



A Little Forgiveness, Please

By Rabbi Perry Raphael Rank
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Shabbat Shalom, everyone, and Shanah Tovah - a good and a healthy year to all.

Mr. Schwartz is taken in handcuffs to court and stands before the judge. The prosecutor rises and says, "Your honor, Mr. Schwartz was caught red-handed stealing a can of peaches from the local grocery and he admits his guilt."

The judge shakes his head and announces, "Mr Schwartz, we cannot have theft in the community. You must bear the consequences of your crime. There are six peaches in this can and I sentence you to six days in jail for every peach stolen," and the judge slams his gavel on the bench. A woman rises in the back of the court room and calls out, "Your, Honor!" The judge immediately recognizes her and responds, "Mrs. Schwartz, I am not inclined to any leniency in this case," to which Mrs. Schwartz replies, "I know, but he also stole a can of chick peas."

Rosh Hashanah is Yom HaDin - Judgment Day, a day when God judges all of humanity. Judges wield real power. Anyone authorized to take your money, in the form of a fine, or take your liberty, in the form of incarceration, wields real power. But the more immediate power we have had to deal with these days is the power of a pandemic. I was curious. I wanted to know the size of a single Corona virus particle.

We've all seen its microscopic structure in the media, but what is its actual size? Turns out its size varies between 70-90 nanometers. A nanometer is one billionth of a meter or 10 to the power of negative ten. In other words, it's really small, yet left unchecked, COVID-19 brought the world to a standstill. That is real power. Who among us has not felt during the past several months incarcerated in their own home? And the effects of that pause in our lives still reverberate - in empty sports stadiums, a darkened Broadway, half-empty restaurants, diminished air traffic, masked faces, unemployment, religious services in a tent, and much anxiety even

with a rate of infection as low as it is in our own beloved New York State.

If COVID-19 has not felt like a harsh judgment, perhaps the social unrest in the country does. We've had to deal with a lot these past several months - racial tensions, questions about policing protocols, second thoughts on statutory and how we represent our history, and on top of all this, a hot presidential election come this November. I suspect that having been locked up as long as we were exacerbated our responses to some of the more intractable fissures within our social fabric.

And it seems very clear, in the polarized atmosphere of our nation, that we are presently engaged in an uncivil war. It's no longer clear to me that we love our neighbors as ourselves, and if that is the case, if the Torah no longer holds sway over our beliefs and behaviors, it would be worth our while to reflect on that development and explore whether we are comfortable in the place we now find ourselves.

Daryl Davis is a professional musician, a pianist, who has played with BB King and Chuck Berry. Back in 1983, he was playing a gig in Frederick, Maryland, at the Silver Dollar Lounge, and at the end of the session, a man comes up to him and says that he had never in his whole life heard a black man play like Jerry Lee Lewis. So Mr. Davis said to this patron that both he and Jerry Lee Lewis had been influenced by the same black boogie-woogie and blues. The patron said - No, no that just wasn't possible. So Mr. Davis said, it was possible because he knew Jerry Lee Lewis and the two were friends. So the patron said - No, no that's not possible either. Then the patron invited Mr. Davis to the bar for a drink.

The two sat down at the bar and the patron said that this was the first time he had ever had a drink with a black guy. So Mr. Davis asked why was that. And the patron hesitated for a bit and then said - because I belong to the Ku Klux Klan. That served as a turning point in Mr. Davis' life as he sought out members of the Ku Klux Klan to talk with them with the intent of

dispelling all the stereotypes and misconceptions they had about black people.

It culminated in a book published in 1998 entitled, "Klan-destine Relationships: A Black Man's Odyssey in the Ku Klux Klan." Mr. Davis eventually infiltrated the office of Robert Kelly, the Grand Dragon or so his title, and over time, moved Mr. Kelly to drop his membership and close down the chapter he ran in the state. Mr. Davis now owns a collection of white robes turned into him by members of the Klan whom he has befriended and influenced to abandon their racist points of view.

I don't think Mr. Davis ever forgave Klansmen for their racism. But he did not see them so much as the enemy as he saw in them an opportunity for dialogue. It would have been easy to scream and protest against them. It was much harder to sit down and speak with them.

Davis' actions were either extraordinary foolishness or extraordinary courage - and maybe a little bit of both. We all know that this is a time of selihah, forgiveness. We are encouraged to forgive others for the sins they have committed against us. That's the pious directive we encounter year after year. Do we succeed? Do we forgive others for their sins?

Let me put it another way. Think of the person whom you do not like. We all probably have a few people like that in our lives. This person is not a nice person. How did you think of this person last Rosh Hashanah? Is this person still on your no-fly list? Did you forgive this person?

I bet some of you did, but I also bet a much larger percentage did not. How do I know? Because forgiveness is one of the most difficult things in the world to grant. People generally don't want the sinners of this world to be forgiven. We want them punished. We want justice. Were we to forgive, it be almost as if we didn't care about justice. And that grates against us. It doesn't seem fair. And that's why it is so hard to forgive. If you haven't forgiven that person or people or whomever it is you've got issues with, I don't blame you. I only want to acknowledge the

challenge forgiveness presents and how we by and large resist its fulfillment.

As the western world continues to move further and further away from its religious moorings in Judaism and Christianity, we have replaced the culture of guilt with the culture of shame. I know that we typically use the terms of shame and guilt interchangeably, but they are different. Ruth Benedict (1887-1948), the American anthropologist and folklorist, did great work in defining the difference between a shame culture and a guilt culture. A shame culture is one in which a sin committed renders the sinner an object of embarrassment and ridicule. The sin and the sinner merge and the one is indistinguishable from the other. Time may erode the shame but there isn't much you can do to rid yourself of it. The sinner may seek refuge in another city, hide, or even commit suicide. Greek culture was very much a shame culture. But Judaism and by extension, Christianity, opted for guilt. We understand guilt. With guilt, the sinner has committed some wrong, might even feel shame, but there is a way to remove the guilt through all the ways we talk about removing guilt - confession, repentance, prayer, doing acts of goodness, etc.

In other words, the sin and the sinner are two different entities. There's a great story in the Talmud (Berakhot 10a) about this. It's about Rabbi Meir and his brilliant wife Beruriah. There were some undesirables in the neighborhood who bothered Rabbi Meir. He prayed to God for their death. Beruriah turned to her husband and said, Meir, the verse in Psalms reads: *Hata'im yitamu min ha'aretz / May sins disappear from the earth (Psalm 104:35).*

It doesn't say, Hot'im, the Sinners. The verse teaches us to pray that sin disappears. How does that happen? It happens when the sinner repents. A sinner repents and sin is removed from the earth. And Rabbi Meir accepted her interpretation, prayed accordingly, and the undesirables did repent of their evil ways (Berakhot 10a).

That kind of thinking is not fashionable in America today