

GATHER THE PEOPLE

Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

www.gatherthepeople.org

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF

Magidah Khulda bat Sarah & Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

It is said that on Yom Kippur God forgives us for the transgressions that we commit against *God*. The transgressions we commit against other *people*, however, can only be forgiven after we have sought forgiveness from them. We must confront that person and directly and sincerely ask for his or her forgiveness. We must also offer to make amends or restitution.

But what if we're not the ones who did the wrong? Suppose someone has wronged us? Is there anything we can do to promote our *own* forgiveness? Is there anything *we* can do to make it right with the person who hurt us? Or do we just have to wait until they come around?

The problem with waiting, of course, is that they may never come around.

What does the Torah tell us about such situations?

We can find some guidance in the Torah reading Kedoshim. The word *kedoshim* (קדושים) means holy—*kedoshim t'hiyu, ki kadosh ani adonai eloheichem* (קדושים תהיו כי קדוש אני יה אלהיכם)—you be holy, the scripture says, because I your God am holy. (Leviticus 19:2)

This particular part of the Torah focuses on some of the things that we have to do to be holy. The beginning verses in the reading speak of our behavior towards our neighbor. They teach us how we are to measure all that we say and do by the eye of God, that is, by the yardstick of truth, honesty, conscientiousness and the brotherly love that God expects from us.

But we want to focus on a couple of verses that appear at the end of the reading, which we think help us to deal with this question of our own forgiveness. They begin: *lo tisna et achicha bilvavecha* (לא-תשנא את-אחיך בלבבך)—you shall not hate your brother in your heart. (Leviticus 19:17) The rabbis describe *sina* (שנא) or hatred as that thorn and thistle feeling, which at the very least causes us to want to be at a distance from that person, and at the most can make us wish them dead.

The verse refers, our rabbis have said, to the occasion of someone's having hurt or wronged us. And the instruction is: You are forbidden to hate that person in your heart.

But how can God demand what we should *feel* in our *hearts*? Don't we have a right to be angry when someone has wronged us? And after all, isn't anger a natural human response?

Think back to the time in the last year that someone wronged you, and did not apologize. How did you feel about that person? And think about how you would feel if someone said to you, as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) has said: You are not to allow any hatred to rise up in your heart.

We can hear you saying: Yeah, easy for *him* to say, he doesn't know the pain of my situation. He doesn't know what it feels like.

But the Torah is often not concerned only with our feelings. The Torah often asks us to go beyond our feelings. If we were to rely only on our feelings, for example, we might treat each other badly even when we didn't deserve it, let alone when we did. The scripture was written in such a way as to be very aware that we human beings find all sorts of ways to worm out of doing the right thing *and* rationalize our behavior in the process. Thus the Torah doesn't rely on our own vague, subjective feelings to get us to do the right thing. The Torah is very specific about what we should do and not do in these situations.

For example, given how angry we might be with this person, and justifiably so, we might feel like taking some kind of revenge. But the Torah here says *lo tikom* (לא-תקום)—you may not take revenge. (Leviticus 19:18) You shall live in the image of God, not adopting the values of those who harm you.

And what is revenge?

It may not be what you think. The Talmud tells us the story, as an example, about lending a sickle. Since this is modern times, we'll make it a lawnmower. So yesterday we came to borrow your

lawnmower, and for some reason—maybe we didn't bring it back on time the last time we borrowed it—you come up with some excuse why we can't have it this time. Then, as it happens, today you need to borrow our weedwhacker, and you come to us asking for it. What should we tell you? If left to our own devices, we might be thinking: You wouldn't help *us*, when we needed *your* help. *Why should we help you?* So according to the Torah, revenge is not okay.

What about bearing a grudge?

The Torah here says *lo titor* (לא-תטר)—you may not bear a grudge. (Leviticus 19:18)

And what is a grudge?

A grudge, the Talmud says (Yoma 23a), is this: Sure, we'll lend you our weedwhacker. Here it is. And then, just as you're walking away, one of us says: We're not like *you*, who wouldn't lend us your lawnmower.

According to the Torah, *none* of this is allowed. But why is the Torah so demanding of us?

If we go to the very end of the second verse, we discover the words: *ani Adonai* (אני יהוה)—I am God. (Leviticus 19:2) It may be quite natural for us to feel badly toward someone who has done us wrong, but, our rabbis say, however badly he may have behaved towards us, however little he or she may deserve the term neighbor, there is one name he or she can never lose, and that is brother or sister. We remain children of the same Parent.

Possibly you remember hearing this from your own parent, or perhaps you have said it to your own child: No matter what he's done, he's still your brother (or sister). The Torah is interested in keeping us together as a people, as a community, and our natural sentiments and tendencies are not always the best for accomplishing that.

