

## Drash for Yom Kippur

Shanah tovah and G'mar Hatimah tovah

I'd like to begin by thanking, as Aaron Jaffe did, the members of the morning minyan, who show up for each other every morning, and have taught me so much about speaking Torah, in its vast multitude of ways. I would also like to thank all those people who generously listened to me fleshing out ideas for this morning's drash, and added their perception. I would also like to thank Rabbi Bronstein for his lovely preview to this talk, and for not stealing it entirely! As Torah always is, this is a compilation of the insights of many people, that I have merely tried to organize into a coherent whole.

This summer, David and I celebrated our silver anniversary. 25 years of marriage! It's been fun revisiting some memories—the silly phrases we started using in our tennis games playing with my friend and bridesmaid Marielle, which we had long since forgotten the origins of. Taking off my bathing suit in the middle of Lake Pontusuc to properly dunk for a mikveh, poring through the wedding album and remembering friends who we've lost along the way, wondering at how young the friends we have kept were (not to mention how young WE were!)

We had a beautiful ceremony in the Berkshires, surrounded by friends and family. Rabbi Alan Lucas, who was the new rabbi at my in-laws's shul, and whom we had immediately fallen for, performed a magical bedekken ceremony. We were married on the first tee of the golf course. We danced all night. The chocolate ganache cake, around which the entire dairy dinner was planned, was even better than we had hoped.

But there was also something missing that day, as there often is even on the best and happiest of days. You see, about 10 days before the wedding, one of our best friends called to say she wasn't feeling very well, and she didn't think she could make the 2 ½ hour drive up to Lenox, so sorry, she wasn't coming. It didn't seem like the greatest of excuses. We had friends and family coming from Tokyo, France, Australia. Dara couldn't make the drive from NYC?

She sent a gift. I think I wrote the thank you note. David was a little sore and angry. The next year was busy. I started grad school, David started a new job, I had my identity stolen and we spent countless hours recovering from that. I got pregnant, we moved to Westchester. We barely saw or spoke to Dara. Just a little over a year later, the High

holidays rolled around and we went to Roslyn to be with the family. It was Rabbi Lucas's third High Holidays. We had fallen in love with him from the start, and this year, he did not let us down. In fact, his Yom Kippur sermon was just a little bit life changing for us.

It was the late 90's, and the science and medicine of stress and the mind/body connection were developing rapidly. Scientists were studying the effects of cortisol, a hormone released in times of stress, and finding that stress was not all in your head but had long lasting impacts on physical health. Probably none of this is news to you today, but in 1997, it was. Rabbi Lucas used this new medical research to implore us to forgive each other, if not for their sake, at least for our own. If we couldn't ask for and give forgiveness because the Talmud said to, we should at least attempt it as a wellness practice. Holding a grudge, as Nelson Mandela was famously quoted as saying, was literally like drinking poison and hoping it would kill the enemy.

This woke us up. A few days later, David called Dara to let her know how upset he had been and to let her know he was ready to let it go and move on. In turn, she told him that she had actually been extremely ill. She was finally diagnosed with Epstein-Barr, and she was recovering, but she had been unable to function for months. She had

not wanted us worrying about her on our wedding day, so she had withheld the extent of her illness. The best of intentions had led to a misunderstanding that had left us all feeling slighted and hurt.

Dara joined us a few weeks later to finish our saved piece of wedding cake (we had forgotten on our anniversary, and even 14 months later, it was still DELICIOUS!). We began spending shabbat together again, enjoyed the last four months of pregnancy (she was due one week after me!) and the beginning of motherhood, and although they now live far, we have stayed in touch over the years and just Zoomed together to catch up recently.

I'd always heard that Yom Kippur was about being forgiven, so, on Yom Kippur, is it incumbent on us to forgive, or to be forgiven?

As Rabbi Bronstein told those of us who were still there at 1:15 on the second day of Rosh Hashannah last week, both are imperative. Some things we do or say may be more conducive to real forgiveness than others, but I will argue today that we must use several different tactics if we want to truly succeed. Specifically, we need to 1: cast a wide net and begin by asking forgiveness of all those we interact with even if we don't think we've hurt them; 2: Dig down deep and think hard about the things we have done, and we know we have done, that have hurt

others; specifically name the wrongs to them and ask for forgiveness for those acts, and; 3: Most difficult of all, forgive those who have hurt us.

