

Forgiveness

EJ By Elie Jesner

"There is only forgiveness if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility." Jacques Derrida

"To err is human; to forgive, divine" Alexander Pope

משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה ב'ט'

אין התשובה ולא יום הכפורים מכפרין אלא על עברות שבין
אדם למקום כגון מי שאכל דבר אסור או בעל בעילה אסורה
וכיוצא בהן. אבל עברות שבין אדם לחברו כגון החובל את
חברו או המקלל חברו או גוזלו וכיוצא בהן אינו נמחל לו
לעולם עד שימתן לחברו מה שהוא חייב לו וירצהו. אף על פי
שהחזיר לו ממון שהוא חייב לו צריך לרצותו ולשאל ממנו
שימחל לו. אפלו לא הקניט את חברו אלא בדברים צריך
לפייסו ולפגוע בו עד שימחל לו. לא רצה חברו למחל לו מביא
לו שורה של שלשה בני אדם מרעיו ופוגעין בו ומבקשין ממנו.
לא נתרצה להן מביא לו שניה ושלישית. לא רצה מניחו והולך
לו וזה שלא מחל הוא החוטא. ואם היה רבו הולך ובא אפלו
אלף פעמים עד שימחל לו:

Mishneh Torah, Repentance 2:9

Teshuvah and Yom Kippur only atone for sins between man and

God; for example, a person who ate a forbidden food or engaged in forbidden sexual relations, and the like. However, sins between man and man; for example, someone who injures a colleague, curses a colleague, steals from him, or the like will never be forgiven until he gives his colleague what he owes him and appeases him.

[It must be emphasized that] even if a person restores the money that he owes [the person he wronged], he must appease him and ask him to forgive him.

Even if a person only upset a colleague by saying [certain] things, he must appease him and approach him [repeatedly] until he forgives him.

If his colleague does not desire to forgive him, he should bring a group of three of his friends and approach him with them and request [forgiveness]. If [the wronged party] is not appeased, he should repeat the process a second and third time. If he [still] does not want [to forgive him], he may let him alone and need not pursue [the matter further]. On the contrary, the person who refuses to grant forgiveness is the one considered as the sinner. [The above does not apply] if [the wronged party] was one's teacher. [In that instance,] a person should continue seeking his forgiveness, even a thousand times, until he forgives him.

אָסוּר לְאָדָם לִהְיוֹת אַכְזָרִי וְלֹא יִתְפָּיֵס אֶלָּא יִהְיֶה נוֹחַ לְרָצוֹת
 וְקָשָׁה לְכַעַס וּבִשְׂעָה שְׂמִיכָהּ מִמֶּנּוּ הַחוּטָא לְמַחַל מוֹחֵל בְּלֵב
 שָׁלֵם וּבִנְפֹשׁ חֲפִצָּה. וְאַפְלוּ יֵצֵר לוֹ וְחָטָא לוֹ הָרַבָּה לֹא יָקָם
 וְלֹא יִטֹּר. וְזֶהוּ דֶרֶכָם שֶׁל זֶרַע יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִבָּם הַנָּכוֹן. אֲבָל הָעוֹבְדֵי
 כּוֹכְבִּים עֲרִלֵי לֵב אֵינָן כֵּן אֶלָּא (וְעִבְרָתוֹ) [וְעִבְרָתוֹ] שְׂמָרָה נִצָּח.
 וְכֵן הוּא אוֹמֵר עַל הַגִּבְעוֹנִים לְפִי שֶׁלֹּא מָחִלוּ וְלֹא נִתְפָּיְסוּ
 וְהַגִּבְעוֹנִים לֹא מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה:

Mishneh Torah, Repentance 2:10

It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and refuse to be appeased. Rather, he should be easily pacified, but hard to anger. When the person who wronged him asks for forgiveness, he should forgive him with a complete heart and a willing spirit. Even if he aggravated and wronged him severely, he should not seek revenge or bear a grudge.

