

Walk Humbly with Your God
High Holy Days 5782
Rabbi Marina Yergin
Temple Beth-El

In my first High Holy Days as a rabbi, which also happened to be my first at Temple Beth-El, I gave a sermon about how I was mad at God because my dad had died suddenly weeks earlier. I asked the question, “What about us forgiving God?” My answer then was about us engaging in conversation with God and how during part of the shofar service, God comes to us to remember us. I felt then, and still feel now, that even by opening a conversation, I was participating in my relationship with God. Just like relationships between humans, ours with God is not always solid or positive.

Now, 6 years later, I’m asking the same question. I am exasperated by the divisiveness in our world, panicked by the pandemic, infuriated by racism, terrified of the increasing intensity of natural disasters, frustrated by the rise in antisemitism, angry with homophobia, scared of terrorism, distraught by the continuation of genocides, and the list goes on. All of these, undoubtedly, have a human element to them – humans causing suffering, not listening to medical advice, not taking care of our earth enough, hiding behind computer screens to spew hatred and ignorance. And yet, so many, including myself, get mad at God. How then, do I, do you, do WE, forgive God? Can we? Do we have to?

In the Book of Micah (6:8), we read “do justice (*asot mishpat*, עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט), love loving-kindness (*ahavat chesed*, אַהֲבַת חֶסֶד), and walk humbly with your God (*v’hatzneah lechet im Eloheicha*, וְהִצְנַע לְכַת עִם-אֱלֹהֶיךָ).” Usually, we hear this text used in social justice contexts, but, today, I want to explore how these concepts connect to Jewish understandings of forgiveness, our focus on love when it comes to God, and our unique relationships with God, especially in times of difficulty.

Do justice is not the best translation for the Hebrew of *asot mishpat*, עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט. I would translate it as “make sentences” or “mete out judgments.” The word *mishpat* is the same word used in legal cases. This reminds us that there are steps to get to a judgment in a court case, just as there are specific steps to forgiveness.

Most Jewish texts on forgiveness focus on the concept between humans. There are two parts to this – the apology and the forgiveness. Maimonides, one of our most prolific and famous rabbis and commentators, compiled *Hilchot Teshuva*, The Laws of Repentance. In it, he explains that there are 5 aspects of an effective apology.

- 1) Recognize we did something wrong and not let denial or defensiveness take over.
- 2) Have a sense of regret.
- 3) *Viddui*, or confession, where we acknowledge 1 and 2 – that we did something wrong, and we are regretful for our actions. This must be done in public, which ensures that the offender’s recognition and regret are legitimate, heartfelt, and can be verified.
- 4) Promise to not do the same thing again and figure out how to help those who have been wronged.
- 5) Be put in a similar situation and choose not to do something wrong – which is understood as the ultimate show of change based on past mistakes.¹

¹ Rabbi Bonnie Koppell “Five Languages of Apology” www.americanrabbi.com/five-languages-of-apology-by-bonnie-koppell

The steps are clearly laid out, but what about the offended – the one who was hurt? Is there a requirement to forgive when someone completes all these steps of apologizing?

The simple answer is no. The complicated answer is still no but has some nuances. The offender has three opportunities to ask for forgiveness before they are absolved and not held captive by the offended. However, and this is really important, the attempts at apologizing must follow the rules we just spoke about and be truly sincere. One cannot just say sorry and walk away thinking that everything is all good. At the same time, granting forgiveness is not always possible and it is in control by the one who was offended. Our texts highlight a few examples of what forgiveness is not, which, in turn, helps us understand what forgiveness can look like.

- 1) “Forgiving is not condoning... [as] a wrongful act is a wrongful act.”
- 2) Forgiving is not forgetting as we can still remember it and move forward, if—and only then—we are ready for that.
- 3) “Forgiving is not justifying [the offender’s actions].”
- 4) “Forgiveness is not reconciliation” and you cannot have reconciliation without forgiveness.²
- 5) “Forgiving is not something we do for another person.”³

So, what *is* forgiveness then?

