

*Parshat Vayeshev / Forgiveness*  
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Rabbi Epstein was giving a Yom Kippur sermon about forgiveness and during his speech he asked his congregation, "How many of you have forgiven your enemies?" About half held up their hands. He then rephrased his question, "How many of you want to forgive your enemies?" Slowly, every hand in the congregation went up, except for one. Little old Mrs. Horowitz.

"Mrs. Horowitz?" inquired the Rabbi, "Are you not willing to forgive your enemies, especially on this Day of Atonement when God forgives us all?"

"I don't have any enemies" Mrs. Horowitz replied, smiling sweetly.

"Mrs. Horowitz, that is more impressive. May I ask how old you are?"

"Ninety-eight," she replied.

"Ninety-eight! Oh, Mrs. Horowitz, what a blessing and a lesson to us all you are. Please tell us how a person can live to ninety-eight and not have an enemy in the world to forgive."

Mrs. Horowitz stood up slowly, smiled, faced the congregation, and said, "Oh, it's quite simple, I just outlived all those *meshugenehs* and *yentes*."

Forgiveness is hard. It really is. And yet, forgiveness, as a habit of love, as Ed Bacon writes in his *8 Habits*, or as a spiritual practice ... forgiveness is the quintessential expression of spirituality and religion. More than that, forgiveness is especially Jewish with the first mention of the concept of forgiveness recorded in the Torah, and that story of forgiveness begins in this week's Torah portion.

This week, we meet Joseph. Joseph is the son of Jacob – the second youngest of Jacob's children [second to Benjamin] – and born from Jacob's beloved wife, Rachel, who has since died. Jacob is said to have loved Joseph most of all of his children. Joseph is given a special coat and seems to know just how exceptional he is and, perhaps because of that, he frankly comes off as a sort of teenage snot. He goes around telling his dreams, each of which, just happen to confidently place him as the center of the universe. He seems to like the sound of his own voice a bit too much. Well, you may remember the rest of the story, which is that his older brothers, sick of listening to this annoying kid, look to get rid of him. They don't kill him – although they do consider it – rather they end up selling him into slavery and essentially leave him for dead.

This leads Joseph on his journey of slavery, captivity in prison, and transformation, where he is able to go from the pit of Pharaoh's dungeon to being his right hand man. The story of Joseph is a novella, planted at the end of the book of Genesis, comprising its last 13 chapters, and we always read it around the time of Hanukkah. In my opinion, the story of Joseph is truly the greatest novella every written, where we trace, piece by piece, the character development of Joseph – his emotional, moral, and spiritual development – and after trials, injustices, and suffering, we come to see him reach his inherent potential as human being – who he really is at his core.

And at the climactic moment in the story of Joseph, at the pinnacle of his development as a human being, which we'll read in a couple of weeks – what does Joseph do? Joseph forgives. Joseph forgives his brothers for selling him into slavery. This is a turning point in history because it is the first recorded act of forgiveness in all of literature.

Before going deeper into what forgiveness is, maybe it's best to draw a distinction and talk about what forgiveness isn't. See, there's forgiveness, which is part of the Jewish ethic and a spiritual practice, and then there is appeasement of anger, which is a sort of universal concept. Forgiveness versus appeasement of anger.

So what's the case? Someone harms someone else – hurts someone, shames or disrespects someone, takes something from someone. This causes anger, resentment, outrage on the part of the victim – and if the offender does nothing to turn away their wrath, then the victim will seek out revenge, which is the polar opposite of forgiveness.

Here's the thing: revenge works. I mean, first of all, why would anyone seek out revenge? We seek it out because we desire order and reason. We want things to make sense and balance out, and taking revenge, in its own way, settles the score and brings everything back to neutrality or even emotional balance. The problem is that revenge is a very costly manner of establishing order, because it doesn't have an inherent stopping point. You think of the Godfather with the Corleone's and the Tattaglias. "They dishonored the family" to which Don Corleone says, "Revenge is a dish best served cold." It could be anything from a bad business deal to murder and you have to retaliate in order to restore the family's honor. And this back and forth can go on for generations!

This, by the way is a universal human experience. That is, this idea of restoring one's honor from a place of shame and disrepute is part of the universal human experience; it's in every human group, as well as in some non-human groups. Chimpanzees for example, will also do this. They have the ability to remember which other chimpanzee caused them harm and will target aggression back at that individual. Japanese Macaques, another kind of monkey, will even target relatives of the one who harmed them as a form of revenge. That's amazing to me – Tony Soprano couldn't do it better himself!

In many ancient cultures the way to bring this kind of conflict, this revenge round robin to an end is not through forgiveness per se, but through a pardon or appeasement or to accept an excuse. In this case, instead of where the victim forgives and the offender atones, the victim forgoes their revenge and the offender makes some a sort of plea in mitigation, saying, "I couldn't help it," "It wasn't that bad," "It's human nature," "I got carried away." In addition, the offender makes some sort of show of humility or submission. That's not forgiveness. One classic example of this is in the Torah is between Jacob and Esau, when they meet again after 20 years, while Jacob was away building up his family.

If you remember, Jacob knew Esau felt wronged by him for stealing the birthright and was afraid of the potential revenge Esau might take. That's why Jacob left in the first place. When they meet again, Jacob doesn't even mention the earlier incident, but he attempts to

appease Esau. He sends him an enormous gift of livestock, he abases himself, bowing down to him seven times, calling him “my lord” and referring to himself as “your servant.” This was not a demonstration of genuine remorse and forgiveness, this was submission and appeasement and it happened to work in that case.