This is the path of the seed of Israel and their upright spirit. In contrast, the insensitive gentiles do not act in this manner. Rather, their wrath is preserved forever. Similarly, because the Gibeonites did not forgive and refused to be appeased, [II Samuel 21:2] describes them, as follows: "The Gibeonites are not among the children of Israel."

(ו) וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה | עַל-פָּנָיו | וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה | יְהוָה | אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אָרֶךְ
 אָפִים וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת:

Exodus 34:6

(6) יהוה passed before him and proclaimed: “יהוה! יהוה! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness,

Understanding is about giving people the benefit of the doubt, in terms of trying to figure out what is going on for them rather than rushing into judge them. Compassion will often follow from this, because we are more likely to feel concern for someone once we have arrived at a more generous understanding of them. And forgiveness will often be the next stage of this journey, because without understanding and compassion it seems almost impossible to imagine forgiving anybody.

The desire to understand is fuelled by the desire to exist in relationship with other people, by an appreciation for how healthy relationships enhance our possibilities of joy and fulfilment in life, how they offer us security and confidence, a sense of belonging and a feeling of peace.

I can choose to be constantly falling out with the people in my life, to be judging them as wanting, holding grudges against them and keeping a distance from them. I can maintain relationships ‘in appearance only’, rendering them a hollow imitation of what a genuine relationship ought to be. I can eye all those close to me with suspicion, and deprive myself of the possibility of receiving any warmth from them. I can render myself lonely in spite of being surrounded by friends and people who are drawn to me.

But why would I want to do that?

יחזקאל ל"ו:כ"ז

וְנָתַתִּי לָכֶם לֵב חָדָשׁ וְרוּחַ חֲדָשָׁה אֶתֶּן בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְהִסְרֹתִי אֶת-לֵב
הָאֲבֵן מִבְּשָׁרְכֶם וְנָתַתִּי לָכֶם לֵב בָּשָׂר:

Ezekiel 36:26

And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you: I
will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart
of flesh;

משנה תורה, הלכות דעות ו'ו'

כְּשִׁיחָטָא אִישׁ לְאִישׁ לֹא יִשְׁטַמְנוּ וְיִשְׁתַּק כָּמוֹ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר בְּרָשָׁעִים
(שמואל ב יג כב) "וְלֹא דִבֶּר אַבְשָׁלוֹם אֶת אֲמֹנוֹן מֵאוֹמָה לְמַרְעֵ
וְעַד טוֹב כִּי שָׁנָא אַבְשָׁלוֹם אֶת אֲמֹנוֹן". אֵלֶּה מִצְוָה עָלָיו לְהוֹדִיעַ
וְלֹמַר לוֹ לְמָה עָשִׂיתָ לִּי כֹךְ וְכֹךְ וְלָמָּה חָטָאתָ לִּי בְּדִבֶּר פְּלוֹנִי.
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ויקרא יט יז) "הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ". וְאִם חָזַר וּבִקֵּשׁ
מִמֶּנּוּ לְמַחֵל לוֹ צָרִיךְ לְמַחֵל. וְלֹא יִהְיֶה הַמּוֹחֵל אַכְזָרִי שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר
(בראשית כ יז) "וַיִּתְּפֹלֵל אַבְרָהָם אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים":

Mishneh Torah, Human Dispositions 6:6

When one person wrongs another, the latter should not remain
silent and despise him as [II Samuel 13:22] states concerning the
wicked: "And Avshalom did not speak to Amnon neither good,

nor bad for Avshalom hated Amnon."

Rather, he is commanded to make the matter known and ask him: "Why did you do this to me?", "Why did you wrong me regarding that matter?" as [Leviticus 19:17] states: "You shall surely admonish your colleague."

If, afterwards, [the person who committed the wrong] asks [his colleague] to forgive him, he must do so. A person should not be cruel when forgiving [as implied by Genesis 20:17]: "And Abraham prayed to God..."

