

Forgiving God

Kol Nidre 2005

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Once, on the eve of the Yom Kippur, the tsaddik Rabbi Elimelech said to his disciples, "If you want to know what a Jew should do on the eve of the Day of Atonement, go to the tailor who lives at the end of town."

And so the Hasidim went to the tailor's house and stood outside the window. They watched the tailor and his children recite the afternoon prayers. Then they put on their best clothes, lit the holiday candles, and ate the pre-fast meal. After services that evening when the house was quiet the tailor went to the closet and took out a ledger.

"Master of the Universe," he said, "now the time has come for You and me to reckon up our sins for this past year." At once he began to list the sins he had committed, all of which were written down in the notebook. Then he went back to the closet, took out a thicker, heavier notebook, and said, "Lord, first I listed my sins, and now I will list Yours." And with that he began to enumerate all the suffering, sorrow, illnesses and tragedies that he and his community had endured during the year. When he was finished, he said, "Master of the Universe, to tell you the truth, You owe me more than I owe You. You know what, though? I'd just as soon not keep strict accounts with You. We are commanded to forgive the wrongs that have been done to us. Why don't I just forgive You and You forgive me?"

So much of what we do over the next 24 hours is a recounting of our sins – great and small. The tradition teaches: For transgressions between individuals and God Yom Kippur atones. We ask God for forgiveness. But increasingly I am feeling like the tailor in that story. I am feeling that we are not the only ones who need forgiveness.

I have lost friends and family to cancer this past year and I feel outraged at God. I have been sickened by the images from the Gulf Coast, Indonesia and Guatemala. And now when I hear over 30,000 dead in India and Pakistan, I feel like washing my hands of this abusive relationship. My wife is an emergency room pediatrician and when I hear her stories of the suffering of children – I want to scream; to scream into the whirlwind, the void I was sure God once filled. I want to scream “I don’t believe in you. We are alone in the universe. There is no master plan. There is no Power or Creator.” That’s how I feel when I look back on the horrible tragedies that punctuated this year. What are we doing here tonight asking God to forgive us?

We are not the only ones needing forgiveness. When people I love, children, suffer the terror of cancer God is the One who needs forgiveness. When a father wakes up to find his newborn daughter has stopped breathing, God is the One who needs forgiveness. When a tsunami kills hundreds of thousands of people, God is the One who needs forgiveness. I fight against all of my instincts. I rage and I struggle and often against all reason I try to forgive God.

God may not ask for my forgiveness. God certainly does not need my forgiveness. I may be a heretic. But I feel a need in my soul to struggle, like

a drowning man, to forgive God for all God's sins against humanity. If I do not forgive God how can I believe in God? How can I stand here and tell you to ask for God's forgiveness? What kind of hypocrisy would that be?

We just recited Kol Nidre – the annulment of vows. Does God annul God's vows with us on Kol Nidre – Is there a Divine rescinding of agreements – to match the human one? Have all the promises with our ancestors been stamped null and void? Is all of this some withering vestige of a dying myth? That is how I feel.

When Aids orphans thousands of children in sub-Saharan Africa I find it very difficult to stand here, bow, and lead you in the Barachu – a praise of God. What brings a mother to stand and recite the kaddish over her deceased daughter? The Kaddish? -- a declaration of God's greatness? Yes I believe in the great and small miracles that surround us every day. And I believe God is present everywhere if we only look. But that does not absolve God. I am demanding God take responsibility – an accounting. A reckoning.

And I do not accept trite religious apologetics. That God only tests those who are strongest. Or Hurricane Katrina was retribution for offshore gambling in Mississippi as some state legislators suggest. Or the reason children are orphaned in Israel is because their parents did not have a mezuzah on their front door. Or God "needs them more in heaven." God needs them more in heaven? Retribution for gambling? A mezuzah? That is not my theology. That is not my God.

I do not understand God's ways. And many of God's ways are most certainly not my ways. The only honest answers we should dare give in response to human suffering is, "I do not understand what this means." And, "I can not explain the reason for your pain." "But I am here. And you are not alone." Your pain is not going unnoticed. I am a witness to your suffering. I am a witness. And you are not alone.

And tonight. Tonight I want to hold God responsible. And over the next 24 hours after I have listed off the places where I was not my highest self. The places where I fell. After I continue that hard uncompromising look into my soul. After I ask for forgiveness I will leave a silence and then I will list God's sins against humanity. The places where God has tested the limits of my faith. Those crevasses filled with doubt, anger and disappointment. The vast wasteland of uncertainty and frustration.

And never let anyone tell you not to be angry with God. Of course be angry with God. When I was younger I recall religious school teachers warning me not to question God's perfection. Never to doubt that God is all powerful. Of course I doubt God's perfection and the idea that God is all powerful. God can not give me common sense and then expect me not to use it.

My religious life feels like one epic struggle to believe there is some higher order in the universe. That somehow all of this matters. And I believe that whatever God is or is not, God is certainly strong enough to endure my doubts. The God I believe in is not so fragile as to not understand our confusion.

When I am standing here in a place of prayer I bring my confusion and my doubts. I have no choice. That is who I am. But I ultimately strive to believe God is el elyon, God on High. When I stand for the Amidah I may at times feel like I am talking to myself, but I struggle to believe I am standing before Ha'ribono shel ha'olam – the Master of the Universe. If I am standing here leading a community in prayer, a servant of God. I want to believe there is a God to serve. And tonight I believe that God needs forgiveness. If not for God's sake then for my own.

By forgiving God I make God relevant in my life. By forgiving God I can allow room for my doubts, my struggles, my confusion. By forgiving God I maintain my relationship and a connection with God – no matter how tenuous it may be at times.

It is not easy to forgive God. It takes huge effort. It is painful, contradictory and maddening. The human suffering that surrounds us feels utterly unforgivable. But I will forgive God because I do not want to write off the relationship. Because I feel there is too much to be lost by simply walking away. Because I want my son to develop his own relationship and come to his own conclusions. Because despite the pain, sorrow and suffering I want my universe full of miracles not void of them. Because I do not want to be one more angry, old cynic in the world. I want to believe a voice still calls out from Sinai, from Heaven. That is why I will forgive God.

I want to engage in the eternal conversations with the ancestors and sages. Despite it all I want to live my life in praise and awe -- in wonder and hope. Even if I am wrong. Even if at the end there is nothing but darkness. Despite

it all I want to surround myself with the people of Jacob, of Israel, with those who struggle with God. Who sing a portion of that song. Who stand above eternity – a nation of priests and priestesses. A Holy people.

For what ever reason, I know I am a better person because of that relationship with God. I want to believe there is a maker of peace in the Heavens and here on earth. I want to be able to say amen and mean it. I want to equally feel that as tomorrow comes to a close and we stand before the open ark. And the final shofar blasts and the gates of heaven close. I want to feel I am forgiven by God. I have faith in the power of that two-way forgiveness.

By forgiving God, God becomes a force in the world. Not some dusty ancient relic, the focus of Hassidic parables. By forgiving God, God reigns. And God regains some exalted place in the universe and in my life. Despite everything. Despite everything. Despite disease that steals parents from their children, and children from their parents. Despite the hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunamis. Despite my desire, my overwhelming desire to walk the other way. Despite it all I will strive to forgive.

Despite having not been asked for forgiveness. I will take the lead and forgive God. I will shout forgiveness into the whirlwind.

And please God, please God, forgive us.

Please God. Forgive me.

Forgive me.