

“Don’t get me wrong. I am not as forgiving as G-d. But I don’t have to be. I’m not G-d. None of us are. Then, we could all be a little more forgiving of our neighbors than we have been in this deeply politicized, polarized world that we now find ourselves.”

where the sinner and the sin have merged into one. It is because we are increasingly a shame culture. Once you have committed the sin, you are a sinner forever. It's no recipe for a society as diverse as ours if there would be any hope to get along with each other.

If I told you there were people in this world who do not deserve forgiveness, I bet many of you would agree with me. I would agree with me. But guess who may just disagree: God. The Talmud discusses three Jewish kings who were so bad, they were denied entry into the World to Come. One was Menasheh ben Hizkiyahu, a seventh century BCE ruler. The Bible describes Menasheh as having put to death so many innocent people that he filled Jerusalem with blood from one end of the city to another (II Kings 21:16).

And yet, one of the rabbis, Rabbi Judah, comes to his defense claiming, as the Bible also lets us know, that Menashe did teshuvah and his years of repentance far exceeded his years of sin. When it came time for Menashe to leave this world, the middat hadin, the Angel of Justice, blocked his entry into the World to Come. In other words, justice demanded that a man with a history of such grave sins be thrown into the dustbin of history, there to decompose and be forgotten.

No way could someone with so much blood on his hands make his way into eternity. God disagreed, Rabbi Judah claimed. God dug a tunnel by which Menashe could secretly slip into the World to Come right under the nose of the angel. Think about that - God allowing compassion to override justice. Did Menashe really deserve entry into eternity? I don't think I'm that forgiving. But according to Rabbi Judah at least, God is.

I like to think of God's capacity to forgive and humanity's resistance to forgive as one of the features distinguishing God from humans. History proves that when it comes to forgiveness, people are infamously not up to the challenge. There is a scene in Schindler's List where Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist who saved

more than one thousand Jews during the Shoah, is talking to Ammon Goth, the SS officer in charge of the construction of the Plaszow Concentration Camp. Goth is heartless and sadistic. He kills Jews as a sport. It makes him feel good. After all, Jews are the problem.

The cause of all Germany's problems points to one and only one source: the Jews. Goth and Schindler are talking power. What is power? “Why do they fear us?” Schindler asks. Goth says they fear us because we can kill them, and that's power. Schindler says, “That's not power.” And he tells Goth a story. A criminal is brought before an emperor. The man knows he has committed a crime. The emperor knows that he can put this man to death. But instead of invoking the death penalty, the emperor pardons the man.

That, Schindler says, is power. To know that you can ruin another person's life, but choose not to, to descend into accusations and recriminations against another, but choose not to, that is a kind of unearthly self-control that runs counter to human history and perhaps even human character. That is power. Goth wants power. He tries to pardon a Jew. Instead, he ends up doing what he always does: he kills yet another Jew. He has no control over the basest of his instincts. He thinks himself justified in every insult he hurls at Jews. He does so not because he is powerful. To the contrary, history exposes him as an utter fool. His problem is not only his inhumanity, which is clear enough, but even more importantly, an almost absolute disconnect from God.

Ki imekha haselihah / (God), Yours is the power to forgive Lema'an tivarei / And thus You are feared.

So Psalm 103:4. Feared? Why? It would seem more likely that the power to forgive would produce not fear but relief or jubilation or wonder. Instead, it is fear that the power to forgive generates. And it does so because the power to forgive runs so counter to ordinary experience. It comes as a surprise or a shock as if you were walking down a street turned the corner and suddenly came face to face with

some person you thought dead long ago. Forgiveness is that rare. It's so contrary to normal human operations.

But Judaism is rarely satisfied with normal human operations. It has always sought to guide us in the path of elevated human operations, to go beyond our emotional reflexes. Beyond the animal instinct, and respond in ways more thoughtful, more deliberate.

Let's be real. We are all essentially imperfect beings. We have selective memories, we stretch the truth, we fall victim to jealousy, we may be selfish, we are not above the unkind word, we get stuck in bad habits, we let our tempers get the best of us, and our prejudices sometimes expose the worst of us.

How do we live with ourselves? The shame society says you can't. The guilt society says you can. The guilt society says don't confuse yourself with your shortcomings, and don't confuse your neighbors with their shortcomings, because we have the power to reflect, we have the power to regroup, we have the power to repent, and we thus have the power to forgive others as we do ourselves.

Of course, we could ask ourselves philosophically, if you have a power and never use it, do you really have the power? Whatever the answer to that question is, I'm telling you now that we are all invested with an incredible power, and that in a world so poised to kill the sinners, we ought to focus less on justice, which roots us in the past, and more about forgiveness, which opens up the possibility of the future.

Two Martians are doing research on earth from the safety of their spaceship, gathering all the information they can on this biped, earth-bound species we know as humans.

One says to the other, “Very interesting. They have developed satellite-based nuclear weapons.” The other says, “Interesting, indeed. So we're dealing here with organisms that are an emerging intelligence.” But the first Martian counters, “I don't think so. The weapons are pointed at themselves.”

I think we need to cut each other a

little slack. I think we need to admit that no one of us has the total answer.

I think if we are serious about this other principle we espouse, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” then we have to embrace the fact that such a principle is without meaning if we think it applies to only the neighbors who share our views, as opposed to those who do not.

I had a professor at the Seminary who once told a group of us something that always stuck with me and that was this: people are going to have many opinions about you and express them to you.

So just remember this. You're not as good as people say you are, but you're also not as bad. I found that comforting. And I think it applies to the world in which we live. And don't get me wrong. I am not as forgiving as God. But I don't have to be. I'm not God. None of us are. Then again, we could all be a little more forgiving of our neighbors than we have been in this deeply politicized, polarized world that we now find ourselves.

We could use the power of forgiveness to begin the conversations that make for a better world. Because though there are clearly people in this world who are in fact, really, really bad, there's a whole huge demographic out there that are not as bad as they have been portrayed, and another huge demographic that isn't as good as they have been portrayed. A little more humility all the way around is in order.

You may ask: well, how forgiving do I have to be rabbi? And I can actually quantify that answer. You have to start somewhere. If you start out small, that's okay. I would suggest that you all begin to look at each other a little more sympathetically, and with just a little more forgiveness, I would say that all it takes is about 70-90 nanometers worth of forgiveness. If a despicable virus of that size can change the world, think of what just a little more beloved forgiveness in our lives could do.

Ketivah va'Hatimah Tovah - everyone - May we all be inscribed and sealed into a year of life and good health, mutual respect, and understanding.