

I was on the train and overheard two women talking about an upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary that one of them was soon going to celebrate.

“Every time I’ve had a significant anniversary,” one said, “I’ve given my husband a nice gift.”

“Really?!” her friend replied. “That’s really nice. What did you do after you were married 10 years?”

“He loves baseball – especially the Mets – so I made plans for him to take a road tour to visit seven different cities where they were playing.”

“Wow, that’s incredibly thoughtful,” the other woman said. “What about for your 25<sup>th</sup>?”

“I took him to Israel.”

“You took him to Israel?! How can you possibly top that? What are you going to do for your 50<sup>th</sup>?”

“Well,” the first woman said, “I’m thinking of returning to Israel ... to bring him back.”

I would not recommend this particular method for maintaining a long-term relationship, but their encounter does speak to the possibility of second chances that we can give to others and allow ourselves.

Indeed, Yom Kippur is the quintessential day for second chances – alluded to in the event in our history our rabbis connect to this day. Passover, of course, is the anniversary of the Exodus. *Chanukkah* commemorates the rededication of the Temple. *Shavuot* is the anniversary of the giving of the Torah. And *Yom Kippur*? A number of Jewish legends say that when Moses saw the people of Israel worshipping the Golden Calf, he shattered the Tablets. Going back up on the mountain he inscribed a second set, bringing them down on this very day.<sup>1</sup> As the people of Israel got a second chance from God with that

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<sup>1</sup> *Seder Olam Rabbah* 6 and *Tanna D'bai Elyahu Zuta* 4. Moses breaks the Tablets 40 days after *Shavuot* – on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz (also the day the destruction of Jerusalem began). He atoned for

new covenant, so – every Yom Kippur since – we are reminded that we all have the opportunity to give and get second chances.

On November 12, 2004 six teenagers in Ronkonkoma, New York bought a 20-pound turkey with a stolen credit card. While driving on Sunrise Highway, one of those teens, 18 year-old Ryan Cushing threw the frozen bird out the back window just for a thrill. Like a cannon ball, it hit Victoria “Vicky” Ruvolo's car, shattering the windshield and smashing her face. She suffered serious injuries, and needed multiple surgeries to rebuild her crushed facial bones. Her recovery was painful and took months.

The teens were caught and the District Attorney got them to enter a plea bargain so that they could testify against Ryan Cushing. This, coupled with the overwhelming evidence, was enough to put Ryan in jail for 25 years. It was at this point that Victoria writes that she started asking questions about Ryan. “I wanted to know what type of kid would do this? Had he always been a bully? Was he always hurting other people? What could possibly have built up inside him so bad that he had to throw something so hard?”

On the day of the trial Ryan walked in with his head hung low. After the case was over he walked over to where Vicky was sitting. She could see that he had been crying, and Ryan said to her, “I never meant this to happen to you, I prayed for you every day. I'm so glad you're doing well.”

Put yourself in Victoria Ruvolo's place. Think about the months of agonizing rehabilitation, the thoughtless indifference of someone who acted so recklessly. If you were there, would you have screamed? Stared him down? Turned away with disgust? Any and all of those reactions would have been unsurprising. But Victoria Ruvolo did something else, something amazing. She cuddled Ryan in her arms and said, “Just do

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40 days until the 1<sup>st</sup> of Elul, was 40 days on Sinai and then came down on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tishri (Yom Kippur).

something good with your life. Take this experience and do something good.”

Vicky did more. She insisted that the DA grant Ryan Cushing a plea bargain: six months in jail and five years probation. As part of his community service, Ryan volunteered to speak to other young people. After his one-year of service he continued on as a volunteer. Contributing to a book Vicky wrote seven years later, Ryan said, “Life is not only about the choices you make, it is about learning from the bad choices you make.”<sup>2</sup>

Why did Vicky forgive Ryan? First, she felt that locking him up for decades for a stupid act might make him even more bitter and angry. “I would not want anyone to feel the pain or anguish that I went through”, she later explained. Second, she was moved by a letter Ryan wrote her even before the trial expressing remorse for what he did. “I needed that expression of regret.” Finally, Vicky said a number of years after this that, “God gave me a second chance at life, and I passed it on. If I hadn’t let go of that anger, I’d be consumed by this need for revenge. Forgiving him helps me move on.”

