

Synopsis: Forgiveness in the Jewish Tradition

by Peta Jones Pellach, Director of Educational Activities, the Elijah Interfaith Institute

There is a famous story told of Nazi hunter Simon Weisenthal, when he was asked to accept apologies from a former Nazi. Weisenthal famously responded to the aging ex-Nazi who came to him asking for forgiveness for the horrors he had perpetrated, that Judaism insists that a person must ask forgiveness from the person he has wronged. He suggested that the Nazi ask for forgiveness from his victims. Weisenthal said, "I am not G'd. I cannot forgive you."

There are dominant themes in Judaism that seem to fly in the face of "Forgiveness" as a guiding principle:

1. We have a commandment to remember "Amalek" - "...you shall obliterate the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens. You shall not forget!" (Deuteronomy 25:19) - to not forget that which has been done to us that is too evil to forgive; and with that is the reminder that there are still people in this world who are evil. Rather than forgive them, we have a duty to pursue them and root them out. It is not just a "suggestion" – it is demanded of us.
2. Only G-d has the power to forgive. Our duty is to rebuke, to educate and sometime to punish. We are commanded to set up courts of justice. We promise G'd not to allow those who shed blood to go free.
3. This is a culture of law – and law exacts punishments, not free pardons. Justice demands punishment.

Forgiveness is often associated with Christian thought and thought of as a Christian virtue.

It is my task to show that these preconceptions are incorrect. Judaism not only approves of "forgiveness" as a virtue, but demands it from us. Indeed, the Hebrew Bible is the primary source for forgiveness.

I present three independent arguments for the centrality of Forgiveness in Judaism.

1. We can begin where former Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth and renowned thinker and scholar, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks does, with the story of Joseph in the Torah. Rabbi Sacks says that the story of how Joseph forgives his brothers is the paradigm for all future forgiveness AND that once Joseph introduces forgiveness into the world, it becomes possible to introduce atonement so that G'd can forgive us.
2. Another approach is to look for a legal principle and we can find that in the section in Leviticus 19 which we describe as the "Holiness" code – where G'd says to the Jewish people, "You shall be holy for I your G'd am holy". The most famous line from this passage is "love your neighbour as yourself" but in the same set of verses it also says "you shall not bear a grudge in your heart." This scriptural source for forgiveness is even stronger than the Joseph story on two grounds – 1. It is a specific commandment; 2. It occurs in the later part of the Torah, after

Genesis, which is usually considered a narrative, in the section where we find the binding, immutable laws. The verses warrant close analysis. Commentators such as Sefer HaChinuch (13th Century Spain) and Ohr HaChaim (17th Century Morocco) consider these commandments to be basic to the health of the individual and the community. The Jerusalem Talmud also insists that taking vengeance is irrational. Chief Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook (early 20th Century) links the verses. All vengeance ultimately hurts us, too. Love is the only sensible path.

3. My preferred approach is to apply the principle to which Christians, Muslims and Jews all subscribe and try to follow – imitatio dei – the imitation of G'd. G'd, we all agree, is all-loving; all-forgiving. In Hebrew, there are three terms used for G'd's forgiving nature and we ask him to slach lanu, mchal lanu, kaper lanu – to excuse, forgive and restore or redeem us.

The relevant term for us is the second, m'chal. When we needed a translation for our forgiveness conference last summer in Jerusalem, we chose to call it in Hebrew a conference on "mechila."

The term is related to two other concepts, and if we understand this linguistic connection, we are helped in understanding how G'd forgives and how we might forgive. The first idea is of Machol as a tunnel, cave or crevice – something which is underground. From this we learn that in order to forgive, we have to adopt humility. There is another meaning for Mechila or machol – the dance, or, more correctly, the circle dance. There is a beautiful description in our mystical literature of the world to come – usually referring to the Messianic era or a time of the perfection of history. There, it says that in the world to come, all of humanity will dance in one large circle, with the Lord Almighty sitting on his throne of glory in the middle of the circle. And what about those with whom we don't want to dance? The person whom we like least will be the furthest away from us. What does that mean in terms of the circle I just described? We will be looking directly at that person – but this time, through the throne of glory! Don't you think we will see them differently?

In summary, there are three independent arguments:

The argument from Joseph as our role-model; the legal argument based on the passages instructing us not to bear a grudge in our hearts AND not to take revenge; and the argument from imitatio dei.

I started out by pointing out the Jewish positions that might mitigate against forgiveness as a principle. I want to make it clear that I do not believe that every act that has been taken against the Jews in our difficult history should be forgiven and I do not believe that we can forgive on behalf of others. Having said that, we have learnt that forgiveness towards a person who has wronged us is not the same as forgiving the act.

There is a story of a very wise woman, Beruria, whose husband, Rabbi Meir, was a great leader of the Jewish people at a time of Roman oppression. Rabbi Meir was terribly troubled by crude and violent people and wanted to pray that G'd destroy them. Beruria reminded him that the verse in Psalms says that G'd should remove the sins from the earth and not the sinners. Rabbi Meir was corrected. Beruria taught us that we can separate between a person and their actions.

There are very few people who fall into the category of “Amalek” – those so evil that they forego their right to forgiveness. Please G’d, none of us has to deal with those people. And there is no one amongst us who does not need to ask for forgiveness at some point or another. So, for humanity to move forward together, and for our physical, mental and spiritual health, we all need to learn how to forgive.