6

משנה תורה, הלכות דעות ו'ז'

הְרוּאָה חֵבֶרֶוּ שְׁחָטָא אוּ שְׁהַלֵּךְ בְּדַרְךָ לֹא טוֹבָה מִצְוָה לְהַחֲזִירוֹ
לְמוּטָב וּלְהוֹדִיעוֹ שֶׁהוּא חוֹטֵא עַל עֲצָמוֹ בְּמַעֲשָׁיו הָרָעִים שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר
(וַיִּקְרָא יִט יִז) "הוֹכִיחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ". הַמוֹכִיחַ אֶת חֵבֶרֶוּ. בֵּין
בְּדַבָּרִים שְׂפִינּוּ לְבִינוּ. בֵּין בְּדַבָּרִים שְׂפִינּוּ לְבִין הַמָּקוֹם. צָרִיךְ
לְהוֹכִיחוֹ בֵּינוּ לְבִין עֲצָמוֹ. וַיִּדְבֹּר לוֹ בְּנִחָת וּבְלִשׁוֹן רַכָּה וַיּוֹדִיעוֹ
שֶׁאִינוֹ אוֹמֵר לוֹ אֶלָּא לְטוֹבָתוֹ לְהַבִּיאוֹ לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא. אִם
קָבַל מִמֶּנּוּ מוּטָב וְאִם לֹא יוֹכִיחֵנוּ פַּעַם שְׁנִיָּה וּשְׁלִישִׁית. וְכֵן
תָּמִיד חַיֵּב אָדָם לְהוֹכִיחוֹ עַד שֶׁיִּכְהוּ הַחוֹטֵא וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֲנִי
שׁוֹמֵעַ. וְכָל שְׂאֵפָשָׁר בְּיָדוֹ לְמַחֹת וַאֲנִינוּ מוֹחָה הוּא גִתְפָּשׁ בַּעֲוֹן
אֵלּוּ כִּיּוֹן שְׂאֵפָשָׁר לוֹ לְמַחֹת בָּהֶם:

Mishneh Torah, Human Dispositions 6:7

It is a mitzvah for a person who sees that his fellow Jew has sinned

or is following an improper path [to attempt] to correct his behavior and to inform him that he is causing himself a loss by his evil deeds as [Leviticus 19:17] states: "You shall surely admonish your colleague."

A person who rebukes a colleague - whether because of a [wrong committed] against him or because of a matter between his colleague and God - should rebuke him privately. He should speak to him patiently and gently, informing him that he is only making these statements for his colleague's own welfare, to allow him to merit the life of the world to come.

If he accepts [the rebuke], it is good; if not, he should rebuke him a second and third time. Indeed, one is obligated to rebuke a colleague who does wrong until the latter strikes him and tells him: "I will not listen."

Whoever has the possibility of rebuking [sinners] and fails to do so is considered responsible for that sin, for he had the opportunity to rebuke the [sinners].

משנה תורה, הלכות דעות ו'ט'

מִי שֶׁחָטָא עָלָיו חֵבְרוֹ וְלֹא רָצָה לְהוֹכִיחוֹ וְלֹא לְדַבֵּר לוֹ כָּלוּם
מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהָיָה הַחוּטָא הַדִּיּוּט בְּיוֹתֵר. אוֹ שֶׁהָיְתָה דַּעְתּוֹ מְשֻׁבָּשֶׁת.
וּמָחַל לוֹ בְּלִבּוֹ וְלֹא שָׁטְמוֹ וְלֹא הוֹכִיחוֹ הָיָי זֶה מַדַּת חֲסִידוֹת. לֹא
הִקְפִּידָה תּוֹרָה אֶלָּא עַל הַמְשִׁטָּמָה:

Mishneh Torah, Human Dispositions 6:9

It is pious behavior if a person who was wronged by a colleague

would rather not admonish him or mention the matter at all because the person who wronged him was very boorish or because he was mentally disturbed, [provided] he forgives him totally without bearing any feelings of hate or admonishing him. The Torah is concerned only with those who carry feelings of hate.

