

We Begin Again in Love

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Last Fall, as we took note of the Jewish high holidays, I spoke of the need for each of us to care enough to seek forgiveness, to make amends, to desire reconciliation with those whom we have harmed. In these days in which our Jewish sisters and brothers seek both atonement for their broken promises to God as well as repair for their broken relationships with other people, it is good to think about how we say we're sorry for the things we've done wrong.

And yet, that is only half of the equation.

The other half—and I think the harder half—is forgiving.

Forgiving ourselves for the ways in which we've fallen short, for the mistakes we've made, for the infinite things that we beat ourselves up for every day.

Forgiving those who have offended us, who have perpetrated some wrong against us. Forgiving those who have broken our trust, made us angry, or hurt us—emotionally, spiritually, psychologically or physically.

Whatever and whoever we are called to forgive, it is not easy work, but it is necessary work for the repair of our world.

Philosopher, theologian and rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes of the necessary qualities we must cultivate in order to be in relationship with people who are different from us. In his book *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, Sacks outlines a theological blueprint for globalization, calling us to reclaim the religious language of covenant—the open, living, sacred agreement between and among people— in navigating differences in this increasingly complex world.

The seven qualities Sacks lists as necessary to cultivate are these:

(Note: Discussion based in part upon lectures by Dr. Michael Hogue, Meadville-Lombard Theological School, January 2007)

Control, the capacity to make moral decisions in the face of rapid social and technological change.

Contribution, the understanding that we are surrounded by abundance and need to make sure that abundance reaches those who are in need.

Compassion, the need for justice and mercy as moral values in the political and economic world.

Creativity, the value of continued innovation and discovery.

Cooperation, the interdependence of all life and the need for relationships and institutions that bind us together.

Conservation, the good stewardship of our Earth and its resources.

And, finally, Conciliation, the need for forgiveness to break the cycles of violence, revenge and grief in our world.

This need for forgiveness in our world penetrates even the most difficult and intractable situations and clashes.

Sacks writes:

“In the late summer of 1999 I visited Kosovo. The NATO action was nearing an end, and the refugees had returned. There was some semblance of normal life, yet the tension was palpable. A few months earlier it had been the Kosovar Albanians who had been in fear of their lives. Some 800,000 had fled; 10,000 had been killed. Now it was the Serbs who were afraid.... There were murders taking place nightly....”

The conflict, he writes, was not over—it was just beneath the surface, ready to erupt again.

Sacks continues:

“It was then, standing in the centre of Pristina amid the wreckage and rubble of war, that I understood as never before the power of a single word to change the world—the word *forgiveness*. The conflict had started more than six centuries earlier, in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. Both sides retained strong memories of that event. It had been a recurring theme in their history ever since. If Serbs and Albanians could forgive one another and act so as to be forgiven by one another they would have a future. If not, they were destined to replay the Battle of 1389 until the end of time.” (Sacks, 177-178)

The work of forgiveness, Sacks points out, is necessary for the people of Kosovo to move on from hundreds of years of violence, killing, “ethnic cleansing,” and threats.

Few societies have mastered the fragile art of forgiveness. Some, though, are trying very hard to get it right, to practice forgiveness, even for the most heinous deeds.

Take South Africa, for example, where decades of apartheid came to an end in 1990. Shortly thereafter, the government of South Africa set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, charged with bearing witness to the crimes of the previous fifty years. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth_and_Reconciliation_Commission_\(South_Africa\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth_and_Reconciliation_Commission_(South_Africa)))

Led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Commission heard testimony for two whole years, investigating the petitions of over seven thousand people who wanted to make restitution—to seek amends—for what they had done.

A decade after the Commission’s report, its efforts stand as a remarkable attempt to bring forgiveness to a population sorely in need of the ability to move on, a population of people many of whom had been systematically abused, and many of whom had been forced to participate in that abuse.

Whether it was ultimately successful in doing this is a matter of some debate, and is a matter that will not be settled for many years to come, but the effort was remarkable nonetheless.

In South Africa, leaders understood that the past cannot be undone, however horrible it was.

There, they recognized that forgetting was not an option, however attractive it might seem to try. Jonathan Sacks quotes Ogden Nash as having once said that “No man ever forgets where he buried the hatchet.”

Indeed, this is why forgiveness is so difficult as well—it runs against human nature, that nature that tells us to dig up the hatchet and take one more whack.

