

Can everything be forgiven? That's what one of our students, who read from the Joseph story at her Bat Mitzvah last year, asked. The answer she gave in her D'rash was no. But our Torah portion this afternoon asks a slightly different question. It notes that though Joseph was able to forgive his brothers, Joseph's brothers, who had committed the offense, still could not let go of their guilt.

By the time we get to Yom Kippur, we have, at least in theory, already gone and asked forgiveness from those we have hurt. We have also, through the multiple repetitions in our prayer book, asked God's forgiveness many, many times. What is there left for us to do in these remaining hours of fasting and prayer?

Of course neither of those first two steps is easy. Let's talk about them for a moment before we come to the third.

Apologizing to a person who is angry with us is very difficult. It is hard because most of us are conflict adverse and don't look forward to a tense and possibly explosive conversation. Even in the twelve step program, where apologizing to those you have hurt is very important to the process, there is recognition that we should only bring up past wrongs, where that is helpful to the other person as well as ourselves.

Talking about what happened can be like washing a wound. It may have to be done, but boy does it hurt. It takes real courage to overcome the fear that inhibits us from getting beyond a mumbled, if I did anything to offend you this year, I'm sorry.

And there is also the issue of pride.

Apologies are hard because often in our own minds, it often seems pretty clear that whatever we did was small potatoes compared to what other's do. Yes maybe I shouldn't have said that ---but people do so much worse. It's hard to take responsibility for our part in the midst of a larger story. And because our minds tend to think about cause and effect, there is usually a reason we did what we did, and quite often we confuse that reason with a justification or excuse. Our apologies, aloud or in our minds, are contaminated – as have been a number of the public apologies we have heard recently. An true apology doesn't blame the other person, make excuses, or minimize what we have done. Taking a measure of responsibility includes owning up to our own imperfections, something that requires a strong character and a high degree of self-confidence.

Talking to someone about what's gone wrong is also putting ourselves out there-exposed and without deniability. If this conversation isn't productive you feel like

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barack in his final round of negotiations with the Palestinians. If you put your best deal on the table and it's rejected, does this now establish that position as the starting point of all future negotiations?

All this hard work is traditionally meant to be done before we even get to Yom Kippur- but let's suppose it didn't happen this year- do you have to wait until next Elul? Of course not, our tradition, gives us an extra window. Make that phone call tonight, or next week, or at least before the holidays end on Simchat Torah.

A temple member said to me that he feels a little bit jealous of the Catholics who confess to a priest. When they confess, they get an answer, right then and there, in English- perhaps even with a concrete assignment of a prayer to recite or an action to take to make ammends. Asking God for forgiveness on Yom Kippur doesn't provide that same reassurance. Some years we may feel lighter and cleansed when we hear that last shofar blow. But I know there are years when that is less the case.

In a class I took this summer, Rabbi Shai Held shared the teaching of Rabbi Shalom Noach Berzovksy, whose book *Netivot Shalom*, our rabbis group studied a few years ago. He explains why this happens, why we sometimes do not feel cleansed even after our prayer and fasting on Yom Kippur.

Giving you a modern translation- Berzovsky said that atonement is like home repairs. Sometimes we bring in a professional and get to the root of the problem. We tear out the plumbing or re-pour the concrete. We replace the whole heating and air conditioning system. But sometimes, we are in a rush, or don't have the money to spend. We put some plaster over the crack, and a little paint, knowing that the fault is still there and it will open up again. We beef up the motor and hope that the system holds together.

Berzovsky was big on digging down to the foundation and rebuilding from scratch, but my observation is that we can't always do that. Perhaps the important thing is to be honest with ourselves about when we are digging deep and when we are just putting on that patch, to hang on for a little while longer. If we remain aware that there is work still to be done, it will also help us understand our feeling incomplete at the end of the day.

Returning to the story in our Torah portion, there is a third aspect of forgiveness, and this is the one that Joseph's brother did not complete. Clearly, from their need to make up a request from their father Jacob that Joseph forgive them as last words they are still entangled in their wrongdoing. I image that they continued to replay all that had happened in their minds, their mistreatment of

their brother, the things that as an individual and as a family they could have, should have, would have done. Each of us gets caught up at times in this kind of ruminating on the past, where we wish we had done something differently. Maybe we missed the boat in some way with our children, and realize that we could have spared them pain and suffering, had we behaved differently. We worry that their lives could have been so much better, had we just done what we didn't do, or not done what we did.

This afternoon, with Yizkor following our afternoon service, we may think also of our loved ones who are dead, and thus are beyond any apology or reconciliation. What if the memory that sticks in our mind is of the time we were not responsive to their needs, or were insensitive to their feelings? How many were the times we missed the boat and were not our highest selves? They may have wronged us, but perhaps they died before we developed the maturity to see that wrong in the context of their lives and not just our own. Would we be more generous to them now, now that we are older and perhaps see ourselves as less perfect as well? What can we do with this desire to change the past? If it just keeps us up at night, it is of no benefit to us or to those we love.

Our tradition teaches that reflections on past mistakes can be helpful if we can turn them around. If these regrets, the would have, could have, should haves, change our behavior in the future, then they can achieve a purpose.

Consider the difference between Jacob and Joseph. I like to think that Jacob regretted his actions as a young man, taking advantage of his brother's weaknesses and deceiving his father. Yet Jacob went on to replay the core issue of his family, favoritism, in the children he raised. The brothers did the wrong, but it was Jacob's extreme favoring of Joseph that shaped the situation.

With Joseph the story is different. He had a lot of time in prison to reflect on his boastfulness, his tattling to his father, his taking advantage of the rifts in his family. But rather than just stewing on all this, he learned from it and paid it forward. His sons Menasheh and Ephraim, were not victims of divisive favoritism and they grew up to be loving brothers. They are the first brothers in the Torah who get along.

When we can no longer apologize to those we love, then we can only prove the authenticity of our repentance by acting differently in the future. This is what our tradition identifies as true repentance. It is the reason that Yom Kippur is but the

beginning of the story. It is how we will act when we leave this sanctuary tonight that is the proof of our teshuvah.

May this day and its service bring you closer to cleansing and renewal.