



**THE PERSON**

**BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB**

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

**IN THE PARSHA**

## Forgiveness: A Jewish Value

**T**his has got to be one of the oldest “rabbi” jokes in the entire repertoire of American Jewish humor.

It tells us of a young rabbi, fresh from rabbinical school, who addresses his first several sermons to his new congregation on the varied subjects of meticulous Sabbath observance, refraining from malicious gossip, honesty in business, and the avoidance of inappropriately familiar behavior with other men’s wives.

After these first several homiletic salvos, the president of the congregation approaches him with the suggestion that these topics are much too sensitive and have upset many of the synagogue’s members. The president urges us the rookie rabbi to try to find some more acceptable topics to speak about.

The rabbi objects, and asks, “But what,

then, do you suggest that I speak about in my sermons?”

To which the president replies, “Judaism! Why not just talk about Judaism?”

Those of us with experience in the pulpit rabbinate typically do not find this story very funny. Each of us has, on more than one occasion, taken on causes in our sermons that our audiences have felt were not in our rabbinic purview, and indeed were somehow “not Jewish”.

One of my favorite examples of this phenomenon in my own career has been my attempts, in sermons to the entire congregation, and in more intimate counseling sessions, to encourage forgiveness. I will never forget the first time I made forgiveness the theme of one of my sermons, only to be accused by one of the more prominent members of my congregation of preaching Christianity. I urged people to forgive those who have offended them, only to find that, for many Jews, forgiveness is a Christian, not a Jewish, virtue.

Of course, this is not true. Forgiveness is a major teaching of our own faith. We are encouraged to forgive others who may have sinned against us, and we must seek forgiveness of those against whom we have sinned.

**Jonathan Rosenblum, DPM**

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In this week's Torah portion, *Vayigash*, we have an outstanding Biblical example of forgiveness. Joseph, after putting his brothers through tests and trials, finally cannot contain himself. He exclaims, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into slavery in Egypt." And immediately after identifying himself, he unequivocally forgives them: "Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither... it was not you who sent me here, but God..."

It is true that the brothers were "blown away" by this unanticipated revelation of the true identity of their tormentor, and even more astounded by this assertion of total forgiveness. But this is not the first example of human forgiveness that we find in the Bible. Joseph may have learned about this value from his great-grandfather Abraham's precedent. Abraham, back in *Genesis 20:17*, not only forgives his adversary, Avimelech, but offers prayers on his behalf.

What, then, can be the basis for the misconception that forgiveness is a Christian virtue and is not preached by Judaism? I think that the answer can be found in a precious book called *The Sunflower*, by Simon Wiesenthal.

Wiesenthal relates his personal experience of when he was brought to the bedside of a dying Nazi officer by the officer's own mother, who pleaded with him to forgive her son for killing Jews. Wiesenthal had been an eyewitness to this officer's murderous brutality. He found himself confronted with a moral dilemma. Could

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he deny a mother's tearful entreaties? On the other hand, could he possibly forgive such unspeakable cruelty? And could he forgive on behalf of other victims?

I will leave it for you, dear reader, to discover for yourself what Simon Wiesenthal actually did. But long after the event, he submitted this excruciating dilemma to several dozen philosophers, writers, and political leaders, asking them what they would do. Some of his respondents were Christians, some were Jews, and I believe one was a Buddhist.

The results were astounding. By and large, the non-Jews were able to find justification for forgiveness. On the other hand, most of the Jews could not express forgiveness for this soldier's heinous crimes, convinced that certain crimes

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were not subject to forgiveness.

For me, the lesson here is one that Judaism teaches well. Forgiveness must be earned, it must be deserved, it must be requested, and above all, it can only be granted by the person who was offended. I cannot forgive you for a sin you've committed against my brother.

In a sense, Joseph goes beyond the call of duty in expressing forgiveness to his brothers. They did not even know who he was, let alone beg forgiveness from him. But he knew from close observation of their concern for each other that they had long transcended their previous petty jealousies and rivalries. He was convinced that forgiveness was in order.

Joseph is an exemplar of how important it is for each of us to forgive those who have offended us. Forgiveness is a practice for all year long, and not just for the season of Yom Kippur. After all, it is not just on that one sacred day that each of us stands in need of the Almighty's forgiveness. His forgiveness is something we need at every moment of our lives.

The prophet Micah (7:18) says:

“Who is God like You,

tolerating iniquity

and forgiving transgression...”

Upon which the Talmud comments (*Rosh Hashana* 17a):

“Whose iniquities does God tolerate?”

He who forgives the transgressions of another.” ■

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