Simon Wiesenthal, a Holocaust survivor, author, and Nazi hunter, wrote a book called *The Sunflower*, in which he tells a story from when he was imprisoned in a concentration camp. He was brought to the bedside of a dying Nazi who was begging for forgiveness for a particularly gruesome attack on hundreds of Jews. Wiesenthal does not grant him forgiveness and leaves the hospital room without a word. He spends, in essence, the rest of his life trying to decide if he did the right thing or not. The second half of the book is comprised of the responses of 53 people of varying faiths, professions, nationalities, etc. sharing what they would have done were they in Wiesenthal’s shoes at that moment – would they have granted forgiveness or not? Among the respondents, Rabbi Harold Kushner explains that forgiveness comes only from the person who was harmed and really for the purpose of that person to be able to move forward with their life. He explains:

Forgiving happens inside us. It represents a letting go of the sense of grievance, and perhaps most importantly a letting go of the role of victim.... It would mean saying ‘What you did was thoroughly despicable and puts you outside the category of decent human beings. But I refuse to give you the power to define me as a victim. I refuse to let your blind hatred define the shape and content of [my essence]. I don’t hate you; I reject you.’⁴

The concept of forgiveness is not so simple and goes back and forth between the offended and the offender – each plays a role and can only move forward when they find themselves ready – ready to admit and repent or ready to forgive and move forward.

I keep going back to God. How can we have the back and forth with God when we can’t really hear God’s apology or see specific acts of repentance? Jewish texts, specifically around

² Adapted by Rabbi Josh Fixler, “Notes on Forgiveness, adapted from Rabbi Abraham Twerski”
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/hta737eiz0wzcpu/Week%209%20-%20Jewish%20Quotes%20on%20Forgiveness.docx?dl=0>

³ Kushner, Harold S. “Harold S. Kushner.” *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*. Simon Wiesenthal. Schocken Books Inc., New York, 1998. Revised and Expanded Version, 186.

⁴ Ibid.

the High Holy Day season, speak to God forgiving us and how that happens during Yom Kippur. I could not, however, find any text that shows **GOD** repenting and **HUMANS** forgiving.

Micah 6:8, gives us an answer with “love loving-kindness (*ahavat chesed*, אַהַבַּת חֶסֶד).”

As Dr. Julie Hirschfeld, a clinical psychologist, explains,

‘loving loving-kindness’ is unbounded by time, situation or relationship. Embracing loving-kindness means you are not only generous-hearted, but you love being that way. This approach to life can protect you from staying stuck in your hurt and anger, lashing out vengefully and holding grudges. It means that even in the face of strong emotions, you can reserve a part of your mind for caring interest in another person.⁵

Again, I could stretch and see how Dr. Hirschfeld’s explanation relates to God, but I wasn’t completely convinced... until I found a Hasidic tale that helped clarify this feeling of love and strong emotions towards God.

Once, on the eve of Yom Kippur, the holy Rabbi Elimelech of Lisinsk... said to his disciples: ‘Is it your desire to know how one should act on the eve of Yom Kippur? Go to the tailor who lives on the outskirts of the city.’ They went to him and stood before the window of his house. They saw him and his sons praying with simplicity.... After the prayer they put on Sabbath [clothing] and lit candles and prepared a table full of good things and sat down to the table in great joy. The tailor took out of a chest a book in which were written all the transgressions that he had committed during the year, from one Yom Kippur to the next, and said: ‘God of the world, today the time has come to make a reckoning between us of all the transgressions that we have committed, for it is a time of atonement for all Israel.’ At once he began to reckon and enumerate all the transgressions that he had committed in the course of the year, for they were all written down in this account book. After he had finished the reckoning of transgressions, he took out a book larger and heavier than the first and said: ‘Having counted the transgressions I have committed, now I shall count the transgressions [You have] committed.’ Then he reckoned the sorrow and afflictions, the troubles and anguish and sickness and loss of money that during the course of the year had befallen him and the members of his family. When he had finished the reckoning he said: ‘God of the world, if we are indeed to reckon with equity, [You owe] me more than I owe [You]; but I do not wish to be exact with [You] in an exact reckoning, for behold, today is the eve of the Day of Atonement and we must all be reconciled with our fellows; we therefore forgive [You of] all the transgressions that [You have] committed against us, and [You] likewise forgive us all the transgressions wherewith we have transgressed against [You].’ He poured brandy into his glass and said the blessing ‘by Whose word all things have their being,’ and said in a loud voice: ‘Lehayim, God of the world! We hereby mutually forgive all our transgressions against each other; and all of them, whether ours or [Yours], are null and void, as though they had never been.’ Afterwards they ate and drank with great joy. The disciples returned to their master and told him everything they had seen and heard. And they said that the words of the tailor were harsh words and excessive effrontery against heaven. But their master said to them: ‘Know that the Holy One... and the whole host of heaven come to listen to the tailor’s words, which are spoken in great simplicity; and from his words are created grace and joy in all the worlds.’⁶

