

Forgiveness – a sermon for Kol Nidre 2015-5776
Rabbi Stephen Wise – Shaarei Beth El Congregation

On Friday June 19 2015 at 8pm a twenty-one year old youth named Dylann Roof, with blonde, sandy hair, wearing a grey sweatshirt and blue jeans, entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. He sat for an hour with the dozens of black people there for a prayer service, then pulled out a gun and killed 9 people, 6 of them female, 3 of them male, all of them black. Among the victims were the pastor, a one-time South Carolina senator named Clementa Pinckney as well as his sister.

The killer was arrested and charged with 9 counts of premeditated murder. He is a white supremacist ostensibly seeking revenge for black crimes against whites. A heinous, devastating and callous act that makes us wonder how one human being can act with such cruelty and hate.

As the killer came to court for his arraignment within a few days of the shooting, the press gathered at the courthouse steps, eager for quotes from the victims family. Would they call for more bloodshed? Would there be reprisals? Would they open fresh wounds in the black-white circle of hatred? To our astonishment each of the victims' family members offered words that none of us could ever have expected.

"I forgive you". This was what Nadine Collier said, daughter of victim Ethel Lance.

"You took something really precious away from me. I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. It hurts me, it hurts a lot of people but God forgive you and I forgive you."

How could this man be forgiven so easily and so quickly? What happened to the anger, the hatred and the rebuke? Can such a man be forgiven for such a crime? Well, at Yom Kippur aren't we all here asking for forgiveness for our sins? Our religious tradition teaches us to forgive. God understands forgiveness. Certainly we

mortals can forgive. We know we are supposed to. But how much guidance do we have on how and when. Should we forgive someone so quickly and easily? That is something that puts our Jewish values to the test.

Sharon Simmons was spared that awful day in Charleston. She admitted to being torn between anger and her Christian inclination for forgiveness. She believes her religious values require her to forgive even this racist redneck murderer.

But the question we face today is, does this quick public declaration of forgiveness give the shooter the easy way out? Does it provide cover for whites to avoid facing racism? The Huffington Post, in a fascinating article a week after the story broke, stated, "It's almost like white America is telling Black America, 'Help us to forget the past by telling us that you forgive us'".

The Rev. Kinsey, after his own church was burned down in North Carolina, publicly stated, "We've already forgiven them, and we want to move forward, and we are hoping this is an opportunity for Christ to show himself in their hearts."

Can one really forgive so quickly and easily? Does it let the criminal off the hook too easily? If the offender hears the words from the victim, "we forgive", then does that make it easier on him for committing the crime? Is this really justice?

Judaism tells us that humans do not have the capacity to offer teshuvah for the crime of murder. For that only god can forgive. But the onus is not on the victim to step forward and offer forgiveness. It's up to the instigator to come forward and truly repent. So far the Charleston church murderer has not decided to say he's sorry for what he did. He has barely said a word, and his silence speaks volumes. When the police searched his social media archives they found countless racist diatribes in print and

video of his hate and desire to kill black people because of the colour of their skin. So why forgive this person if he is not even asking for forgiveness?

Moses Maimonides, our 12th century professor of Jewish texts and values, taught us that when a person asks for forgiveness they must say, I am sorry for what I did and if the situation comes up again, I will act in a different way than I did the last time. That is true repentance, saying sorry, and then acting the proper way in the future. But in this situation, I don't believe this killer would act any differently. I have not seen him say sorry and in the same situation, I am willing to bet he would kill again if given the chance. So I ask again, why forgive.

There have been times in my life when even I did not want to forgive someone right away for the way they might have hurt me or my friends or my family. Our mahzor tells us that we should act like God - slow to anger and quick to forgive. Easier said than

done. Sometimes we want someone who hurt us to really think about the pain and hurt they caused, to stew in that guilt for a while, not just for a minute or an hour, but maybe for a few weeks or longer. If one is truly repentant he or she will wait as long as it takes for the person hurt to forgive. Maybe forgiveness should not be given out so freely and easily.