The Torah makes it pretty clear that being forgiven was the point of Yom Kippur from the start. In chapter 16 of Vayikrah, the Torah describes in great detail the rituals the High priest must perform on Yom Kippur, a sin offering of a goat and a bull, the laying of sins on the goat of Azazel and setting it free in the wilderness, and the cleaning of the inner sanctuary and the priest himself; all for the sake of expiating the sins of the people. The people must practice self denial and refrain from work. Together these two things

כִּי־בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה תִּטְהָרוּ:

For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be clean before the LORD

and until the destruction of the last temple, it seems this ritual was followed closely, and Jewish society felt it got a “do-over” every year. After the destruction of the temple, the rabbis had to find a way to recreate this ritual for the people. Prayer took the place of much of the ritual sacrifice, and on Yom Kippur, the details of “the people shall

afflict themselves” was fleshed out into specific laws. On Kol Nidrei, the cantor nullifies all promises made and not fulfilled, and through fasting, refraining from pleasurable sensation, and prayer, we are able to obtain forgiveness from G-d for our sins.

But forgiveness from God can only go so far. If you believe in that kind of thing, it might guarantee good weather and crops.

So, why this ritual of forgiveness? There seem to be at least 2 main purposes:

One is clearly to give people a refresh: To start the year over with new, good intentions, without the weight of baggage from last year’s mistakes.

Another is societal. In order for a society to function, it must be able to move forward. As Jonathan Larson wrote so beautifully, “The opposite of War isn’t peace. It’s Creation!” In society, there has to be a system in place to punish or make up for real transgressions, so that vigilante justice is not practiced, and there has to be a system for forgiving, so that perceived ills are not carried down, generation to generation, infecting each one and using its energy not for creation but for retribution.

So we begin with the first task, casting that wide net and asking everyone for forgiveness.

in the Shulchan Aruch, Rabbi Joseph Caro explains that God can only forgive the sins committed against God, not those performed against other human beings, and so, we must ask our fellow humans for forgiveness. Not surprisingly, the laws here become quite elaborate. If we ask once and are not forgiven, we must ask again, up to three times. We must take witnesses. If it is our rabbi, 3 times is not enough, we must ask until forgiven. If the person we wronged has died, we must take witnesses to her grave and ask forgiveness publicly.

This custom of asking for forgiveness became widespread, not surprisingly, but rapidly took on a form that some of you might recognize today. A quick call to a friend between Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur that goes something like this?

“Stella! hi, It’s Kari. Shanah Tova! How’s the family? Josh got off to college OK? Great. Is Sarah still dating that guy? Any signs of a

wedding? OK. How's work? Yeah, the kids are great. Alex is home from Israel for a few weeks with Adi. It's great having them home. Ben's back at school, a little anxious but doing great. We need to make plans to go out sometime soon. Oh, and by the way, if I did anything this year that offended you or hurt you, I am so sorry. Please forgive. Alright, have an easy fast. Bye"

Spoken in this glib, offhanded way, the apology is probably useless at best, and maybe even offensive. If the person does feel you have hurt them, they may perceive that you have no feelings whatsoever, that you will never be able to learn to NOT hurt in the manner you did, and may be reluctant to continue to engage. If the person would have been willing to tell you how they were hurt, they may not get the chance, and an opportunity for learning and healing is lost.

However, if that apology is offered sincerely with enough time for a real conversation, a friend might surprise us with a response like "well actually, I know you had the best of intentions when you "fill in the blank," but it really hurt me because of x, y and z. This dialogue can lead to real forgiveness and healing, and maybe even help us do it better next time.

If you can make the time, have some of these conversations. You might be surprised by what comes of it!

Sometimes, this opening is not enough, though, especially when the offense didn't come from good intentions but from anger, pain, or selfishness.

To combat against the glib version, in Pneninei halakha, chapter 5, Rabbi Eliezer Melamed explains “ Some people ask forgiveness from all their friends and acquaintances before Yom Kippur. However, this practice is almost meaningless. People fool themselves into thinking that because they are so careful to ask for forgiveness from all their friends, this makes them pious. In fact, though, they are acting wickedly because they are not asking forgiveness from the people they actually hurt. Rather, the point is to do some soul searching before Yom Kippur and recall those whom one may have truly hurt. He should then request forgiveness from them.”

And so, the second task, to acknowledge our wrongdoings to the other and sincerely ask for forgiveness.