What Joseph does is different. When he reveals himself to his brothers he says, “Don’t be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me [into slavery].” Then he says, “It was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you” [Gen. 45:5]. Now this is starting to sound like forgiveness but it doesn’t end there. It isn’t until the very end of the book of Genesis, really almost the last verses in the book, just after Jacob blesses his children and dies. The brothers say to Joseph, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for the wrong we did him ... Forgive! ... the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly. Please forgive the servants of the God of your father.’ And as they said this, Joseph wept. And Joseph said, ‘Don’t be afraid ... I will provide for you and your children.’ And Joseph spoke kindly to them and reassured them” [Gen. 50:15-21].

This is forgiveness. Joseph doesn’t actually say ‘I forgive you,’ but he makes clear that he has no intention or thought of revenge. That’s forgiveness.

What the Torah introduces to the world in this incredible story is a morality of guilt and forgiveness rather than an ethic of shame and honor. What’s shame? Shame is what you feel when you are aware that someone sees you doing something wrong; guilt is what you feel when you know you’ve done something wrong whether or not someone sees you. Shame is externally motivated, guilt is internally motivated, its from your internal compass, your inner voice.

Shame is also not necessarily about what you did; it’s about what and who you are. Shame is essentially a stain on your being that can never be lifted – we can only hope to cover it up some how so that others will turn a blind eye toward it, pardon it, or be appeased for it in some other way. That’s a shame and honor culture, as it was expressed in ancient Greece as well as in other cultures throughout history, where you see punishments for crimes in the form of public shaming. The main thing in a shame and honor culture is not to be found out, because once you are, there is no way back, shame is permanent – there is no place for you anymore.

But guilt is not about what or who you are, it’s about what you did, and what you did can be fixed and healed through taking responsibility, making amends and forgiveness. With a guilt and forgiveness culture, such as in Judaism, it is the act that is wrong, not the person. In a guilt and forgiveness culture a person has the ability to show that they’ve changed, that they can confront the same situation and take a different action. That is *teshuvah gemurah* – that is complete repentance – a person can actually distance him or herself from the deed. And that’s what the whole story of Joseph is about. This novella traces how not only Joseph changes as a person – he is someone different at the end of the story than he was as a bratty kid in the beginning – but also his brothers change. And when Joseph forgives them what he is basically saying is that ‘I fundamentally reaffirm your worth as a person, as people, despite the fact that we both know what you did was wrong.’ That’s forgiveness.

Now I said at the beginning that forgiveness is hard, but the truth is that we do it all the time. We are constantly forgiving others. We mostly live in a culture of forgiveness because a culture of forgiveness assumes that built into the fabric of society of all these people, that we will make mistakes – we just will and we know it. Think about kids. Kids do things all the time that we forgive. I remember sleeping and snuggling with my kids when they were little and I can't tell you how many times I was elbowed in the mouth and kicked in the groin when they laid next to me. I let it go ☺ – that was forgiveness. How many times do we forgive our pets for making a mess? Or think about driving – we are constantly forgiving people for cutting us off, leaving their blinker on, driving too slowly in the fast lane. Have you waited in line at the grocery store while someone writes a check – I mean who writes checks anymore! – that is an act of forgiveness ☺.

Now, I know what you're thinking: "Okay, Steinberg, that's all cool, but there are some things, some atrocities and terrible things you just can't forgive," and we can all think of examples. I get that. And yet people do it; they forgive the seemingly unforgivable all the time. People forgive workplace politics and injustices, spousal infidelity, harassment and abuse, and people even forgive terror.

Sherri Mandell wrote a book called *The Blessing of a Broken Heart*, where she details how her 13 year old son, Koby, was brutally beaten to death by a Palestinian terrorist in 2001 in Israel. It made massive headline news. She forgave the terrorist.

I have a good friend, Lance. Lance did 25 years of hard time in prison for shooting and murdering someone at a party when he was 19. After 25 years, Lance was let out on probation and was given a place to stay at a Jewish rehabilitation center – Beit T'Shuvah – until he got on his feet. While in prison, he became a devoted member of a 12 Step group called Criminals and Gangsters Anonymous, CGA (there is such a thing), and he helped to organize weekly CGA meetings at Beit T'Shuvah. Since being let out, Lance went back to school and became a counselor for young people who are criminals and he now helps to rehabilitate them. And every single year on Yom Kippur, Lance goes in person to the home of the mother of boy that he killed and he asks her for forgiveness. And every single year, she opens the door, embraces him, and tells him that he is forgiven.

Forgiveness is possible. Yes there are conditions that help to make it happen such as community and support, because it is hard to do it when you feel all alone in the world, but when those conditions are met and when we realize that we are forgiven through little things every single day, we can let go and open our hearts to the possibility of transformation and love that is available all the time in this world.

Ed Bacon writes in his *8 Habits of Love*, "The only essential to the habit of forgiveness is the genuine wish for both yourself and your adversary to become whole. Naturally, there are times when we cannot manage this. But we will see that, in genuinely opening ourselves to the power of forgiveness, that we ourselves become free."

We forgive ourselves, we forgive others, and we even forgive God, and when we do when we really let go, an energy of release, of love, of freedom flows through us and leads us on to a life renewed.

Shabbat Shalom