were to ask how many of your family histories, and present situations, include a breach that has stretched on for years, there would be many. A colleague of mine describes another heart-wrenching funeral this way: I conducted the service for an elderly man with five surviving children, each one a good and respected citizen of the community. The funeral director told me: "Rabbi, cut the mourner's ribbon for each of them separately. They don't speak to each other."

What kinds of hurts, which deep resentments and long-festering wounds fuel our inability to forgive? Many of us can so quickly bring to mind the faces of those we cannot forgive? How many of us have a ready litany of sins committed against us by those we trusted to act otherwise:

We remember those who betrayed us and those who abandoned us.
We replay the battles over money and the fights over morality.
We seethe with anger against co-workers who stepped on us to advance.
We rage that others took credit for our hard work.
We remember embarrassment, public ridicule, shame.
We have been deserted by siblings to care alone for aging parents.
We feel that we constantly give to someone who only takes.
We are indignant when romance takes precedence over friendship.
We nurse the pain of every broken promise.
We are the neglected children of self-absorbed parents.
We are the sorrowful parents of ungrateful children.

Is this the secret litany that accompanies us as we sit in these sacred precincts? Is it the secret litany that disturbs our daily life?

Though some of the injuries lie long buried beneath the passage of years, recalling them now can replicate the original blow, even take our breath away. Or we feel the sting of recent barbs, incredulous at our vulnerability, angry, perhaps waiting for a chance to even the score.

Wouldn't it be fantastic if somehow, we could erase the pain of old hurts, lift from our shoulders the burden of our grudges, release us from bitterness and cure us of resentment? How amazing, if by the strains of the organ this morning all those who have harmed us throughout our lives, will have apologized, sincerely repented, and promised to change? What if we could walk out of this sanctuary ready to forgive, eager to reconcile, and free of rancor? That, my friends, would be the Hollywood version of forgiveness! Genesis gives us an alternate scenario:

As a brash and self-absorbed teenager, Joseph knows how to needle his brothers and exasperate his parents. Not satisfied just to be the blatantly favored child in a family of 13 siblings, Joseph lords it over all of them, excitedly recounting his dreams in which the whole family literally bows down to him. Resentment builds daily until the brothers snap. When they are away from home for the first time, unsupervised, and their father sends Joseph out to check on them, the brothers seize their chance. They plot to kill Joseph, but Reuven stops them from murder and Judah suggests they sell him into slavery. The brothers then compound their sin by shredding Joseph's special coat, dipping it in lamb's blood and then bringing it to their father Jacob, to lead him to believe that a wild beast attacked and killed him.

We read of Jacob's anguish as he cradles that mangled coat. But what about Joseph? The Bible does not record what we might well

imagine Joseph thinking on that dusty road to Egypt: “How could my own brothers have done this? I hate them! I hate them with all my heart. I will survive--and I will get even somehow. I will never forgive them.”

Thank God few of us have endured a trauma as shattering as Joseph's, though I know some of us have. Yet many of us have experienced what we regard as unforgivable sins inflicted upon us, or upon people we love. Like Joseph, deep down inside our souls, we don't truly believe in forgiveness. We don't expect or hold out hope that an apology or sincere repentance will come our way. Like Joseph, we do not anticipate a radical change in behavior from the ones who harmed us. Like Joseph, we are left alone to decide how to cope with our hurt and how much power it will have over us. So for many of us, forgiveness sounds like a grand and beautiful word in our religious lexicon, but we find ourselves quietly asking: how can it ever really happen?

The rest of Joseph's story gives us some clues ... and some hope.

Twenty-two years have passed. Undaunted by slavery and imprisonment, Joseph becomes the most powerful man in Egypt, trusted by the Pharaoh and in control of the economy. Joseph begins a family, a wife and two sons. He names his first-born, Menashe, meaning, “forgetting,” because, he explains, “God has made me forget my hardship and my father's home.” Joseph works hard at forgetting. For twenty-two years he denies his family any word of his existence or the opportunity to kvell from his success. He never writes a postcard home: “Dear Dad, I know you must be worried about me. Relax, Pop, I'm okay; life is good in Egypt.”