Gregory Alan Isakov is a folk and country singer and songwriter who was born in Johannesburg, South Africa and now calls Colorado home. I don’t know if him being Jewish or having come from South Africa play a role in his music, but they sure seem to in his song “Second Chances.”<sup>3</sup> Listen to his words (*play song*):

I'm running from nothing, no thoughts in my mind  
Oh my heart was all black  
But I saw something shine  
Thought that part was yours, but it might just be mine  
I could share it with you, if you gave me the time

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<sup>2</sup> See: [theforgivenessproject.com/stories/victoria-ruvolo-usa](http://theforgivenessproject.com/stories/victoria-ruvolo-usa) and [www.ncronline.org/blogs/conversations-sr-camille/golden-rule-inspired-woman-forgive-after-near-death-experience](http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/conversations-sr-camille/golden-rule-inspired-woman-forgive-after-near-death-experience).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2SABYGwHII>, play from 1:59 to 3:20

I'm all bloody knuckles, longing for home  
If it weren't for second chances, we'd all be alone.

Like the woman bringing her husband back from Israel after many years being apart, as Moses gave our people so many millenia ago, as Vicky Ruvolo discovered through her own pain and as Gregory Isakov teaches in song, one of the sweet blessings life affords each of us is a chance for a re-do by receiving forgiveness. And they all teach us a lot about what forgiveness is and what it is not in Jewish thought. First, it is the point where justice and mercy meet. Second, it is the end of the road, not the beginning. Finally, forgiveness is a gift we don't really just give others. It's the gift we give ourselves.

### **Where Justice and Mercy Meet**

Once upon a time there was a king who owned cups made of delicate glass. He said, "If I pour hot water into them, they will expand and shatter; yet if I pour cold water, they will contract and break." What, then, did the king do? He mixed hot and cold water, and poured it into the cups so they remained unbroken. So, too, when "The Eternal God made earth and heaven." The Holy One said: "If I create the world exclusively with the attribute of mercy, its sins will be too many; but if I fashion it with the quality of justice alone, how long could the world last? So I will create the universe with both justice and mercy, so it long may endure."<sup>4</sup>

When we are wronged or hurt, it is natural to be upset, embittered and to be angry. Most of us knows the hurt of having been betrayed. Few here are strangers to the pain that comes when someone we trusted let us down. We have been belittled, forgotten, ignored – and done the same to others, thinking of our own needs without considering the affect on those around us. We are – each of us – wounded and wounding.

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis Rabbah 12:15

As Isakov sings, “I saw something shine. Thought that part was yours, but it might just be mine.” Thus, forgiveness begins from a place that involves a willingness to find a perspective outside of our own. It’s realizing that satisfying our own need for payback or justice may actually make the world a little more mean-spirited.

In the Torah we will read tomorrow that one means of finding holiness is to rebuke others. We are, in Jewish tradition, obligated to scold and chastise those who do wrong. But immediately after the commandment, “You shall surely rebuke your people” comes the line “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The juxtaposition of these two phrases – many commentators note – means that we should tell others how they hurt us only if we do so in a compassionate way. The goal is not only getting things off our chest, but seeking a better relationship moving forward. The only way to do that is with love – the fine balance of justice and mercy.

### **The Steps that Lead to Forgiveness**

A few years ago some of you heard me tell the story of a parrot that was a terrible pet. No matter how kind it's owner was, it pecked at her, hurled insults and continually was cursing her. No matter what she did the parrot could not be trained. One day, after some particularly colorful obscenities the woman picked up the bird, opened her freezer door and threw it inside. After 10 seconds the parrot suddenly grew silent. Afraid that she hurt or even killed the bird, she opened the door.

The parrot respectfully came out and said, “I am terribly sorry for my inappropriate behavior. From now on I promise to be good. Please forgive me.” The woman was so astonished – and grateful – that she immediately accepted.

“Thank you,” the parrot said. “But ... can I ask you one thing?”

“Of course,” the woman answered.

With a wary eye towards the freezer, the parrot asked, “Can you tell me ... what did the chicken do?”

While it is always nice to get an apology, I don't think that parrot's atonement was all that genuine.

One of the important insights of Jewish tradition is the understanding that forgiveness is not a simple reward for saying, “I'm sorry.” Nor is it the reward one gets just to avoid punishment. In Jewish thought, forgiveness is the end point of a long process that begins with a recognition that we did something wrong, admitting what we did, apologizing, acting better (having learned from our mistakes) and offering due “payment” to the one's we wronged. Only then are the words “please forgive me” genuine.

There is no magic that Yom Kippur offers. It is simply a reminder – a communal acknowledgement that we all have to be engaged in the hard work of honestly facing who we are. This day reminds us that it is a *mitzvah* tell others off, but only if we can do so with compassion, the goal not just getting things off our chest, but helping those we care about lead better and richer lives. Yom Kippur is about accepting that who we were is not necessarily who we are now; and if we can change, we ought to be no less accepting that others can change, too. On this day we stop blaming others, but accept responsibility for the hurt we cause – sometimes knowingly, other times without awareness.

