

Pardes from Jerusalem - Parshat Vayigash
Yoseph's Legacy to Every Jew:
נשא פשע - מחילה - סליחה - Forgiveness

“Then Yehuda approached **him** and said: If **you** please, my **lord**, please allow **your servant** to speak a few words in the ears of my **lord** and do not be angry at **your servant**...” (Bereishit 44:18).

”ויגש אליו יהודה ויאמר: בי אדוני, ידבר נא עבדך דבר באזני אדוני, ואל יחר אפך בעבדך...”
(בראשית מד, יח).

The second Rimanover Rebbe, Rav Tzvi Hersh HaKohen of Rimanov (1778-1846) interpreted the opening passage of *Parshat VaYigash* as Yehuda's deep heartfelt prayer beseeching the Divine. At the moment when he thought that he was at the very end of his life in this world and the next, when after all his many tragic mistakes and failures he thought that his entire existence was about to end, Yehuda realized that while the Divine seemed quite hidden, She was actually present in all his life events, including his tragic failures.

Though in the text we read that Yehuda approached Yoseph to speak with him, the Chassidic masters teach us that Yehuda was simultaneously speaking with HaShem. He said, “bee Adoni - You my Master are within me. When I was born, my mother named me Yehuda - she was the first person to give her child a name to openly express her joyous praise and gratitude to You HaShem. But now here I am, just about to lose it all, just about to totally fail in fulfilling Your purpose and will in bringing me into this world.

I cannot give up! I will not give up! I plead that You listen to my words, that they will arouse Your compassion. I am pleading not only on my behalf, but I am praying for the fulfillment of Your dream. When the Egyptian man asked us if we have a father, if we have a brother, we realized that it was You who was asking us if we are living in love and unity and if we sense Your presence.”

The Rimanover Rebbe's tears poured down his face and he cried like a little child as he read Yehuda's words to HaShem: “We said to my master, we have an old father and we have a little brother who was born to his father in his old age and his brother is dead” (Bereishit 44:20)

I fully admit the sad truth, we did love You very much and we had loved each other but our love grew “old.” Did we sense Your presence when we sold our brother into slavery? For all we know, he may not be alive any more. You know the truth. For Your sake I will not give up on Your dream, no matter how many mistakes I have made.”

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks provides his understanding of how Yoseph responded to Yehuda's plea, a plea of repentance that includes admission of guilt, confession and behavioral change . “There are moments that change the world: There is such a transformative moment in this week's *parsha*. It happened when Yoseph finally revealed his identity to his brothers. While they were silent and in a state of shock, he went on to say these words:

‘I am your brother Yoseph, 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. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.’ (Bereishit 45:4-8).

This is the first recorded moment in history, not only in the Jewish tradition, in which one human being forgives another. (Although Avraham too forgave Avimelech, yet that was not the forgiveness that follows proper repentance as we see here with Yehuda's plea).

While some Midrashic sources believe that God had forgiven before this, according to the plain sense of the text, the *peshat*, He did not. Forgiveness is conspicuously lacking as an element in the stories of Adam and Chava, Cain, the Flood and the Tower of Babel. Even when Avraham prayed his audacious prayer for the people of Sodom and the cities of the plain, he did not ask God to forgive them. His argument was about justice not forgiveness. Perhaps there were innocent people and it would be unjust for them to die. Their merit should therefore save the others, says Avraham. That is quite different from asking God to forgive.

Yoseph forgives. Yet the Torah hints that the brothers did not fully appreciate the significance of his words. After all, he did not explicitly use the word 'forgive.' He told them not to be distressed. He said, 'It was not you but God.' He told them their act had resulted in a positive outcome. But all of this was theoretically compatible with holding them guilty and deserving of punishment. That is why the Torah recounts a second event, years later, after Yaakov had died. The brothers sought a meeting with Yoseph fearing that he would now take revenge. They concocted a story:

"They sent word to Yoseph, saying, your father left these instructions before he died: This is what you are to say to Yoseph: I ask you to **forgive** your brothers for the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly. Now please **forgive** the sins of the servants of the God of your father. When their message came to him, Yoseph wept" (Bereishit 50:16-18).