Suddenly, those brothers Joseph wants to forget appear before him, fleeing famine in Israel, desperate to buy food. Recognition is a one-way street. They do not know before whom they stand, but Joseph does.

Joseph seems at first to toy with them. He insists they bring his youngest brother Benjamin to Egypt. He subjects them to false accusations, harassment and imprisonment. As the brothers contend with this ruler's arbitrary demands, a memory dawns on them. They finally regret their long-ago crime against Joseph and say to each other: “Perhaps we are being punished on account of our brother, because we looked upon his anguish, yet paid no heed as he pleaded with us.” (Genesis, 42: 21). When Joseph frames Benjamin and seizes him, Judah begs to be imprisoned instead. Judah cannot bear to inflict the loss of another beloved son upon his aging father. In Judah's eloquent speech, Joseph hears what he only dared to hope and plan for from the minute

he set eyes upon his brothers. As Joseph opens the gates of forgiveness for them, the brothers express remorse, empathy, selflessness – virtues never before seen in their limited repertoire. Joseph weeps then, and reveals himself, “Ani Yosef. “I am Joseph.” As his brothers stand silent--dumbfounded, terrified, guilty—he reassures them, embraces them, and Joseph forgives them.

It's an amazing story. But it's not an easy or an unambiguous story. Just as our stories of pain and hurt are not easy or readily resolved. We are deluded to think of forgiveness as all or nothing, love or hate, passionate kisses or pointed daggers. Rather, Joseph teaches us that forgiveness is a complicated, difficult and uncertain process. Forgiveness is lived in stages, not always moving forward. It takes time, sometimes long and arid stretches of time.

We know the path to the promised land of forgiveness would be much shorter and less rocky if we could see those who hurt us running toward us with outstretched arms and with the perfect words of apology on their lips. But what if they refuse, what if they don't care, what if they have forgotten us, what if they have died? Will we forever compromise our emotional, physical and spiritual health because of **their** shortcomings? Why forgive? Can we let go of our justified resentment, can we relinquish our right of retribution in order to close a moral gap that someone else has created?

In his book The Ethics of Memory, philosopher Avishai Margalit teaches that forgiveness is a voluntary decision to let go of the **resentment** from an injury. He calls forgiveness a policy. Deciding to forgive, to let go of the anger, the resentment, the hurt, does **not** mean denying that the harm happened, pretending that everything is fine, or condoning the hurtful behavior. But we can decide that self-respect, love, family and friendship is worth more to us than egos, power, stubbornness or our fiercely held notions of who is weak or strong, right or wrong.

Forgiveness may be a policy, but it is also a process. Jews and Christians each have seasons of forgiveness. We need time– not to wrap up all our conflicts in a tidy Hollywood package -- but to consider and remember and weigh whether we will dare to enter that process, whether we will decide to take a first step on the journey toward forgiving those who have wounded us. Through a careful examination of Joseph's story of forgiveness, we can find some possible signposts on our path to forgiveness. Listen and consider which ones might point you in the direction you want to travel.

1. **Interrupt the continuous memory loop.** Joseph tries to forget the harm that his brothers caused him. He will never forget the event itself, but he consciously decides not to replay it time and again. The story is told of Clara Barton, founder of the Red Cross, who was once reminded of a cruel wrong done to her years before. "Don't you remember?" her friend asked. "No," she replied. "I distinctly remember forgetting that."

The way we remember plays a role in our ability to forgive. We can choose not to fuel and magnify our anger at a person over an offense by telling and retelling the tale until it becomes larger than life. Someone once compared hating a person for wronging you to burning down your house in order to get rid of a rat. Rather than lighting the torch, we can practice forgetting the **resentment** that accompanies the memories of the wrongs done to us.