In the book of Genesis we read of two brothers who hate each other. Esau and Jacob are born fighting. Tradition says they even struggled in the womb, each pushing each other down, each wanting to get ahead. When Esau came out first, Jacob was holding on to the heel of his foot, trying to drag him back down so he could be the first born. That is why his name is yaakov' from the root Heel. And he continues to be a heel throughout his childhood. When Esau comes in from the field famished for food, Yaakov withholds it from him until Esau promises to hand over his birthright. What kind of brother does that? And later on, Yaakov

steals the first born blessing by disguising himself as Esau to fool his elderly and near blind father. Esau was seething in anger and threatens to kill him. Esau doesn't walk up to him and say, I forgive you for tricking me out of my birthright and blessing. No. Yaakov is forced to run away and think about what he did. He goes off and marries and has children and a livelihood but what he did to his brother gnaws at him for years. And so it should. He acted in a callous and despicable manner. After years and years go by Yaakov does slowly acknowledge his wrongdoing. And when the two brothers do finally meet up, Yaakov breaks down in tears, goes on his hands and knees in repentance and asks Esau for forgiveness. Time has gone by and healed old wounds, Yaakov has learned his lesson and at that point Esau does forgive him. Their relationship is never the same and they go their separate ways because of the past. But they do make amends, forgiveness is offered and given, at the appropriate time.

There is another interesting story later in the Bible in the Book of Kings respecting the prophet Elisha. He was approached by Naaman, a great Syrian Prince, struck my leprosy. Elisha told the Prince to bathe in the river seven times and his leprosy would be healed. Naaman didn't at first believe Elisha but he did as he was told and was cured. He was so grateful he offered Elisha great gifts of silver and gold, which Elisha would not take. He did not follow God's will to become a prophet for personal gain. But Elisha's servant Gehazi waited until after Elisha left and went back on his own, demanded the payment and kept it for himself. Later Elisha confronted Gehazi as to why he took the payment that was not his. Did Elisha, the prophet of God, then forgive Gehazi for his crime of hypocrisy and covetousness? No. In fact Elisha declared that the leprosy he cured from Naaman would now be on Gehazi. At that moment his skin turned white as snow. It's a fascinating story, because Elisha was hurt by his loyal servant

who did not follow his ways and was punished. One would imagine a prophet would be quick to forgive but the story does not speak of the repentance of Gehazi and if he will be forgiven, only that first he must suffer the consequences of his actions.

Is it more “Christian” than Jewish to forgive, to turn the other cheek? The Rev. J.C. Austin, at Auburn Theological Seminary teaches, that we must distinguish between forgiveness and excusing behavior. Forgiveness doesn’t mean giving up moral judgment. It means giving up on enacting vengeance.

Quote: “From what I saw from the South Carolina families, it was the desire to speak a different word when faced with hate, and not to return hate with hate. In Christianity we would talk of forgiveness being a moral necessity. That doesn’t mean it comes cheap and it doesn’t mean it can be wrested out of our hands. It’s something we have to offer. **We do not do it** to let the

perpetrators off the hook. We do it to preserve our own humanity.”

That is the other side of forgiveness. When the victims of the church shooting were forgiving the shooter, they were saying, you are not worth it, for us to wait for you to apologize. We don't even want it. We forgive you, because we want to move on, from anger to calmness. Indeed those who extend forgiveness are not naïve. They make it clear that forgiveness is not the only emotion they have about the racial events that are unfolding. "It makes us angry. It makes some of us want to explode," the Rev. Jonathan V. Newton. But forgiveness is "not about that person, it's about you," Newton said. "In order for you to be free, you've got to let it out."

The Rev. Norvel Goff of Charleston said self-preservation is also a motive — forgiving does more for the person who is hurting than the one who caused the pain. "We're not in control of those who

may commit evil acts, but we are in control of how we respond to it," Goff said.

