

"Forgiveness"
דרשה (sermon) for Yom Kippur Day, 5768
Saturday, September 15, 2007

Note: All translations are my own.

One of the most famous literary works in Judaism next to the תורה (*Torah*, Bible) is the work known as פירקי אבות (*Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of the Fathers). *Pirkei Avot* is a section of the Mishnah, compiled probably a little after the year 200. It is a compilation of wise sayings from the great rabbis up to that time. We look to *Pirkei Avot* for a treasure trove of ethical teachings and for guidance in life. Many דרשות (*derashot*, sermons) are written based on teachings from that work. Today, however, I am going to be basing my thoughts not on the ancient *Pirkei Avot*, but on a wonderful book called Wisdom of Our Fathers by Tim Russert. Tim Russert has been the moderator of Meet the Press for a number of years. In 2004 he published a book called Big Russ and Me about the lessons he had learned from his father, whom he describes as a "steady, hardworking, and modest man."¹ Big Russ and Me became a national bestseller. As the book became popular, Russert received so many letters from people talking about the lessons they learned from their fathers, that Russert published an anthology of them, called Wisdom of Our Fathers. When I looked through the book a couple weeks ago at a book store, one story, written by Marla Kovatch of Flanders New Jersey caught my eye. She writes:

My parents separated when I was thirteen, and by the time I was sixteen I had no contact with my father. This went on for about ten years, until I had a dream in which a faceless child looked up at me and asked, "Mommy, why don't you speak to Grandpa?"

The next day I broke my silence and called my father - the best thing I ever did. It has been about seven years since we resumed our relationship and in those years I have had three children who adore him as he adores them. I can't imagine them not having the chance to know this remarkable man I call Daddy.

What has my father taught me? Forgiveness. He answered my call that day and accepted me with open arms, and he showed me that the time we had "lost" was far less important than the many times we would share from that day on. Forgiveness - what a beautiful gift! How blessed I am, not only to have found it within myself but to have received it from him as well.²

I think what this letter teaches us, more than anything else is to realize that forgiveness - our capacity to give it, and our fortune at receiving it - is a precious gift. The writer found it within herself to pick up the phone and rekindle her relationship with her father. Were she not to do so, there would have been a tremendous void in her life, and in the lives of her children.

¹ Wisdom of Our Fathers p. ix.

² *Id.* p. 144.

Today, on Yom Kippur, we should focus ourselves on our own capacity to forgive, as well as our own aspirations to be worthy of forgiveness. Jewish law teaches that prayer and repentance can only earn forgiveness from God for our religious failures. When it comes to failures in our behavior toward others, one cannot be forgiven by God until seeking the forgiveness of the person we have wronged. On the other hand, the Rabbis teach that one should be ready to forgive another for their wrongdoings, and if after three sincere attempts to be forgiven the person still refuses, the failure to forgive is that person's failure.³ Maimonides puts it eloquently:

אסור לאדם להיות אכזרי ולא יתפייס אלא יהא נוח לרצות וקשה לכעוס ובשעה שמבקש ממנו החוטא למחול מוחל בלב שלם ובנפש חפוצה, ואפילו הצר לו וחטא לו הרבה לא יקום ולא יטור . . .

It is forbidden for one to be stubborn and not forgive, rather one should be easy to accept and difficult to anger, and when the sinner asks him to forgive, he should forgive with a full heart and a willing soul. Even if the person troubled him and sinned greatly toward him, he should not take revenge or begrudge.⁴

In the Talmud, the sage Rava says that the one who is willing to forgive others is the one who is worthy of God's forgiveness.⁵ He learns this from the words from the book of Micah which are the end to this afternoon's Haftorah and which also reflect the words of the thirteen attributes of God which we repeat so often on Yom Kippur. Micah describes God as "וְעָבַר עַל פְּשָׁע" *who forgives iniquity and overlooks transgression.*⁶ Rava asks: "For whom does [God] forgive iniquity?" and answers "for the one who overlooks transgressions."

The great poet Alexander Pope said, "To err is human, to forgive divine."⁷ Indeed, it is God's capacity for forgiveness that we hope to emulate. But forgiveness is also a beautiful gift of humanity. Forgiveness is a tremendous element to living a complete and contented life. There is much in our lives that we can miss if we can't find it in our hearts to forgive others. In the most extreme cases, we might block someone out of our lives completely. Other times, we may just miss one or two times we might otherwise have spent with the person, or we might miss celebrating with a full heart with them in times of joy, or our friendship may not bring us every ounce of consolation that it could in our time of need.

Forgiveness is not only about bringing a person back into our lives, but also about erasing the darkness in our hearts that is our anger. Many times we fool ourselves into believing that we no longer care for the person with whom we are angry. If that were true, we probably wouldn't feel nearly as bad. But most of the time our anger is as much a manifestation of our love as anything else. When a person we love hurts us, it cuts deep into our soul. But that doesn't mean we no longer love them. It just means that in the face of our anger, in the face of our feelings of betrayal, our love causes us great pain. Forgiveness, finding a way to accept what went wrong and to continue in a loving relationship is the only cure for the aches in our heart.

³ See e.g. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:9 and *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim* 606:1.

⁴ *Mishneh Torah Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:10.

⁵ Babylonian Talmud Megillah 28a. דאמר רבא : כל המעביר על מדותיו מעבירין ממנו כל פשעיו, שנאמר . נשא עון ועבר על פשע, למי נושא עון - למי שעובר על פשע.

⁶ Micah 7:18.

⁷ "An Essay on Criticism."