The New York Times published an article on the first day of Rosh hashannah this year about an end of the year ritual in Peru. Although it was not explicitly stated, I have to believe its connection to the Jewish High Holidays and this theme of forgiveness was not a coincidence. The article spoke of a ritual called Takanakuy, in which any person can challenge another to a fist fight in order to aggrieve any perceived offense committed during the year. The fights are public and have a festive atmosphere. They begin and end with a hug. For this community, this is a way to heal from hurts and wrongs and move forward without the weight of the past year.

Our mitzvah of asking for forgiveness serves a similar purpose. But this whole process is not so easy. Sure. It is easy to call our friends and offhandedly ask for forgiveness. It is much harder to dig deep inside and admit to ourselves that we actually did something wrong. We inherently think of ourselves as good people with good intentions. We NEED to think of ourselves in that way in order to keep moving forward. We often hide from ourselves the uncomfortable truths of our transgressions. Not doing so would shake our whole self-notion to the core.

But being open to sitting with our faults and mistakes also allows us the time of self reflection that can lead to real change and ultimately help us actually be the better people we would like to imagine we already are. And if our friends and acquaintances see that we are truly ready to act differently and learn from them, they are more likely to forgive us and be willing to continue in relationship with us.

Finally, the hardest part: forgiving others for the things they have done that have hurt us. Sometimes, we cannot, and maybe even should not forgive. If an offense is so great, and the doer unrepentant—I'm thinking here of someone who commits genocide or torture — forgiveness may be impossible. Similarly, even if the offense is not unforgiveable, but the doer is unrepentant and perceived as likely to continue committing the same act, it may not be possible to forgive. However, most “sins” against us are small and ultimately should be forgiveable. For insight on how to do this, I turn to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of blessed memory, who plays a substantial role in our morning minyan, and whose words, through the interpretations of my friends, have continually inspired me.

Rabbi Sacks uses Joseph as the first example of a person truly forgiving others for horrible acts. By proving to his brothers not just once when he first revealed himself to them, but a second time when Jacob died,

that he had no intention of avenging himself, Jacob acted radically. Human nature is to take revenge for wrongs, and often the cycle of revenge can be carried l'dor va dor, through the generations. Joseph broke this cycle so his people could survive and prosper, which WAS, in his understanding, the whole reason for his journey.

Rabbi Sacks spoke of the difference between shame and guilt cultures, and I quote him here because he said it better than I could paraphrase "The key difference between the two is that in shame cultures, wrongdoing is like a stain on the person. Hence the only way to be rehabilitated is to have the stain covered up somehow... You do this by placating the victim of your wrong so that in effect he "turns a blind eye" to what you did. His resentment, indignation and desire for revenge have been appeased.

In guilt cultures, however, there is a fundamental distinction between the person and his or her acts. It was the act that was wrong, not the person. That is what makes forgiveness possible. I forgive you because, when you admit you did wrong, express remorse and do all you can to make amends, especially when I see that, given the opportunity to repeat the crime you do not do so because you have changed, then I see that you have distanced yourself from your deed. *Forgiveness means I fundamentally reaffirm your worth as a person, despite the fact that we both know your act was wrong.* [\[6\]](#)

This makes me think of my favorite teaching from Rabbi Bronstein's B'nei Mitzvah class. If we can truly see each other panim l'panim, face to face, and see the divine in each other, we will see the fundamental worth of the person in front of us. Then, we can separate them from the thing they did, and finally forgive.

So, to close, for the sake of our community, our relationships, our selves, three tasks. To ask for forgiveness widely and sincerely. To dig deep, realize the hurts we have created and ask forgiveness for those specifically. And finally, to forgive.

You may be wondering why you haven't heard from me this past week and I haven't asked your forgiveness. I love that Judaism sets time frames and specific rules and tasks. I try to stick to those timelines, but sometimes, I fall short. Between the time spent preparing this drash (how ironic) having my daughter home from Israel, and work, I haven't made the time. When I was ready to graduate from college and had been studying with the wonderful Rabbi Eddi Feld all year with the aim of converting to Judaism, he said to me "You're technically not ready for conversion—you don't know enough blessings and rituals yet. But I know you are going to keep studying and learning, and I so I feel ready to convert you anyway." And so, although we talk about the book of life being sealed at the end of this day, I do believe this work is ongoing, just as the work of choosing to be a Jew is. I sincerely hope and believe revisions can be made even after the book is sealed.

So I begin now, throwing the net very wide. I promise to try to get to you personally to have a conversation, but for starters, if I have done anything this year that hurt you, I hope you will forgive me, and I hope

you will be brave enough to tell me and trust that I will be open to hearing your hurt.

G'mar Chatimah tovah. A healthy, happy year to you and your loved ones.