משנה תורה, הלכות דעות ו'א'

דָּרָךְ בְּרִיתוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם לֵהֱיוֹת נִמְשָׁךְ בְּדַעוֹתָיו וּבַמַּעֲשָׂיו אַחֵר רֵעִיו
וְחֻבְרָיו וְנוֹהֵג כְּמִנְהַג אֲנָשֵׁי מְדִינָתוֹ. לְפִיכָךְ צָרִיךְ אָדָם לְהִתְחַבֵּר
לְצַדִּיקִים וּלְיֹשֵׁב אֶצֶל הַחֲכָמִים תָּמִיד כִּדִּי שִׁילְמַד מִמַּעֲשֵׂיהֶם.
וְיִתְרַחֵק מִן הָרָשָׁעִים הַהוֹלְכִים בַּחֲשָׁךְ כִּדִּי שֶׁלֹּא יִלְמַד
מִמַּעֲשֵׂיהֶם. הוּא שֶׁשְׁלֹמֹה אוֹמֵר (משלי יג כ) "הוֹלֵךְ אֶת חֲכָמִים
יִחְכַּם וְרָעָה כְּסִילִים יִרְוַע". וְאוֹמֵר אֲשֶׁרִי הָאִישׁ וְגו'. וְכֵן אִם הָיָה
בְּמְדִינָה שְׂמִנְהֻגוֹתֶיהָ רָעִים וְאִין אֲנָשִׁיהָ הוֹלְכִים בְּדָרָךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל
לְמָקוֹם שֶׁאֲנָשִׁיהָ צַדִּיקִים וְנוֹהֲגִים בְּדָרָךְ טוֹבִים. וְאִם הָיוּ כָּל
הַמְּדִינּוֹת שֶׁהוּא יוֹדֵעַם וְשׁוֹמֵעַ שְׂמוּעָתָן נוֹהֲגִים בְּדָרָךְ לֹא טוֹבָה
כְּמוֹ זְמַנָּנוּ. אוֹ שֶׁאִינוּ יָכוֹל לְלַכֵּת לְמְדִינָה שְׂמִנְהֻגוֹתֶיהָ טוֹבִים
מִפְּנֵי הַגִּיסוֹת אוֹ מִפְּנֵי הַחֲלִי יֵשֵׁב לְבִדּוֹ יְחִידִי כְּעֶנְיִן שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר
(איכה ג כח) "יֹשֵׁב בְּדָד וַיִּדֹם". וְאִם הָיוּ רָעִים וְחֲטָאִים שָׂאִין
מִנִּיחִים אוֹתוֹ לְיֹשֵׁב בְּמְדִינָה אֲלֵא אִם כֵּן נִתְעָרַב עִמָּהֶן וְנוֹהֵג
בְּמִנְהַגָּם הָרַע יֵצֵא לְמַעֲרוֹת וּלְחֻתּוֹחִים וּלְמַדְבָּרוֹת. וְאֵל יִנְהִיג
עַצְמוֹ בְּדָרָךְ חֲטָאִים כְּעֶנְיִן שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (ירמיה ט א) "מִי יִתְּנֵנִי בַּמַּדְבָּר
מָלוֹן אֲרַחֵם":

It is natural for a man's character and actions to be influenced by his friends and associates and for him to follow the local norms of behavior. Therefore, he should associate with the righteous and be constantly in the company of the wise, so as to learn from their deeds. Conversely, he should keep away from the wicked who walk in darkness, so as not to learn from their deeds.

This is [implied by] Solomon's statement (Proverbs 13:20 : "He who walks with the wise will become wise, while one who associates with fools will suffer." Similarly, [Psalms 1:1] states: "Happy is the man who has not followed the advice of the wicked."

