

A Brief History of Forgiveness - Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

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The birth of forgiveness, in a similar way to the first man-made flight in 1903 or the discovery of writing some 5,000 years ago, is one of these moments in which the world changes and a new possibility is born.

It is one of the most radical ideas ever to have been introduced into the moral imagination of humankind. Forgiveness is an action, not a reaction. It breaks the cycle of stimulus-response, harm and retaliation, wrong and revenge. It frees individuals from the burden of their past, and humanity from the irreversibility of history. It tells us that enemies can become friends.

According to the philosopher David Konstan¹, Forgiveness is yet another unique contribution of Judaism to Humanity. Ancient Greek had a different mechanism, namely the Appeasement of Anger. We can find it also in Genesis 32-33 in the story of Jacob meeting Esau when he returns, 22 years after fleeing from his homeland, K'na-an. He sends presents, emissaries and messages of appeasement to Esau and humiliates himself when he faces his twin brother. Eventually they embrace, kiss each other, and go each on his own way, never to get together again. There is no forgiveness in this encounter, only anger appeasement.

I. The Idea of Freedom

A necessary, but not adequate, prerequisite idea is required before forgiveness can enter the world: it is the idea of Freedom and Free Will.

Greek mythology is full with stories that are based on the idea of *moira* – inevitability, and *Ananke* – blind fate. Maybe that is a reason why forgiveness does not exist in Greek philosophy. Others also challenged the concept of free will: Spinoza (all that there is comes from natural necessity), Marks (human behaviors is driven by economics), and many others.

Unconditional freedom and free will are introduced to the Western civilization in the very first chapter of Genesis when God freely creates the universe, concluding with the making of humankind in His own Image and His Likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). We may be dust of the earth, yet within us IS the breath of God; that Ru-ah, the breath, spirit, of God He instills in us IS the freedom to make choices at will.

All life was created. Humans alone are creative. Every life-form has drives, inherent instincts of survival. Humans alone are capable of what philosophers call second-order evaluations, deciding which drives to pursue and which not. Other animals act. We

¹ David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

alone bear responsibility for our acts because we could have chosen to act otherwise. Freedom is God's greatest gift to humankind but it is also the most fateful and terrifying. For it means that we alone have the power to destroy the work of God. freedom is a double-edged sword. The freedom to do good is inseparable from the freedom to do harm, to commit sin, to practice evil. One must assume that God, foreseeing the possibility of humans to sin, to do evil, must have also provided a mechanism to counter it, an antidote. This is T'shuvah (repentance) and forgiveness. Without releasing the person from moral responsibility, one acknowledges and recognizes one's wrong action; express remorse for the past and commit oneself to learn and grow, so as to avoid repetition of such actions in the future.

The Midrash in B'reshit Rabbah (3:8) adds color to this idea:

אמר רבי ינאי מתחלת ברייתו של עולם צפה הקדוש ברוך הוא מעשיהו של צדיקים ומעשיהם של רשעים, והארץ היתה תהו, אלו מעשיהם של רשעים. ויאמר אלהים יהי אור, אלו מעשיהו של צדיקים. ויבדל אלהים בין האור ובין החושך, בין מעשיהו של צדיקים למעשיהו של רשעים. ויקרא אלהים לאור יום, אלו מעשיהו של צדיקים. ולחשך קרא לילה, אלו מעשיהו של רשעים. ויהי ערב, אלו מעשיהו של רשעים. ויהי בקר, אלו מעשיהו של צדיקים. יום אחד, שנתן להם הקדוש ברוך הוא יום אחד, ואיזה זה יום הכפורים.

Rabbi Yannai said: From the beginning of his creation of the universe the Holy One, blessed be He, foresaw the deeds of both the righteous and the wicked. "And the earth was formless, void, caotic", these are the deeds of the wicked. "God said, 'let there be light'", these are the deeds of the righteous. "God separated between the light and the darkness", [that means separated] the deeds of the righteous from the wicked. "God called the light day", these are the deeds of the righteous. "And the darkness he called night", these are the deeds of the wicked. "There was evening", these are the deeds of the wicked. "There was morning", these are the deeds of the righteous. "One day [a single day, a unique day]", which the Holy One, blessed be He, gave them both [the wicked and the righteous]. Which Day is this? Yom Kippur.