In fact, in these two verses the Torah comes to make the ultimate demand of us. Not only are you not to hate, not only are you not to take revenge, nor even bear a grudge, but now the verse following it—probably the most famous of all in the Torah—comes to teach us: *v'ahavta l'rei-acha kamocha* (ואהבת לרעך כמוך)—you are to love your neighbor *as yourself*. (Leviticus 19:18)

Oy, we hear you saying, now they expect me to *love* this person? How can I be expected to love someone who hurt me?

Significantly, however, the verse does not say: *v'ahavta et rei'acha*. If the little word *et* (את) had been included, it would literally mean feeling the same love for others that they feel for themselves, which would be practically impossible to carry out.

But what it *does* say here is, *v'ahavta l'rei-acha kamocha*, and *l'rei-acha* is not the person himself, but everything that pertains to that person, all the conditions of his or her life, and his or her welfare

in the world. We are to help with everything that will further this person's well-being and happiness as if we were working for ourself, and must keep trouble away from him or her as if it threatened ourself.

And as Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Kopitchinitz used to say: It does not mean to love saintly and righteous people—it is impossible *not* to love such people. But God commands us to love even people whom it is hard to love.

And our rabbis say, this is something that *does* lie within our capabilities, for this kind of love does not depend on the personality of our neighbor, and is not based on any of his or her qualities. This kind of love sees our neighbor as being equally a creation of God.

But what about my anger?—we can hear you saying. Am I supposed to stuff it? Isn't that unhealthy? Oy, by the time they get done with me, I won't be able to say *anything*. That is where you would be wrong.

To the question of your right to anger, the Torah answers yes and no. The Torah generally condemns anger. It is said that, on the one hand, *sinat chinam* (שנאת חנם)—senseless, unjustified hatred, resulted in the destruction of the Temple. But on the other hand, the Torah condones righteous indignation, for it is also said that the Temple was destroyed because the people failed to rebuke each other.

And in regard to the question of whether stuffing anger is unhealthy: Yes it is—which is precisely what the verse meant by: You will not hate your brother in your heart. It is unhealthy for you and for him, and the scripture then says: *hocheach tochiach et amitecha* (הוכח תוכיח את-עמיתך)—you will surely rebuke that person. (Leviticus 19:17)

The solution to not smoldering away in anger is to say something. But the question is *what?* Now the word rebuke has a bad rap. But it may not mean what you think it means. In Hebrew, in all places in the Torah, according to Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105), the word means *to make clear*—which suggests the possibility that things are *not* clear. For example, it may not have been clear to the other person what he or she did to hurt you, or the other person may not even be aware of hurting you.

We hate to tell you how many times we've been upset about something we thought someone did to one of us *on purpose*, and it turned out that it was completely *accidental* or that they didn't even know they'd done it.

The words *hocheach tochiach*, you will surely rebuke, teach us that when anyone has wronged us, or we feel hurt or offended by someone, we have the duty either to completely forget the whole mat-

ter and not to allow it to have the slightest influence on our attitude or feelings towards the person, or if we feel we cannot do this, then we must frankly speak out and place the matter openly before him or her, affording an opportunity for the person to justify his or her behavior or to make amends for it. Actually the word *hocheach*, our rabbis say, means to make someone aware of his own true self, the self that may have been abandoned in doing the hurtful thing.

But that brings us to our last question: How do you rebuke in such a way that you make a person aware of his own true self?

First of all, anyone like us who's ever said angry words in a hurry and regretted those words deeply, and wished that they could be taken back, knows that is *not* the way. Secondly, the Torah calls the person to be rebuked *amitecha*, your fellow, and the use of that term says that we are to avoid the slightest trace of any assumption of superiority. It implies that the one to be admonished must be made to feel how completely we value him as our absolute equal, and how he has quite the same right to treat us in a similar way.

And the Torah also says: Don't rebuke the person in such a way that you commit a sin yourself. This means: Do not put him to shame in front of other people. The scripture says: *v'lo tisa alav chet* (ולא-תשא עליו חטא)—and you shall not bear sin because of him, which has also been interpreted to mean that if we do *not* speak out against that which is destructive to us, then we ourselves have done wrong; because in failing to rebuke we carry the sin not only of the individual, whom we could have helped return to his own true self, but also of the *community* (because others may also suffer from his mistakes), as it is said: "Jerusalem was destroyed only because they did not rebuke each other."

Oy, I hear you saying. Now they say we're responsible for the whole world. And the answer to that is: Yes, we are.

So . . . if you have a gripe with someone, first get a picture in your head of that person as a creation of God, and also see *yourself* as a creation of God. Then go to that person and, in kindness, let your neighbor know.

Click [here](#) for more congregational development and organizing tools.

Help support the work of *Gather the People* with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here!](#)