A person who lives in a place where the norms of behavior are evil and the inhabitants do not follow the straight path should move to a place where the people are righteous and follow the ways of the good.

If all the places with which he is familiar and of which he hears reports follow improper paths, as in our times, or if he is unable to move to a place where the patterns of behavior are proper, because of [the presence of] bands of raiding troops, or for health reasons, he should remain alone in seclusion as [Eichah 3:28] states: "Let him sit alone and be silent."

If they are wicked and sinful and do not allow him to reside there unless he mingle with them and follow their evil behavior, he should go out to caves, thickets, and deserts [rather than] follow the paths of sinners as [Jeremiah 9:1] states: "Who will give me a lodging place for wayfarers, in the desert."

משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה י"ב

הַעֹבֵד מֵאַהֲבָה עוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה וּבַמִּצְוֹת וְהוֹלֵךְ בְּנִתְיבוֹת הַחֲכָמָה
 לֹא מִפְּנֵי דָבָר בָּעוֹלָם וְלֹא מִפְּנֵי יִרְאַת הָרָעָה וְלֹא כְּדֵי לִירֹשׁ
 הַטּוֹבָה אֲלָא עוֹשֶׂה הָאֱמֶת מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהוּא אֱמֶת וְסוֹף הַטּוֹבָה לָבוֹא
 בְּגִלְגָּלָהּ. וּמַעֲלָה זוֹ הִיא מַעֲלָה גְדוֹלָה מְאֹד וְאֵין כָּל חָכָם זֹכֵה
 לָהּ. וְהִיא מַעֲלַת אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ שֶׁקָּרָאוּ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא
 אוֹהֲבוֹ לְפִי שֶׁלֹּא עָבַד אֲלָא מֵאַהֲבָה. וְהִיא הַמַּעֲלָה שֶׁצִּוְּנוּ בָּהּ
 הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא עַל יְדֵי מֹשֶׁה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים ו ה) "וְאַהֲבַת אֵת
 ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ". וּבְזֶמֶן שֶׁיֵּאָהֵב אָדָם אֶת ה' אַהֲבָה הָרְאוּיָה מִיָּד
 יַעֲשֶׂה כָּל הַמִּצְוֹת מֵאַהֲבָה:

Mishneh Torah, Repentance 10:2

One who serves [God] out of love occupies himself in the Torah and the mitzvot and walks in the paths of wisdom for no ulterior motive: not because of fear that evil will occur, nor in order to acquire benefit. Rather, he does what is true because it is true, and ultimately, good will come because of it.

This is a very high level which is not merited by every wise man. It is the level of our Patriarch, Abraham, whom God described as, "he who loved Me," for his service was only motivated by love.

God commanded us [to seek] this rung [of service] as conveyed by Moses as [Deuteronomy 6:5] states: "Love God, your Lord."

When a man will love God in the proper manner, he will immediately perform all of the mitzvot motivated by love.

וְכִיצַד הִיא הָאֲהָבָה הָרְאוּיָה. הוּא שְׂיֵאֵהֵב אֶת ה' אֲהָבָה גְּדוֹלָה
 יִתְּרָה עֲזָה מְאֹד עַד שֶׁתִּהְיֶה נִפְשׁוֹ קְשׁוּרָה בְּאַהֲבַת ה' וְנִמְצָא
 שׁוֹגָה בָּהּ תָּמִיד כְּאִלּוּ חוֹלָה חֲלִי הָאֲהָבָה שְׂאִין דַּעְתּוֹ פְּנוּיָה
 מֵאַהֲבַת אוֹתָהּ אִשָּׁה וְהוּא שׁוֹגָה בָּהּ תָּמִיד בֵּין בְּשִׁבְתּוֹ בֵּין
 בְּקוּמּוֹ בֵּין בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁהוּא אוֹכֵל וְשׁוֹתָהּ. יֵתֵר מִזֶּה תִּהְיֶה אֲהֲבַת
 ה' בְּלֵב אוֹהֲבָיו שׁוֹגִים בָּהּ תָּמִיד כְּמוֹ שֶׁצִּוְּנוּ בְּכָל לְבָבָךְ וּבְכָל
 נִפְשְׁךָ. וְהוּא שֶׁשְׁלֵמָה אָמַר דֶּרֶךְ מַשָּׁל (שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים ב ה) "כִּי
 חוֹלַת אֲהָבָה אָנִי". וְכָל שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים מַשָּׁל הוּא לְעִנְיָן זֶה:

