

LET THEM KNOW

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It is said that on Yom Kippur, God forgives transgressions only between a person and God. Transgressions committed against other persons can be forgiven only after we have sought forgiveness from those we have harmed. For a transgression against another person, we must go to that person and directly and sincerely seek forgiveness. We must also offer to make amends or restitution.

But what if we're not the ones who did the wrong? Suppose someone has wronged us? Is there anything we can do to promote our own forgiveness? Is there anything we can do to make it right with the person who hurt us? Or do we just have to wait until they come around?

The problem with waiting, of course, is that they may never come around.

For the Yom Kippur Mincha service, there is an alternate Torah reading from *parsha* Kedoshim. Now, the word *kedoshim* (קְדוּשִׁים) means “holy.” So it says, *kedoshim tehiyu, ki kadosh ani Hashem elokeichem* (קְדוּשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם)—“And you be holy,” the scripture says, “because I the Lord your God am holy.” (Leviticus 19:2)

This particular part of the Torah focuses on some of the things that we have to *do* to be holy. The beginning verses in the reading speak of our behavior towards our neighbor. They teach us how we are to measure all that we say and do by the eye of God, by the yardstick of truth, honesty, conscientiousness and brotherly love, which God expects from us.

But we want to focus on a couple of verses that appear at the end of the alternate Yom Kippur Mincha reading, because we think they will help us to deal with this question of our own forgiveness. They begin with the words, *Lo tisna et achicha bilvavecha* (לֹא-תִשָּׂא אֶת-אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ)—“You shall not hate your brother in your heart.” (Leviticus 19:17)

The rabbis describe *sina* (שָׂנָא) or hatred as that thorn and thistle feeling, which at the very least causes us to want to be at a distance from that person—perhaps we cross the street to avoid them—and at the most can make us wish them dead. The verse refers, our rabbis have said, to the occasion of someone's having hurt or wronged us. And the instruction is that we are forbidden to hate that person in our heart.

But how can God demand what we should feel in our hearts? Don't we have a *right* to be angry when someone has wronged us? And after all, isn't anger a natural human response?

We ask you to think back to the time in the last year when someone wronged *you*, and did not apologize. Think about how you feel about that person. And how you would feel if someone said to you, as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) has said about this verse, “You are not to allow any hatred to rise up in your heart. . . .”

Easy for him to say, we imagine you saying: he doesn't know the pain of my situation; he doesn't know what it feels like. But the Torah often is not concerned only with our pain and our feelings. The Torah frequently asks us to go beyond our feelings. If we were to rely only on our feelings, for example, we might treat each other badly even when we didn't deserve it, let alone when we did. The scripture was written in such a way as to reflect that we human beings find all kinds of ways to worm out of doing the right thing, and to rationalize our behavior in the process. Thus the Torah doesn't rely on our own vague, subjective feelings to get us to do the right thing.

The Torah is very specific about what we should do and not do in these situations. For example, given how angry we might be with this person, and justifiably so, we might feel like taking some kind of revenge. But the Torah here says *lo tikom* (לֹא-תִקֹּם). (Leviticus 19:18) You may *not* take revenge. In effect, we are to live in the image of God, not adopting the values of those who harm us.

And what is revenge?

It may not be what you think! The Talmud tells us the story, for example, about the lending of a sickle. Since this is modern times, we'll make it a lawnmower. So, yesterday we came to borrow your lawnmower, and for some reason—possibly we didn't bring it back on time the last time we borrowed it—you come up with some excuse why we can't have it this time. Then, as it happens, today *you* need to borrow *our* weedwhacker, and come to us asking for it. What should we tell you? If left to our own devices, we might be thinking: You wouldn't help us, when we needed your help—why should we help you?

According to the Torah, revenge is not okay—but what about bearing a grudge?

No, that's also not okay.

And what is a grudge?

A grudge, the Talmud says, is this: “*Sure*, we'll lend you the weedwhacker, here it is.” And then we add: “We're not like you, who wouldn't lend us your lawnmower.”

According to the Torah, none of this is allowed.

But why is the Torah so demanding of us?

If we go the end of the second verse, we discover the words, *ani Hashem* (אני ה')—"I am the Lord." It may be quite natural for us to feel badly toward someone who has done us wrong. But as our rabbis have said, however badly he may have behaved towards us, however little he or she may deserve the term neighbor, there is one name he or she can never lose—and that is brother, or sister. We remain children of the same parent—*Hashem*.

Possibly you remember hearing this from a parent, or perhaps you have said this to your own child: No matter what he's done, he's still your brother. Like our parents, the Torah is interested in keeping us together as a people, as a community. And our natural sentiments and tendencies are not always the best guide for accomplishing that.