### **If it weren't for second chances, we'd all be alone**

When I was young I was close to my only uncle and aunt. In my 20's a relationship that once was strong began to falter. In time, it became non-existent, to the point that it was obvious that they were upset. I could not remember doing anything that would have created such a breach, but the few times I did try to reconnect I was given an obvious cold shoulder. It took nearly eight years before I decided that I had to do something. I

went to visit them and spoke about how I missed the former closeness we had. “If you wanted to be close,” they asked, “why didn’t you call for so many years? How could you not acknowledge important events in your cousins’ lives? You never did anything specifically wrong,” they ended, “you just seemed not to care.” My uncle and aunt touched a part of me that I knew was true – a trait of creating emotional walls and distance – and it pained me to hear how it had hurt them so. After tears and an apology, we said we would try to be better about keeping in touch. As hard as was the admission of guilt, I am grateful for the forgiveness I received as a consequence; and in the years after I was blessed by renewing a relationship that meant so much to me.

It’s understandable, when we’ve been hurt, to want some justice. At best we seek some righting of the harm we feel was done. At worst, we just want revenge. “That so-and-so cut me off on the highway. I’ll show her.” “You want to leave me after all this time. I’ll make sure you pay.” I often meet people who tell me that about the anger they carry. Maybe it was some betrayal, perhaps an invitation not received, it could have been just a slow drifting away from a former friend they thought they could count on. Maybe the wrong occurred long ago, but anger has a remarkable ability to stay fresh and strong.

To say, “I’m the one who was wronged; it’s up to him/her/them to make the first move” is so wonderfully self-satisfying. To always be so sure that we are right, however, as the songwriter Gary Alan Isakov observes, often leaves us incredibly lonely. If we spend our lives waiting for others to move, more often than not we get stuck in our rage, our pain and our hurt. The problem, as a wise friend once told me, is that being indignant is a self-afflicted wound. “Anger,” she said, “is like the poison you give your self.” So what’s the antidote? Forgiveness.

Researchers have found that a capacity to forgive and feel forgiven yields important health benefits.<sup>5</sup> Just as importantly, it leads to a great sense of psychological well-being. To forgive someone who hurts us is a powerful sign of self-control and self-empowerment, since it allows us to define how we respond to the actions others take. Forgiveness liberates us from being victims to being shapers of our destiny. Thus, by taking the risk of giving someone a second chance we can bring healing not only to the one we forgive, but to ourselves.

One of the most powerful stories of giving someone a second chance comes from the story of a man named Eric Lomax, who wrote a book *The Railway Man*. Lomax was one of thousands of British soldiers who surrendered to the Japanese in Singapore in 1942 and forced to build the Burma Railway, made famous by the film “The Bridge on the River Kwai.” The work was brutal and the conditions horrific. Lomax, in particular, was repeatedly beaten and interrogated after his captors found a radio receiver he had made from spare parts. Multiple bones were broken and water was poured into his nose and mouth. One of his constant torturers stood out: Nagase Takashi, an interpreter. “At the end of the war, I would have been happy to murder him,” he recalled many years later.

Mr. Lomax spent years trying to track down his torturer. When he finally found Nagase he discovered that he was involved in charitable work and expressed particular guilt over his treatment of one particular British soldier. Lomax realized that he was that soldier. In 1987, seeking some closure to his pain, he wrote his former captor. The letter back to him was filled with such compassion, that Eric Lomax began to let go of his hate. It took 11 more years, but they finally met in Kanburi, Thailand in 1998. When Lomax greeted him, Nagase was trembling and crying and said, over and over, “I am so so sorry, so very sorry.” His regret broke the final barrier in

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/01/ce-corner.aspx>



Eric Lomax's heart. He forgave his former captor and, he said before he died in 2012, they ended their years as friends.

Most of us (thank God) do not face traumas as wrenching as this, but none of us are free from the pain others give us. But we have a choice. Will we carry that blackness of the heart Gary Alan Isakov sings about or see something shine? Do we point fingers of blame – or accept some responsibility?

Thought that part was yours, but it might just be mine  
I could share it with you, if you gave me the time  
I'm all bloody knuckles, longing for home  
If it weren't for second chances, we'd all be alone.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, the legendary spiritual leader and composer of Jewish music, came to the United States from Austria as a teenager, a refugee from the Nazis. Every so often he would go back to Austria and Germany to give concerts, and people would ask him, “How can you go back there and give perform? Don't you hate them after what they did to you? Don't you hate the Austrians and the Germans?”

This was Carlebach's answer: “I only have one soul. If I had two souls, I would gladly devote one of them to hating the Germans full time. But I don't. I have one soul, and I am not going to waste it on hating.”

Allow Yom Kippur's message to penetrate your heart. Seek justice, but allow for mercy. Take the steps that lead to forgiveness. Don't waste time or energy on hating. And allow yourself the gift to be forgiven.

We have one life – and only one opportunity to live it. But we *do* get second chances.

*Ideas in this sermon came from Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner*