

**A Frame to Forgive
Kol Nidre 5780
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A few years ago, a man in my former congregation phoned me in the middle of the work day. “Hi Cantor Abramson,” he said, “thank you so much for preparing my son for his bar mitzvah. I am wondering if you have a few minutes to help me with my parent’s speech that I will give during the service.” “Sure,” I said.

“You should know... I haven’t set foot in temple since my own bar mitzvah! Also, I wasn’t sure where to start,” he continued, “so I just Googled the Torah portion, and I think I’ve got the jist of it. But,” he said, “I have to confess...I am not very religious.”

“That’s okay ” I said. “What do you want to say to your son?” “Well, I want to talk about our family’s history with the Holocaust--and by the way, how does that kind of evil exist if God is supposed to be good?” “Ok, what else,” I asked, wanting him to continue. “I want to tell my son publically, how proud I am of his hard work on his Torah portion.” Anything else? “ Oh, and I want to talk about our upcoming family trip to Israel. We just booked it! “Ok,” I said, “so you want to talk about God, Torah, and Israel? Is that right? “Yes, he said, but *I’m* not religious!” “I got it,” I said. “I am happy to help you.”

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had a similar version of this conversation during my 17 years in congregational life. The context often varies but the contour of the exchange is nearly always the same: a person says to me “I am not religious,” while simultaneously engaging in core religious ideas.

Why, I wonder? What’s going on here?

While there is some dispute on its etymology, the word “religion” comes from the Latin root “*religio*” meaning an obligation, a bond, or reverence, or from the verb form “*religare*” which means “to bind.” To have a religious

feeling, therefore, is to feel bound by some sense of obligation or reverence.

I suspect the “not religious” gentleman who called me for help did not have in mind this original definition of religion. He meant what many people mean: that he wasn’t **observant** in the way he thinks religious people are supposed to be. In Jewish life, observance means following commandments or *mitzvot*--the precepts or rules--Jewish law--which are meant to add holiness to our lives. Such commandments include keeping Shabbat, or the dietary practices of *Kashrut*. While observance is an important part of religion for many Jews, it is not the same thing as religion.

It’s also possible that the gentleman was conflating being religious with attending synagogue. He mentioned he hadn’t really spent time in Temple since his own bar mitzvah, despite being a member of a synagogue. Perhaps that is what he wanted to make sure I understood about him when he said he wasn’t religious.

Indeed, I know plenty of people who are very active in synagogue life (who regularly attend services and observe Shabbat and also hold leadership roles) who have also told me they are “not really religious.” For some, the notion of being “religious” has become associated unfortunately with negative aspects of large-scale organized religion: bureaucracy, politics, and in the worst cases, abuse of power by religious leaders. Moreover, the very term “religious” has been used by extremists to further oppressive agendas. If people like *that* call themselves *religious*, then I don’t want to describe myself with the same word. The original meaning of “bond” or “reverence” has become obscured--saturated with negative connotations. No wonder even some dedicated synagogue leaders don’t want to identify as “religious,” despite their robust commitment to synagogue and Jewish life.

And still for others, there may be a sense that if they don’t have a firm belief in God, then they can’t call themselves religious. This is where so many of us can get stuck. Often we feel that our belief with God must fit a kind of template--a consistent, universal, unquestioning belief. Who knows where this assumption comes from? For a few of us, perhaps that kind of certainty comes easily, but for most of us, belief develops over a lifetime of inquiry and curiosity, faith and doubt may wax and wane, grow stronger or be tested. Belief for many is a process, not a product. After all, the very name

“*Yisrael*” means one who “wrestles with God.” We are a people meant to wrestle with our relationship with God; We are not meant to have it all worked out; we are meant to work on it, and, yes, even to struggle--for within that struggle is an opportunity for insight, wisdom and meaning.

To me, being a religious person means that I ask core existential questions, or questions about meaning and values--just as the gentleman did on the phone when he asked me “how does evil exist if God is supposed to be good?” Moreover, being religious **also** means that I feel an obligation to act in the world and work for justice (as I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah) and finally, it means that we are meant to think about our own existence together with a sense of Awe for the Creative Source of All.

The great 20th century theologian and philosopher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it eloquently: A religious person is, in his language, “one who holds God and man in one thought, at one time, at all times.”

Being a religious person for Heschel is a frame of mind--it is an orientation--in which we hold ourselves and God, however you understand God, in the same thought. It means, to paraphrase Heschel, that the way we are meant to think about humanity and God is linked, and we need to wrestle with that relationship.