Mishneh Torah, Repentance 10:3

What is the proper [degree] of love? That a person should love God with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love of God. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick.

[A lovesick person's] thoughts are never diverted from the love of that woman. He is always obsessed with her; when he sits down, when he gets up, when he eats and drinks. With an even greater [love], the love for God should be [implanted] in the hearts of those who love Him and are obsessed with Him at all times as we are commanded [Deuteronomy 6:5: "Love God..."] with all your heart and with all soul."

This concept was implied by Solomon [Song of Songs 2:5] when he stated, as a metaphor: "I am lovesick." [Indeed,] the totality of the Song of Songs is a parable describing [this love].

וכבר בארנו בפירוש 'אבות' ש'חסד' ענינו – הפלגה באי זה דבר שמפליגים בו. ושמשו בו בהפלגת גמילות הטוב יותר. וידוע שגמילות הטוב כולל שני ענינים. האחד מהם – לגמול טוב מי שאין לו חוק עליך כלל. והשני – להיטיב למי שראוי לטובה יותר ממה שהוא ראוי. ורוב שימוש ספרי הנבואה במלת 'חסד' הוא בהטבה למי שאין לו חוק עליך כלל. ומפני זה כל טובה שתגיע מאתו ית' תקרא 'חסד' – אמר "חסדי יי אזכיר". ובעבור זה זה המציאות כולו – רצוני לומר: המצאת האלוה ית' אותו – הוא 'חסד' – אמר "עולם חסד יבנה" – ענינו: 'בנין העולם חסד הוא'. ואמר ית' בסיפור 'מדותיו': "ורב חסד".

Guide for the Perplexed, Part 3 53:2

In our Commentary on the Sayings of the Fathers (chap. 5:7) we have explained the expression *ḥesed* as denoting an excess [in some moral quality]. It is especially used of extraordinary kindness. Loving-kindness is practised in two ways: first, we show kindness to those who have no claim whatever upon us; secondly, we are kind to those to whom it is due, in a greater measure than is due to them. In the inspired writings the term *ḥesed* occurs mostly in the sense of showing kindness to those who have no claim to it whatever. For this reason the term *ḥesed* is employed to express the good bestowed upon us by God: "I will mention the loving-

kindness of the Lord” (Isa. 63:7). On this account, the very act of the creation is an act of God’s loving-kindness. “I have said, The Universe is built up in loving-kindness” (Ps. 89:3); i.e., the building up of the Universe is an act of loving-kindness. Also, in the enumeration of God’s attributes, Scripture says: “And abundant in loving-kindness” (Exod. 34:6).

We are suspicious of forgiveness that comes too quickly, because on some level we know that genuine forgiveness involves recovery, and that recovery cannot be rushed. That it requires a good deal of patience.

Something new has to grow in us before we are ready to forgive, a fresh source of strength and independence, a fresh confidence in our ability to weather life’s storms. And following this line of thought, we might say that a relationship after forgiveness is never quite the same, that something of its chemistry, of its power balance, has been fundamentally altered.

The one who forgives has given a gift, has shown themselves to be bigger and more generous than hitherto known, whilst the offender has shown themselves to be in someways very lacking. To forgive does not mean to forget, it is not about wiping the slate clean and going back to how things were. It is a new beginning, in the sense of the relationship having changed, having matured and become stronger along the way.

EJ