From this Midrash we learn that the mechanism of repentance and forgiveness was created even BEFORE the creation of the Homo-Sapiens. Without it, the creation of the animal called Human Being wouldn't make sense. There would be no way to mend the past, moving away from it, into a different path of a better future. With the lack of that, humanity would cease to have any voice of conscience, and we would then become lower than the beasts.

God gave us freedom, knowing the risks. Because we are free, we bear responsibility for our deeds; AND we can change; therefore, we are able and need to repent. This Jewish insistence on freedom – we become what we choose to be: good or bad, honest or deceptive, generous or mean-spirited – is one of its greatest contributions of Judaism to the ethical imagination.

II. Before God Forgives, Man Must Forgive

Even though, according to the Midrash we just studied, Forgiveness was created first, God does not apply it in the early times of humanity: He does not forgive Adam and Eve, nor Cain, though He mitigates their punishment. Nor He forgives the generation of the flood or the builders of the Babel Tower. Even Avraham's plea to spare the People

of Sodom is not a plea for forgiveness but rather letting them benefit the merit of the Righteous, should there be ten of them.

David Konstan, in *Before Forgiveness*, identifies the first recorded moment in history in which one human being forgives another: it is when Joseph discloses his identity to his brothers and while they are silent and in a state of shock, goes on to say these words (Genesis 45: 4-5, 8):

...אני יוסף אחיכם אשר מכרתם אתי מצרימה: ועתה אל תעצבו ואל יחר בעיניכם כי מכרתם אתי הנה כי למחלה שלחתי אלהים לפניכם: ...ועתה לא אתם שלחתם אתי הנה כי האלהים...

“I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.” Joseph’s forgiveness to his brothers is best expressed in *ibid*, *ibid* 15:

וַיִּנָּשֶׂק לְכָל אָחָיו וַיִּבְדַּח עֲלֵהֶם וַאֲחֵרֵי כֹן דִּבְרוּ אִתּוֹ אֵתוֹ:

He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; only then were his brothers able to talk to him.

However, this does not happen at the very first meeting Joseph has with his brothers. There is nothing accidental about Joseph’s behavior. His acts trigger his brothers to respond in certain ways. In fact, the whole sequence of events, from the moment the brothers appear before him in Egypt for the first time to the moment when he announces his identity and forgives them, is an intricately detailed account of *teshuva*, repentance, the prerequisite for forgiveness and the key act of Yom Kippur itself.

First phase: Admission and remorse:

After being confined for three days in the Guardhouse they converse among themselves, not knowing that Joseph understands (*Ibid* 42:21):

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחָיו אֲבָל אֲשֵׁמִים אֲנַחְנוּ עַל אֲחֵינוּ אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהַתְחַנְּנוּ אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמְעֵנוּ עַל כֵּן בָּאָה אֵלֵינוּ הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת:

They said to one another, “Truly we are guilty [*aval ashemim anahnu*] because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that’s why this distress has come on us....”

An echo of those words, *aval ashemim anahnu*, “truly we are guilty,” reverberate throughout our prayers on Yom Kippur. They represent the first stage of repentance. *Admitting to one’s doing wrong and taking responsibility to those actions, and demonstrate remorse.*

Second phase: Confession:

The second stage of repentance is confession, as Yehuda says (*ibid*, 44:16):

מֵה נֹאמַר לְאֲדֹנָי מֵה נְדַבֵּר וּמֵה נִצְטַדֵּק הָאֱלֹהִים מִצָּא אֶת עֵוֹן עַבְדֶּיךָ הִנְנוּ עַבְדִּים לְאֲדֹנָי גַּם אֲנַחְנוּ גַּם אֲשֶׁר נִמְצָא הִגְבִּיעַ בְּיָדוֹ:

“What can we say to my lord? What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants’ guilt. We are now my lord’s slaves – we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup.”

