



Yom Kippur 2010

“FORGIVENESS”

Introductory Remarks by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

Believe it or not, there is a website called “Prayers-4u.com” which advertises the services of a modern kabbalist, Rabbi David Azulai, who “now offers you the opportunity to ask for a recurring prayer” at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The cost ranges from \$29.99 for a one-time prayer to \$49.99 for prayers that are recited on a daily basis. You can also ask for a special Forgiveness Prayer to be uttered at the holy grave site of Rabbi Elazar - the son of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai. The same rates apply.

As the website states, if you are interested in, among other things, being forgiven for past wrongdoings, asking for the Lord’s mercy, redeeming your soul, solving previous quarrels and disputes, apologizing for your sins, and, my favorite, being forgiven by your partner or spouse, Rabbi Azulai is the one for you. The site is replete with testimonials from appreciative petitioners whose lives have turned around because of Rabbi Azulai’s special powers.

Now in case this isn’t your idea of how to achieve forgiveness, but you still need a little help, Rabbi Michael Lerner of Tikkun Magazine, offers this strategy:

“Carefully review your life and acknowledge to yourself who you have hurt...Find a place where you can be safely alone, and then say out loud who and how you’ve hurt others and how you’ve hurt yourself.” He even offers an all-purpose meditation: “I forgive (name each person) and every person who has hurt or upset me, whether or not I can remember them at this moment.” Quite frankly, if you’ve forgotten who they are, how can you still be feeling hurt?

For many people, the hardest words to utter, and which they may try to avoid at all costs, is the simple phrase, “I’m sorry.” If that’s not hard enough, to make this more than formulaic or perfunctory, and to convince the listener that we mean it and understand what we did wrong, there is the additional obligation to fill in the blank for what we’re sorry about.

Notably, according to Jewish teaching and practice, we cannot obtain forgiveness or absolution by appealing to an authority or a high priest. Transgressions of one human being to another – *bein adam l’chavero* – must be negotiated one person to the other. Nothing could be more humanistic than this.

Now in the sense that this a dialogue, the burden of responding flips over to the offended party who, in turn, may feel equally indisposed to utter the words, “I forgive you.” This doesn’t come easily either or necessarily on the first go-round. However, according to traditional Jewish teaching, the injured party is duty bound to forgive. According to the Talmud, in the matter of

granting forgiveness “a person should be pliant as a reed, not hard like the cedar. ” (Ta’an 20a)
We also read that if the injured party refuses to forgive even when the sinner has come before him three times in the presence of others and asked for forgiveness, then he, in turn, is deemed to have sinned. (Tanh. Hukkat 19).

Obviously we wouldn’t have this teaching if the rabbis hadn’t observed human nature and seen how reluctant people are not just to apologize but also to offer forgiveness. It’s a lot easier and sometimes even satisfying to remain angry, nurse a wound, or harbor a grudge.

Remarkably, there is a picturesque description of God praying to Himself that His mercy should prevail over His anger and that He should forgive the people their transgressions and stop short of exacting the full penalty and punishment they deserve. (Berakot 7a). It made me think that if the all-powerful God had a hard time being forgiving, why shouldn’t we?

How do we forgive others?

Why is offering forgiveness such a hard thing to do? Or isn’t it?

Are there limits to what and who we will forgive?

How do we do this work with people who are no longer living?

How do we forgive ourselves?

Today we have invited two of our members to reflect on this matter of forgiveness. First we’ll hear from Dan Wyman and then we’ll hear from Carol Sternhell.