Such was the sentiment of Martin Luther King Jr.'s father and sister when they forgave King's killer James Earl Ray. And when they forgave Marcus Chenault, who shot and killed King's mother, Alberta Williams King, in 1974 as she played the organ during Sunday services at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church. "Hate won't bring my mother or brother back. It would only destroy me," Christine King Farris told JET magazine in 1984.

Historically, African-Americans have been expected to forgive for slavery, discrimination, Jim Crow segregation, attacks by the Ku Klux Klan and police violence. Ansley M. LaMar, a professor at New Jersey City University, pointed out that the civil rights movement was born out of anger, but the nonviolence and forgiveness it espoused is what people remember about it most.

"There was an understanding that there was a community of black people who were not going to take it if it kept on happening," LaMar said. "So being forgiving doesn't mean being a wimp. It doesn't mean, white folks, you can walk all over me. It means I forgive you, but I'm not going to let this happen again."

That is a value Jews understand. We have experienced great pain, not just in this century, but for millennia. Expulsion, destruction, genocide, we Jews have seen it all. When we say "Never Again" we declare that nothing like this should befall anyone else ever again. But do we forgive? It would not serve us well to harbour all the pain of 6 million dead in our hearts as a people or as individuals. While we cannot forgive the Nazis for their crimes, does it really help to keep the hate in our hearts every day?. Does it really help when we find these 90 year old former Nazi guards and put them on trial? It might feel good for a

moment that they are finally brought to justice for their war crimes, but they are pathetic old men. And they still might not even ask for teshuva, they might still 60 years later say they were merely following orders.

So what do we do? Jewish tradition recognizes the value and spiritual, psychological, and communal benefits of forgiving those even if they have not done the work of repentance. Rabbi Dalia Marx writes that when we don't have the opportunity for meaningful, heartfelt communication with a person who hurt us, what are we to do with our hurt feelings? Considering this troubling issue, the 16th-century Safed kabbalists added a paragraph at the beginning of the *Bedtime Sh'ma*, a prayer recited just before going to sleep, which declares unconditional forgiveness for all those who may have hurt us:

*I hereby forgive anyone
who angered or annoyed me*

*or who sinned against me,
whether against my body, my property,
my honor, or anything of mine;
whether they did so unwillingly,
willfully, carelessly, or deliberately;
whether through speech or action...
And may no one be punished
on my account.*

When we pardon all those who caused us physical, emotional, or financial harm, without their having to express remorse or even know that they have hurt us, ours is a generous act that can facilitate our peace of mind.

This past spring I invited into our congregation a man who truly wanted to repent. Michael Roberts, known as Bull, had a life of crime. He was a drug dealer, enforcer, murderer and self-proclaimed white supremacist. He had swastikas tattooed all over his body. But there was a moment when he was beaten within an inch of his life. In his pain and brokenness, he realized that he had to let go of his hate at the world, forgive those who hurt him.

After many years he came to me, a Rabbi, a representative of the Jewish people and apologized for his behaviour and his words. He apologized for his ignorance and his weakness. He displayed true repentance. He even visited Auschwitz to see the worst crime of humanity for himself. So I accepted his apology, even if he couldn't actually find each person he hurt. One more person spreading glove instead of hate into the world.

Indeed, we rest – and live – more easily when we have been able to put aside our anger and preoccupation with wrongs against us, and when we can hope that God might similarly find compassion for us. Offering such forgiveness may help us, both individually and communally, to move forward in positive ways.

The victims in Charleston were letting go of their anger and hate when they said they forgive. They might still be working through emotions. Deep down they don't condone the actions. The shooter is still a criminal and should be brought to justice. But

they will not allow themselves to dwell on those feelings. Instead they let it go and move on to more productive feelings. When people hurt us, yes, they should take the time to properly go through a period of consequences for their actions. They might come and ask for forgiveness, and maybe they won't. They might need to go through more suffering or they might never express repentance nor change their ways. But it's out of our hands. It's in god's hands. When the time is right, forgive, and let that weight off your shoulders and place it on theirs. And let God in, to help the sinner find the straight path and help us, open our hearts to love and peace and forgiveness. Ken Yah Ratzon.