The letter in Wisdom of Our Fathers speaks not only of the daughter's great fortune of forgiving her father, but also her great fortune in receiving forgiveness from her father. So too, Yom Kippur calls on us not only to forgive others, but also to seek their forgiveness.

Just as we search ourselves for the capacity for forgiveness on Yom Kippur, so too we search ourselves for the capacity to seek forgiveness. Our minds put up many barriers to stop us from seeking forgiveness. Perhaps we are stubbornly holding on to our hope that we were 100% right in a given situation, even though deep in our hearts we realize that we bear some responsibility for what happened. Sometimes we are too embarrassed to ask for forgiveness. Sometimes, and this is particularly true of our religious failings, we are too stuck in our ways to realize we have gone wrong in the first place. On Yom Kippur we try to take it into our hearts that we cannot always be sure of our ways. We try to recognize where we have gone wrong. As *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) says: "כִּי אָדָם אֵין צְדִיק בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה טוֹב וְלֹא יִחַטָּא *for there is no one person on earth who does good and does not sin.*" By definition, we all have room for religious improvement. We may try to excuse our shortcomings by telling ourselves that we're not *that* religious, or that we simply are following in our family's footsteps, but we know that each one of us has responsibility for our own religious lives. Just as when we have wronged our friends, we must muster up the combination of humility and courage to realize that we are capable of improving, and ask God to forgive our shortcomings up to now.

Sometimes, we fear that our sin is too egregious to warrant forgiveness. If we are not accepted, we may find the finality of our estrangement to be another psychological blow. Our story from the Tim Russert book tells us that sometimes the capacity of others to forgive us can be surprising. And as long as we seek forgiveness sincerely, at least our hearts can rest knowing that we did whatever was in our power to repair the relationship. Moreover, the Rabbis teach us that it is our responsibility to sincerely apologize. After we have asked for forgiveness three times, the responsibility now lies with the other.

As it is with asking friends for forgiveness, we may also fear that we are not worthy of God's forgiveness. Perhaps we fear that we are too far off of the right path. Perhaps we believe that we could never do everything that we should do. The woman calling her father could not be sure if he would be willing to answer her call. This is not the case with God, who is always available to hear our call. In today's Haftorah God says: "שְׁלוֹם שְׁלוֹם לְרָחוֹק וְלִקְרוֹב . . . *Peace, peace to the one who is far and the one who is near . . .*"⁸ Based on the fact that those who are far away are mentioned before those who are near, Rabbi Abahu concludes in the Talmud: "Where a person who returned to God stands, a completely righteous person is cannot stand."⁹ As long as you strive to increase your connection to Judaism, you are closer to God than you may realize, and you are all the more worthy of forgiveness.

There is yet another fear that comes with reconciliation. What of the time lost? If we repair our relationship now, does that mean we have wasted all this time in the past? The letter in Wisdom of Our Fathers addresses these fears beautifully, "He answered my call that day and accepted me with open arms, and he showed me that the time we had 'lost' was far less important

⁸ Isaiah 57:19.

⁹ Babylonian Talmud Berachot 34b. דאמר רבי אבהו: מקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין - צדיקים גמורים - אינם עומדין, שנאמר: שלום שלום לרחוק ולקרוב. לרחוק ברישא והדר לקרוב ורבי יוחנן אמר לך: מאי רחוק - note that I've taken some poetic license regarding Rabbi Abahu's statement, which likely refers directly to one who has already returned to complete observance.

than the many times we would share from that day on." The past is out of our hands. The future can be bright and meaningful, and that future is so much more important to us. However many days and years we have in the future, let them be days blessed with peace and love rather than anger and hurt.

We may also worry that there is not enough time to make up for times that we already missed in our religious lives. But just as with personal reconciliation, the time ahead of us outweighs the time of the past. In the book of Ezekiel, God says, " . . . וְרָשָׁעַת הָרָשָׁע לֹא יִפְשֹׁל בָּהּ . . ." *the evil of the evildoer will not be a barrier on the day he repents from his evil.*"¹⁰ The author of Unetaneh Tokef also seizes on the idea that it is never too late for repentance: "ועד יום מותו תחכה לו אם ישוב מיד תקבלו" *and until the day of his death you will wait for him, and if he repents you will immediately receive him*" It is never too late to rebuild our relationship with the Holy One, Blessed is He. The only question is whether we will ever find ourselves on that path.

And now, we are about to enter the Yizkor service, where we remember our relatives and friends who are no longer with us. Even here, there is room in our hearts to repair the strains in our relationships with those loved ones. Perhaps there is something that they did that still upsets us to this day. Maybe there is an "I'm sorry" that we never got to say in this lifetime. Maybe the strains in the relationship were great, or maybe they were just on the periphery. Today, let's try to release ourselves from those strains as well. For those moments where they may have stung us, we pray that their souls are now free of the burdens of human imperfections that may have guided them wrongly. For those that we may have wronged, we pray that their souls are no longer burdened by our actions and we pray that through our repentance we have become people who are now worthy of their forgiveness. . . Though we can no longer have them here with us in this world, we hope that by finding forgiveness in our hearts we can lighten our load and carry their memories in our hearts as a blessing.

May this year 5768 be a year of forgiveness. May we be blessed with a heart that is willing to forgive, and with genuine repentance that makes us worthy of the forgiveness from God as well as from our family and friends. May we find ourselves free of our own anger and our own guilt. "Forgiveness - what a beautiful gift!" May it be this years most plentiful bounty.

¹⁰ Ezekiel 33:12.