⁵ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/how-to-forgive-is-just-as-important-as-when-to-forgive/>

⁶ <https://www.commentary.org/articles/milton-himmelfarb-2/the-vindictive-and-the-merciful-god-of-wrath-and-god-of-love/>

THIS is the story I was looking for. Why don't more of our texts talk about us forgiving God? Why is this only brought up in a folktale? Shouldn't we tell God what God should be repenting for? According to *Hilchot De'ot* 6:6, Maimonides' book of laws related to personal development in his *Mishneh Torah*,

When one person sins against another, [the victim] should not harbor hatred and remain silent.... Rather, it is incumbent upon them to speak [to the assailant] and to say, 'Why have you done such and such and why have you sinned against me [by doing] such and such?... If the [aggressor] repents and asks for forgiveness, he must forgive. The forgiver must not be cruel.

We are reminded in that last sentence that we can't be cruel and hold those grudges against God. By sharing with God how we feel, we are giving God an opportunity to hear and hopefully, maybe, somehow repent and make amends.

These conversations with God allow us to see the third part of Micah 6:8, "walk humbly with your God (*v'hatzneah lechet im Eloheicha*, וְהִצְנֵחַ לְכֶת עִם־אֱלֹהֶיךָ)," even, and especially when, we struggle with God. Dr. Julie Hirschfeld continues her explanation of this verse:

For those times it's hardest to conjure loving thoughts on your own, ['walking humbly with God'] provides a paradoxical answer. It connects humility and strength. When our resources feel depleted, and we recognize our own limits, we can find support by tapping into something greater than ourselves. 'Walking with God' signifies the placing of values above our personal desires and, perhaps, even a sense of personal connection to the Divine. Living like this promotes inner strength, and we may also receive social support from others who walk a similar path. These factors can make us less vulnerable to the insecurities that arise when we're hurt, and, in turn, they make it easier to forgive.... Each of us has a personal journey. It is a great gift to be invited to walk that path with a sense of purpose and to draw strength from love, whether or not someone experiences that purpose, that love as related directly to God.⁷

Each one of us has our own relationship with God. Each one of us answers theological questions differently, especially when influenced by events in our lives. In the Amidah, we have the prayer Avot V'Imahot, which lists each of our fore parents separately – *Elohai Avraham*, *Elohai Itzchak*, *Elohai Ya'akov*, *Elohai Sarah*, *Elohai Rivkah*, *Elohai Rachel*, *v'Elohai Leah*. In *Mishkan T'filah*, our prayerbook, in the footnote it asks why we list each person individually as "God of [person]"? The answer is that each person has their own unique relationship with God.⁸ In an interpretation on that page by Rabbi Richard Levy z"l, the prayer explains each of those relationships between God and our fore parent—full of difficulties and looking for answers or help.⁹ No matter what, they were all striving to seek God's presence.

We are the same as our fore parents in that we are striving to seek God's presence and get upset when we don't see it, or feel things aren't going our way. The only opportunity to change that is to recognize our own relationship with God, strive to understand what God may want, and look for God's repentance. Martin Buber, a famous Jewish philosopher, said it succinctly and powerfully, "God does not want to be believed in, to be debated and defended by us, but simply to be realized through us."¹⁰

⁷ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/how-to-forgive-is-just-as-important-as-when-to-forgive/>

⁸ *Mishkan T'filah* pg 127.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Buber, Martin. "God does not want..." *Mishkan HaLev*. Ed. Rabbi Hara Person. CCAR Press, New York, 2017. p 104.

May we, in this year of 5782, “do justice (*asot mishpat*, עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט), love loving-kindness (*ahavat chesed*, אַהַבַת חֶסֶד), and walk humbly with your God (*v’hatzneah lechet im Eloheicha*, וְהִצְנַע לְכַת עִם-אֱלֹהֶיךָ).” May we understand how to forgive one another and seek God’s presence in a positive way. May we look for the beauty around us and work internally to better our connections with others and with God. May we give God the space to repent, and, even more so, allow our senses to be opened to receive that repentance. May we set out on our own personal journeys, encouraging God to join us on our path. May we experience more positivity, love, friendship, and so much more, so that we can make this world a better place and show God’s presence through our actions and interactions. Ken Yehi Ratzon. May this be God’s will.