

Forgiveness and the Law

א-ל רחום וחנון ארך אפיים ורב חסד ואמת...
נושא עון ופשע.

*God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, filled with love and truth...
forgives transgression and sin.¹*

The S'lichot service is based on a story, an ancient story from the Midrash, the rabbinic collection of stories about stories, stories that fill in the gaps in Torah. This particular story is a somewhat astonishing one because it is told in response to the narration in the Torah of the greatest calamity ever to befall the Jewish people – the sin of worshipping the Golden Calf. This sin was worse than anything else because unlike war and exile, the people clearly and uncomplicatedly brought it upon themselves. There was no one else to blame. God had already not only led them out of Egypt but also brought them to Mt. Sinai and given them the Ten Commandments, and the very first Commandment says: “I – not any other being – am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” In case that wasn't clear enough, the second commandment follows up: “You shall have no other god before me.” And for those in the back who weren't keeping up, God threw in the third commandment: “You shall not make any image of anything on the earth and set it up as an idol; you shall not bow down to it or worship it.” So when the people not only built a calf out of gold but also bowed down to it and worshipped it, it couldn't be more clear that they had violated the law God had given them. They had sinned. They were guilty. And there was no one else to blame.

So Moses, their leader, was distraught. His mission to lead the people to freedom seemed to be over before it had really begun. God was threatening to destroy the people for their sin. And Moses apparently believed that the sin was so great that there was no possibility that he could intervene and plead with God on their behalf. At this point, the ancient rabbis provide the story: When Moses was wandering around and wondering what to do, God appeared to him wrapped in a tallit as a prayer leader would be dressed. God taught Moses these words of prayer:

א-ל רחום וחנון ארך אפיים ורב חסד ואמת...
נושא עון ופשע.

“God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, filled with love and truth...
forgives transgression and sin.”

God said to Moses, “Every time that Israel sins, they should say these words before me, and I will forgive them.”² Now, think about how extraordinary this is. “Every time.”

¹ Exodus 34:6-7.

God doesn't say, "Maybe I'll forgive them," or "I'll think about forgiving them," or, in the words of generations of parents, "We'll see." Speaking these words of prayer – appealing to God's mercy and love – is guaranteed to work! It's certain to get God to forgive the Israelites' blatant violation of the very laws that God gave them in the first place!

This is like a jailer throwing a guilty party in jail for violating the law and then saying, "Oh, do you want the key? Here it is – off you go!"³ God creates laws, communicates them to the people, and then when the people violate them, God says, "Well, if you ask me nicely to forgive you, then I'll forgive you." What meaning does law have if God will forgive ANY violation of the law, just because the people ask for forgiveness? Why bother to give laws in the first place?

Clearly, this is not just a theoretical question – this is about us. We are the Israelites who have clearly and blatantly violated laws of the Torah. Ok, maybe we haven't built a golden calf. But what about honoring elders, parents, and teachers? What about supporting the poor? Pursuing justice? And what about really hard ones like not standing idly by while the blood of our neighbors is shed in the streets? We can't blame anyone else. It was us. We knew the law. But we didn't follow it. Do we deserve to be forgiven? And what about those who have sinned against us? Those who have hurt us, dishonored us, cheated us, stolen from us, acted with violence against us? They can't blame anyone else. It was them. They knew the law. But they didn't follow it. Do they deserve to be forgiven? Won't we be giving up on principle, dishonoring the law itself, if we forgive them for what they have done?

In rabbinic fashion, I want to answer that question by telling another story, about the beginning of time, when God created a world of strict justice in which no violation of law was ever forgiven and there was no mercy. Such a world, of course, could not endure. So God created a second world of ultimate mercy in which every violation of law was immediately forgiven. But that world couldn't endure either. So God created this world, in which justice was tempered with mercy and forgiveness. We usually read that story as a message to balance law with forgiveness. But tonight I want to read it differently. I think that story – and the Midrash that we already talked about – are both teaching us something else: Justice and mercy, law and forgiveness are not opposing forces. Law and forgiveness require each other; like light and darkness, neither could exist without the other. When God teaches the words that will lead to forgiveness, God is not undermining the law – God is not saying that violating the law is perfectly okay. Instead, God is establishing the law by requiring that even violators of the law recognize its validity and force. Without forgiveness, the law could not exist;

² This midrash appears in the Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 17b.

³ This is actually a scene from The Phantom Tollbooth by Norton Juster.

every violation would chip it away until there was nothing left. With forgiveness, there is a way of upholding the law even when it has been violated.

When the families of those who were murdered in their church in Charleston publicly announced that they forgave the murderer, only days after their loved ones had died, I was not the only one who was shocked, and not the only one who was somewhat appalled. Were they saying that such a horrific act was okay? Were they undermining the law? No, they said, they were upholding their faith that the law was just, and they were making the strongest possible statement that the murderer had violated the law and thus had something to be forgiven for. Forgiveness can be hard, and we do not always feel ready to forgive even when those who have done us wrong ask to be forgiven. But when I think about it, I can't help feeling that we often fail to forgive because we think that by forgiving we will be giving something up, that we will be losing the principle that was what was done to us was wrong. I think Jewish tradition teaches us otherwise. By granting forgiveness to others – as we hope others will forgive us – we constantly rebuild the system of laws that binds us to each other in webs of obligation. When we refuse to forgive, we create rents in those webs, places where relationships are severed beyond repair, and the law is damaged as a result. If we could forgive more easily, we would help our world be more like the vision inscribed in Torah than it currently is.

In the story from the Midrash, notice that God does not say that the people will be forgiven before they acknowledge their sin, before they admit their culpability for violating the law and ask for forgiveness. It is that turn, that recognition that the law is valid and is upheld even while some violate it, that triggers God's power to forgive. And that turn should trigger our power to forgive as well, even if we are not asked, if we can feel that the law that protects and obligates us is being upheld in the cycle of law, violation, recognition, and forgiveness.

So we come to each other tonight and to God, each of us as a leader of prayer, each of us wrapped in the garments of our deeds, each of us reciting these ancient words of mercy and forgiveness. Let us all be forgiven now. Let us all forgive now. Let us know that far from undermining our highest ideals, forgiveness has the power to uphold them instead, to restore their luster, and to place them once again at the center of our lives. Forgive now. Be forgiven now.

Psalm 27 asks us to imagine that we have just one thing we can ask for, just one thing we can request. This is the one thing that I am asking from you and from God this year. Forgive now. Be forgiven now. And move into the New Year with a whole heart.