2. **Play the whole movie.** When Joseph encounters his brothers again, he sees more than a snapshot of them casting him into the pit. In their faces, he sees the antics of a tribe of rowdy boys, the loud conversations over the dinner table, the conspiratorial exchange of secrets late into the night. Standing before him is a hungry family, his family, the link to his father and his childhood. If all he saw were the snapshot of his abuse, he would have sent them away hungry--or worse. Once someone hurts us, he or she can become, for us, fixed in time in space, frozen in stone like Lot's wife. We tend to redraw all the images in our mind, not with a soft pencil, but with black ink, like painting in mustaches on villains, drawing their worst qualities onto the canvas. We **can** look beyond this one-dimensional impression and reflect on the full range of experiences we once knew—the laughter and the hope, the surprise and the curiosity. We can revisit those old pictures tenderly, without editorializing. When we play the whole movie, perhaps our resentment will shrink as our empathy grows.

3. **Find the facts inside the feelings.** It is possible that during those lonely twenty-two years of trying to forget his brothers' betrayal, Joseph recalled his own teenage role in goading them to violence. Without falling into the trap of blaming the victim, we can consider our own part in creating or sustaining a breach. And, it can help to question the accuracy of the "total recall" we might claim about the times we were hurt. How often have we described a crystal clear memory only to have a companion say, "Is that how you remember it? That's not what happened!" Poet Merle Feld describes this equation of distance and memory:

“As time passes
The particulars
The hard data
The who what when where why
Slip away from me
And all I'm left with is
The feeling.”ⁱ

Are the hurts that we have nursed through the years based on accurate recollections? Or feelings? Or memories of feelings? Is there something in the depiction that we might have missed? We can use doubt as a tool, a lever, to begin to move the weight of concretized hurt, to advance the process of forgiveness. Part of forgiveness is granting that we all only have a partial picture.

4. Put down the hatchet. Joseph appears to be getting even, putting his brothers in an arbitrary and powerless position just as he was twenty-two years earlier so that they would know something of what he experienced. Joseph is poised to give as good as he got. Sweet revenge is in sight. The brothers are right where he wants them, confused, disturbed, anguished. Joseph is vindicated—his childhood dreams have become reality. But when Judah pleads before him, when he sees his brothers distraught and humbled, Joseph has an epiphany. He doesn't want vengeance; he wants family. He wants

It is inevitable that, having been injured by another, we steel ourselves to protect against them. We entertain seductive fantasies of getting even. They seem bigger; we seem smaller. But the laws of physics apply—we throw the hatchet at someone else, but there is an equal and opposite reaction and we, too are injured. How often have we gone over in our minds a fissure that grew into a chasm, dividing us from a friend or a family member, and wondered, how we could have forfeited all that we shared? Being right may have offered cold satisfaction, but in the tug-of-war between satisfaction and relationship, putting down the hatchet, relinquishing the desire to even the score, can cleanse our souls.

5. Imagine a different ending. The beauty of the Joseph story is that, like our lives and our memories, it can be understood in multiple ways. In Joseph's motives, one can find evidence of plotted revenge, or a blueprint for intentional benevolence. Why does Joseph subject his brothers to a complex series of trials? I believe that Joseph wants to provide his brothers with another chance, in the hope that this time, they will do right. Before the brothers themselves even knew they had it in them, Joseph prepares the way for them to walk toward remorse and

repentance. For this generosity of spirit, for his courageous decision to forgive, Joseph is called a tzaddik, a righteous man.

Joseph's story can inspire us to imagine a different ending for our own struggles. Why forgive? Because then we are not doomed to separate funeral gatherings for our loved ones, nor to years of silence between alienated friends. We can forge fresh pathways, new practices to reconcile with those from whom we are estranged. We can open our hearts to the possibility that those who have wronged us are capable of remorse. Just as, at the end of summer, the colors of leaves change incrementally, in subtle tones, so does our willingness to forgive. If, we embrace just one of these steps, we will be turning to a more hopeful future.

Interrupt the continuous memory loop. Play the whole movie. Find the facts inside the feelings. Put down the hatchet. Imagine a different ending.

May we learn in these next few weeks to believe in forgiveness, and may each step take us closer to shlaymut v'shalom – to wholeness and to peace. Amen.

ⁱ Merle Feld, “Sinai,” A Spiritual Life: A Jewish Feminist Journey, p. 206

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