The brothers used the actual word 'forgive' --- this is the first time it appears explicitly in the Torah, as they were unsure about Yoseph's earlier words. Did Yoseph actually meant he forgave them when he revealed himself to them earlier? Does someone really forgive those who sold him into slavery? Yoseph weeps that his brothers did not originally understand that forgiveness is precisely what he meant. Yoseph weeps that his brothers had not fully understood that he had forgiven them long before. He no longer felt ill-will toward them. He had no anger, no lingering resentment, no desire for revenge. He had conquered his emotions and reframed his understanding of the events.

Forgiveness does not appear in every culture. It is not a human universal, nor is it a biological imperative. We know this from a fascinating study by an American Classics professor, David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: the origins of a moral idea* (2010). In it he argues, "that there was no concept of forgiveness in the literature of the ancient Greeks. There was something else, often mistaken for forgiveness. There is appeasement of anger."

When someone does harm to someone else, the victim is angry and seeks revenge. This is clearly dangerous for the perpetrator and he or she may try to get the victim to calm down and move on. They may make excuses: It wasn't me, it was someone else. Or, it was me but I couldn't help it. Or, it was me but it was a small wrong, and I have done you much good in the past, so on balance you should let it pass.

Alternatively, or in conjunction with these other strategies, the perpetrator may beg, plead, and perform some ritual of abasement or humiliation. This is a way of saying to the victim, "I am not really a threat." The Greek word *sugnome*, sometimes translated as forgiveness, really means, says

Konstan, *exculpation* or *absolution*. It is not that I forgive you for what you did, but that I understand why you did it - you could not really help it, you were caught up in circumstances beyond your control - or, alternatively, I do not need to take revenge because you have now shown by your deference to me that you hold me in proper respect. My dignity has been restored.

Konstan argues that the first appearance of forgiveness is in the Hebrew Bible and he cites the case of Yoseph. What he does not make clear is why Yoseph forgives.

The answer is that within Judaism a new form of morality was born. Judaism is primarily an ethic of guilt, as opposed to many other systems, which are ethics of shame. One of the fundamental differences between them is that **shame attaches to the person. Guilt attaches to the act.** In shame cultures, when a person does wrong, he or she is, as it were, stained, marked, defiled. In guilt cultures what is wrong is not the doer but the deed, not the sinner but the sin. **The person retains his or her fundamental worth** ("the soul you gave me is pure," as we say in our prayers). It is the act that has somehow to be put right. That is why in guilt cultures there are processes of repentance, atonement and forgiveness.

There is nothing accidental about Yoseph's behavior. 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 immensely detailed account of what it is to **earn** forgiveness. It is a textbook case of putting the brothers through a course in atonement, the first in literature. Yoseph is thus teaching them, and the Torah is teaching us, what it is to *earn* forgiveness. Now Yoseph can forgive, because his brothers, led by Yehuda, have gone through all three stages of repentance: (1) admission of guilt, (2) confession and (3) behavioral change.

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 something we have done is wrong and we are responsible for it and we must never do it again. The possibility of that kind of moral transformation simply did not previously exist.

Forgiveness is not just one idea among many. It transformed the human situation. For the first time it established the possibility that we are not condemned endlessly to repeat the past. When I repent I show I can change. The future is not predestined. I can make it different from what it might have been. And when I forgive I show that my action is not mere reaction, the way revenge would be.

Forgiveness liberates us from the past. Forgiveness breaks the irreversibility of reaction and revenge. It is the undoing of what has been done (a point made by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*).

Humanity changed the day Yoseph forgave his brothers. When we forgive and are worthy of being forgiven, we are no longer prisoners of our past." If there is ever an appropriate time to take the initiative to forgive, even before it is sought, it is now. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*.