And in fact, in these two verses the Torah comes to make the ultimate demand of us. Not only are you not to hate, not only are you not to take revenge, nor even bear a grudge, but now, the verse comes to teach us, *v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocha* (ואהבת לרעך כמוך)—you are also to "love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18)

Oy, I hear you saying, now she says I have to love this person? How can I be expected to love someone who hurt me?

Significantly, the verse does not say, *v'ahavta et reiacha*. If the little word *et* (את) had been included, it would mean feeling literally the same love for others that we feel for ourselves, which would be practically impossible to carry out. But what it does say here is, *v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocha*, and *l'reiacha* (לרעך) is not the person himself, but everything that pertains to the person, all the conditions of his or her life, and his or her welfare in the world. We are to help with everything that will further this person's well-being and happiness as if we were working for ourselves. And we must keep trouble away from him or her as if it threatened ourselves.

As Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Kopitchinitz used to say: "It does not mean to love saintly and righteous people; it is impossible *not* to love such people. But God commands us to love even people whom it is hard to love." And the rabbis said, this is something that does lie within our capabilities, and is something that is required of us even towards somebody whose personality may actually be highly antipathetic to us. For the demand of this love is something that lies outside the sphere of the personality of our neighbor, and is not based on any of his or her qualities. The spiritually and morally perfect person loves his or her neighbor as being equally a creation of God.

But, we can hear you saying, what about my anger? Am I supposed to stuff it? Isn't it unhealthy?

Oy, you're saying, by the time they get done with this, I won't be able to say anything. But that is where you would be wrong.

Regarding the question of your right to anger, the Torah answers, yes *and* no. The Torah generally condemns anger; it is said that senseless, unjustified hatred, *sinat chinam*, was what resulted in the destruction of the Temple. But on the other hand, the Torah condones righteous indignation, for it is also said that the Temple was destroyed because the people failed to rebuke each other.

And in regard to whether stuffing anger is unhealthy: yes it is, which is precisely what the verse meant by, "You will not hate your brother in your heart." It is unhealthy for you and for him, and the scripture then goes on to say, *hocheach tochiach et amitecha* (חוכח תוכיח את-עמיתך)—"You will surely rebuke that person." (Leviticus 19:17)

The solution to avoid smoldering away in anger is to say something—but *what?*

Now the word rebuke or reprove may not mean what you think it means. In Hebrew, according to Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105), the word means "to make clear." Which suggests the possibility that things are not clear. For example, it may not have been clear to the other person what he or she did to hurt you, or the other person may not even be aware of it. We hate to tell you how many times we've been upset about something we thought someone did to us on purpose, and it turned out that they hadn't even been aware of it, or that it was completely accidental.

We could add here, that there's always the possibility that we ourselves have, without being aware of it, done something wrong, in which case we might open the conversation with the words, "We're imagining that we've done something to offend you."

In any case, the words *hocheach tochiach* (חוכח תוכיח), "you will surely rebuke," teach us that when anyone has wronged us, or we feel hurt or offended by someone, we have the duty either to forget completely the whole matter and not allow it to have the slightest influence on our attitude or feelings towards him, or if we feel we cannot do this, then we must frankly speak out and place the matter openly before him, giving him the opportunity to justify his behavior or to make amends for it.

Actually, according to Rabbi Hirsch, the word *hocheach* means to make someone aware of his *own true self*, the self that may have been abandoned in doing the hurtful thing.

But how do you rebuke in such a way that you make a person aware of his own true self?

Anyone like us, who's ever said angry words in a hurry and regretted those words deeply, wishing they could take them back, knows what we're talking about. For the Torah calls the person to be rebuked, *amitecha* (עמיתך), your fellow, and the use of that term says that we are to avoid the slightest trace of any assumption of superiority. It implies that the one to be admonished must be made to feel how completely we value him as our absolute equal, and how he has quite the same right to treat us in a similar way.

One way to open the conversation is to say something like, "I'm sure that you didn't mean to . . ."—fill in the blank. Or, "I'm sure that you wouldn't want to . . ."—fill in the blank.

In addition, the Torah says, don't rebuke the person in such a way that you commit a sin yourself.

What does this mean?

It means, do not put him or her to shame in front of other people. For the scripture says, *v'lo tisa alav chet* (ולא-תשא עליו חטא)—"and you shall not bear sin because of him" (Leviticus 19:17)—which has also been interpreted to mean, if we do not speak out against that which is destructive to us, then we ourselves have done wrong. Because in failing to rebuke, we carry the sin not only of the individual whom we could have helped return to his own true self, but also of the community, since others may also suffer from his mistakes. As it is said: "Jerusalem was destroyed only because they did not rebuke each other." (Shabbat 119b)

Oy, we hear you saying. Now they say we're responsible for the whole *world*? And the answer to that is, yes, we are.

So, if you have a gripe with someone, first get a picture in your head of that person as a creation of God, and also see yourself as a creation of God. Then, go to that person in private, and in gentleness, in kindness . . . let them know.

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