Sacks writes that forgiveness is “the ability to live with the past without being held captive by the past.” (Sacks, 179)

And yet forgiveness, Sacks reminds us, is also the “most compelling testimony to human freedom.” Forgiveness proves that we are not compelled to act in a certain way just because something happened to us. It proves that we are free to make a better decision—even when faced with decades or centuries of the cycle of hatred and violence, as the people in South Africa and Kosovo are.

The work of forgiveness is the work of turning outwards from ourselves.

Desiderius Erasmus, a theologian and humanist philosopher of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, wrote in 1511 that, “a man dead to all sense of nature and common actions, and no more moved with love or pity than if he were a flint or rock; whose censure nothing escapes; that commits no errors thysself, but has a lynx’s eyes upon others; measures everything by an exact line, and forgives nothing; places himself with himself only....” (*Desiderius Erasmus, The Praise of Folly, 1511*)

Erasmus understood that forgiveness was an act of placing oneself in relationship with another, of doing something for the good of another in order to do something for one’s own good.

Forgiveness is a great gift that we can give another. I have seen the hold it can have over people, and the torment that the lack of forgiveness can wreak on people who have done very bad things.

Almost ten years ago now, I was active in work with the Rape Crisis Center of Durham. There, I served as a crisis advocate for survivors of rape and sexual abuse and their families, and I participated in various educational programs around Durham. Most of those educational programs were in schools, but we also trained police officers and hospital workers. One of these programs, however, was an experience I will never forget.

On two occasions, I volunteered to be a part of a team of rape crisis advocates that visited a program for convicted sex offenders called SOAR—for Sex Offender Accountability and Responsibility. The program took place in the Harnett Correctional Institution, a medium-security state prison in Lillington, North Carolina.

In order to get into the program, the men had to admit to what they had done and be willing to submit to hundreds of hours of therapy and confrontational programs about their offenses. They received no special treatment in prison—in fact, many of them were treated worse by fellow inmates once they had admitted to crimes of abuse and rape.

One two-hour session towards the end of the months-long program invited rape crisis advocates in to talk with the men in a group setting. We were supposed to be honest about what we had experienced—to tell them stories of the lives that we had seen shattered by rape and sexual abuse, to give them some glimpse of the post-traumatic stress disorder that gave survivors flashbacks in the middle of the night for years, flashbacks strong enough to call a crisis hotline in terror.

We were as close to their victims as they were ever going to get.

On both occasions that I participated in this program, I was overwhelmed by the intense longing of these men for forgiveness.

After months of grueling punishment and voluntary therapy, most of them wished sincerely that they could take back what they had done. And many of them wanted nothing more than to tell the person they had harmed how sorry they were. Few of them understood why this was not ever going to be an option for them—and it was part of our job to let them know that.

But for all we could do to tell them stories and listen to theirs, forgiveness was the one thing we could not ever give them. And it seemed that it was all they really wanted.

It was hard to participate in that program, and I'm amazed I signed up for it twice, to be honest with you. It was hard to see humanity, much less inherent worth and dignity, in some of the people I encountered in that program—the few people who, despite the program, would not come to terms with what they had done to another person.

It was hard to see the pain of survivors on a daily basis and then see also the pain of perpetrators. It reminded me that cycles of violence hurt everyone caught up in them.

But most of all, it was hard to see people begging for forgiveness.

Our capacity to forgive is something to be explored, even when it is truly painful and difficult.

Forgiveness is a great spiritual virtue that we can and should cultivate in ourselves—whether or not others seek it from us, whether or not those who have wronged us seek to atone or to apologize.

No less an authority on Jewish teaching than Maimonides once wrote that “If someone is sinned against by another and the offended party does not wish to rebuke him or to say anything to him...then if one forgives him in his heart and bears no animosity against him and does not rebuke him, this is indeed the way of saintliness.” *(as quoted in Sacks, 186)*

Forgiveness is, ultimately, also a gift we give ourselves.

To cultivate a practice of forgiveness, we are asked to make a radical choice in favor of healing. We are asked to let go of our hate, our animosity, our hurt, and to move on to what then becomes possible.

Forgiveness is also an act of love.

Sacks reminds us that “at the heart of the concept of forgiveness is the idea of love—not abstract love but the real, concrete attachment of one being for another. Love,” Sacks writes, “distinguishes between the person and the deed. An act may be evil, but since the person is free, he or she is not inseparably joined to that evil.” *(Sacks, 180)*

And so, as we reflect today upon our own mistakes, our own failings, our own sources of atonement, let us also learn to forgive, let us love even those whom it is hardest for us to love. Let us do this as the ultimate act of hope for the future.

Our world will be better for it. We will be better for it. May it be so.