Yehuda goes further than confessing for himself – he also takes a collective responsibility and will to pay the penance. However, Joseph declines Yehuda’s offer (ibid, ibid, 17):

חַלִּילָה לִּי מֵעֲשׂוֹת זֹאת הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר נִמְצָא הַגְּבִיעַ בְּיָדוֹ הוּא יִהְיֶה לִּי עֶבֶד וְאַתֶּם עָלְוּ לְשָׁלוֹם אֶל אֲבֵיכֶם:

Far be it from me to act thus! Only he in whose possession the goblet was found shall be my slave; the rest of you go back in peace to your father.”.

Joseph puts his brothers to the ultimate test: he gives them the opportunity to walk away harmless with the perfect reason, leaving Benjamin a slave. Thus, repeating the same transgression, crime, they once did when leaving Joseph behind and selling him as a slave to the Midyanites.

Third phase: Behavioral Change:

Yehuda’s response is different: he mounts a passionate plea to be allowed to take the guilt on himself so that Benjamin can be reunited with his father (ibid, ibid, 33):

וְעַתָּה יֵשֵׁב נָא עִבְדְּךָ תַּחַת הַנְּעָר עֶבֶד לְאֲדֹנָי וְהַנְּעָר יָעַל עִם אֶחָיו:

“So now let me remain as your slave in place of the lad. Let the lad go back with his brothers!”.

Yehuda has just demonstrated what the Talmud and Maimonides² define as complete repentance, namely when circumstances repeat themselves and you have an opportunity to commit the same offense again, you refrain from doing so because you have changed. Judah is the first ba’al teshuva, the first penitent, the first morally transformed individual in history. Joseph’s behavior has had nothing to do with his own dreams, or revenge, and everything to do with repentance. Only then, can Joseph forgive.

III. In Summary:

The brothers, led by Judah, have gone through all three stages of repentance: (1) admission and remorse (ḥarata), (2) confession (viduy) and (3) behavioral change (shinui ma’aseh).

Forgiveness only exists in a culture in which repentance exists. Repentance presupposes that we are free and morally responsible agents who are capable of change, specifically the change that comes about when we recognize that what we have done is wrong and we are responsible for it and must never do it again. The possibility of that kind of moral transformation simply did not exist in ancient Greece or any other pagan culture. Greece was a culture of character and fate. Judaism is a culture of will and choice, the first of its kind in the world.

² Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 2:1.

A story that demonstrates the above, Talmud, Ta-anit Tractate, 201-b (not a part of Rabbi Sacks teaching):

which [Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon](#), came from Migdal Gedor, from his rabbi's house, and he was riding on a donkey and strolling on the bank of the river. And he was very happy, and his head was swollen with pride because he had studied much Torah.

He happened upon an exceedingly ugly person, who said to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, but [Rabbi Elazar](#) did not return his greeting. Instead, [Rabbi Elazar](#) said to him: Worthless [*reika*] person, how ugly is that man. Are all the people of your city as ugly as you? The man said to him: I do not know, but you should go and say to the Craftsman Who made me: How ugly is the vessel you made. When [Rabbi Elazar](#) realized that he had sinned and insulted this man merely on account of his appearance, he descended from his donkey and prostrated himself before him, and he said to the man: I have sinned against you; forgive me. The man said to him: I will not forgive you go until you go to the Craftsman Who made me and say: How ugly is the vessel you made.

He walked behind the man, trying to appease him, until they reached [Rabbi Elazar's](#) city. The people of his city came out to greet him, saying to him: Greetings to you, my rabbi, my rabbi, my master, my master. The man said to them: Who are you calling my rabbi, my rabbi? They said to him: To this man, who is walking behind you. He said to them: If this man is a rabbi, may there not be many like him among the Jewish people. They asked him: For what reason do you say this? He said to them: He did such and such to me. They said to him: Even so, forgive him, as he is a great Torah scholar.

He said to them: For your sakes I forgive him, provided that he accepts upon himself not to become accustomed to behave like this. Immediately, [Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon](#), entered the study hall and taught: A person should always be soft like a reed and he should not be stiff like a cedar, as one who is proud like a cedar is likely to sin. And therefore, due to its gentle qualities, the reed merited that a quill is taken from it to write with it a Torah scroll, phylacteries, and *mezuzot*.