So when I stand before a beautiful sunset, I think not only of physics and the way light is refracted through the atmosphere, but also in awe of the splendor of creation, and its transcendent source. But also, when we stand in the face of horror, as when that father asked me, “How could God allow the Holocaust...” Like him, like many or most of you, I have no tidy answer. But it is a fundamentally religious question and the impulse to ask it, tells us something about how we experience the world and how we continue to seek and maintain a relationship with the divine.

So what does it mean to be religious (in the sense I have described) when it comes to the task of forgiveness?

The 10 Days of Repentance call us to seek forgiveness from those we have harmed. It is our opportunity to make amends and to initiate repair. And then, Yom Kippur invites us to bring that work into our worship together and offer the repair to God to restore that relationship as well. It is a two step process, first the work between us, on the human level,

horizontally, if you will, and then in the day that lies ahead of us together, to bring in the divine human connection, the vertical.

Here again we see that religious connection requires holding ourselves and God, as Heschel teaches, together in the same moment.

Of course there are numerous highly regarded articles and books in the field of psychology that instruct us in the work of forgiveness, and we would be foolish to disregard the robust body of secular literature on that subject; like me, perhaps you have found great wisdom from secular texts on forgiveness written by therapists, psychologists and other experts in the field. But on Yom Kippur, I want to know from the tradition: how might a Jewish religious person (a Jew by birth, by practice or by choice) seek forgiveness?

To me, it begins with learning--with study of Jewish texts on forgiveness. As an example, it means to explore the steps to repentance laid out by the great 12th century Jewish thinker, Moses Maimonides, known as the Rambam. As I reviewed this medieval teacher's 800 year old lessons, they sounded so current that I imagined him on stage with one of these headset mikes, giving his viral Ted Talk: "Rambam on Apologies." The steps are simple and straightforward. It's the execution that is so challenging. That is why we have these Days of Awe each and every year.

First step, the Rambam reminds us: Despite your discomfort and embarrassment, take ownership of the offense. Name what you did, even if it makes you squirm. (No – stop focusing on what you think someone else did. Stay focused on what **you** did wrong.) Now, step two. Employ the first person. For example, you should not say: "I'm sorry that your dog got hurt, or, "I'm sorry that it was impossible to ignore the incessant yapping." Rather, you should say "I am sorry I kicked your Pomeranian," Just "I am sorry. I take responsibility."

Next, acknowledge the impact of what you did. "I said I would be your confidante and when I told your secret to our mutual friend, I betrayed you and my own good intentions. You have every right to be hurt and angry."

A real apology, Rambam continues, includes an expression of your feelings of remorse. "A sincere apology must include an offer of repair, a compensation that is appropriate and that could go some way to rebuilding trust. Sometimes it is a literal, monetary compensation. "That time I spilled my wine on your outfit? Please send me the bill." Sometimes, the compensation is in time. "With your permission I would like to set up a time for all three of us to meet, so I can apologize to our mutual friend as well."

Finally, says the Rambam, the ultimate test of the sincerity of our apology comes when we find ourselves in the same situation again, hard-wired and habituated to act as we always have, but instead we catch ourselves and refrain from repeating the offense.

We have in our hands this 12th century Jewish wisdom from our religious tradition that is timeless and timely for our lives. Studying it, seeing ourselves in it and revisiting it, is part of being a religious person--one who returns to the teachings and considers their application and meaning.

In addition to reading the wisdom of the rabbis on forgiveness, what else does it mean to forgive in a religious sense? Well, the context matters. That is, the space and location in which we observe the Day of Atonement has spiritual meaning. Tonight, we are gathered in synagogue--a space where we listen to the sounds of the cello, its haunting beauty prompting us to reflect; we hear the beautiful voices in our choir offering textured harmony; we are awakened by the cry of the shofar. Together these symbols and sounds lend their aural beauty, urging us and calling us to action.

Closely related to our physical space is the act of coming together as a community. While I can glean much from reading books on forgiveness alone in my den, I am strengthened by the presence of others who have come to recite ancient words and stirring song. While not all of the words of the prayer-book may speak to us, liturgist, Larry Hoffman, reminds us that prayer makes us "ethically ready" to do right action in the world and to each other. I am not in it alone; together, we strengthen our resolve to do the challenging work of being human, of seeking forgiveness, of wrestling with our relationship, our bond, with the Source of Awe.

At this awesome moment of Kol Nidrei, when we are united (in introspection and penitence) with Jews all over the world, the haunting melody connecting each of us through all time and all space, so too we are connected by our tradition, a religious tradition, that reminds us of the holy, encourages us to seek forgiveness in very specific ways, opens our hearts to compassion and slows our impulse to judgment. What a worthy religion we have been given. Let us walk in its ways as we enter the New Year. Amen.