

Rosh Hashana 5779 – Mandi Katz

I have noticed recently among younger people how important the acknowledgment of country is. It clearly feels very important to many younger Australians as a chance to show respect for Indigenous Australians. And interestingly often it is delivered with an additional stronger statement: that sovereignty has never been and never will be ceded which goes further and is also a recognition of wrong doing and of harm caused by white settlement.

From time to time there is discussion about whether these statements are tokenistic – given that there are so many material injustices yet to be addressed, is this perhaps an example of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called ‘cheap grace’ where forgiveness is sought without the work being done to repent and make good.

So it raises questions for me of what it really means to seek and to grant forgiveness - what does it cost to forgive and what is required for forgiveness.

Focus of this drash is very much between people – because while we are in shule with its God focused liturgy, every child who has been to cheder knows that in our tradition, teshuva, the Hebrew word for repentance that is enabled by spiritual reflection and an accounting for one’s actions, can’t happen until we’ve dealt with the messy stuff of damaged and disorderly human relationships.

There’s been a proliferation in recent years in the number of books, articles and popular wisdom about forgiveness - And there is nothing in modern life that makes it less likely that families experience discord and conflict. Yiddish has particularly resonant word for the simmering grievances that eat at families – a broiges or if you’re South African a feribel. And if I were to ask you to put your hand up – and don’t worry I’m not asking – if you are estranged from or have unresolved difficulties with a relative who is first cousin or closer, probably half of the room would raise a hand.

Ways of speaking about forgiveness that have currency focus on letting go, for the spiritual and emotional health and wellbeing of the person who has been wronged. And we all know people who very much need to do that – people who are stuck in a grievance deeply legitimate but stuck nevertheless - five and ten years on. Who keep telling the same story with the same sad ending to anyone who will listen, because the person is consumed by the hurt done to them.

I like this definition of forgiveness: “It’s learning that there are other ways of dealing with life when it turns out different than you wanted, than staying bitter.”

I like this idea that the capacity to forgive requires a mindset, a certain kind of acceptance of the things we cannot change, to add to the idea that the person who has hurt you is the last person you should allow to determine how happy you are.

But what does Jewish law say about forgiveness? From classical rabbinical texts we learn that

- We are obliged to forgive when the person asks for forgiveness and is genuinely remorseful and the damage is not beyond repair.
- We are permitted but not obliged to forgive even if they don’t ask for forgiveness
- we’re actually forbidden to forgive when the damage is done to someone else - we don’t have the right to forgive on behalf of another person.

The focus here is much more relational and communally minded; forgiveness is important not only for the sake of the person wronged but also for the benefit of the wrongdoer so that they can do the right thing and maybe also have some peace, and this focus also on the wrong doer demands compassion from us and it’s often really difficult.

And the Rambam raises the bar again and says that if you’re wronged you actually have to tell someone about your hurt so that they know to ask for forgiveness. This is tougher again

– it's asking a person to be vulnerable, to take the risk of being hurt again, But Rabbi Joseph Telushkin points out something really insightful - we tend to judge others by their actions and ourselves by intentions, and so often when we speak to someone how about their actions have hurt us they hadn't realised and want to fix things.

So Jewish tradition offers a toolbox of different kinds of forgiveness, with different levels of optionality. It is legalistic - consistent with the way that we often think about Judaism as a religion of justice - but it is also deeply compassionate because forgiveness in Judaism is sourced in imitating God's compassion for us, and its compassions that is the overarching theme of these days.

And this model of different kinds of forgiveness is as it should be – life is complex and people are different - some can look at people who hurt them with empathy and a willingness to understand their behaviour, and for others, that's just not possible. And of course some wrongs are much worse and harder to forgive than others. And it can take much time and many go's, and Telushkin teaches why it doesn't work to say you've forgiven when you haven't - he says that that an element of forgiveness is that once you accept the apology or tell the person they are forgiven, you can't mention it again. And anyone who had been married a long time knows why that's important.

Importantly forgiveness is sometimes less than reconciliation – there are circumstances where you can move on, but you can't go back to how things were. If someone is unable to change and keeps doing the same hurtful things it's harmful to reconcile. Sometimes forgiveness still requires us to maintain boundaries.

So lots of ideas and rules about forgiveness but we know that it's stories that really take us into the space of reflection and emotional change.

It strikes me that the story of the *akeidah* – the almost sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham which we will read tomorrow is a powerful prompt us to consider what it means to forgive and specifically to forgive our parents. This reading (about parents) for me is

reinforced by the focus on parenthood in the readings of these days including stories of people who ache to be parents and in tomorrow's haftora parents who worry for their children. But I want to focus on the experience and perspective of Isaac as a child, a son because not everyone is a parent but we all have parents and we're so profoundly shaped by their active influence in our lives, positive and negative and for some people by absence, abandonment and what parents don't do.

So Abraham - great forefather but maybe not such a great father.

He negotiates with God to save the people of Sodom but won't argue with God to save his own son. He shows great hospitality to strangers but sends his own son Ishmael to die in to the desert. And what Abraham was willing to do to his son is a key narrative theme of Rosh Hashana. It's in our Torah reading tomorrow but it's also all over the liturgy, and in the main symbol of Rosh Hashana – the shofar – which brings in the wordless wail with the capacity to silence even the most rambunctious toddler and in a way we are all children in the moment of shofar, hearing the sound as if for the first time each year.

So the *akeidah* story is really challenging if you look to it for ethical guidance – how to make sense of the example of a leader who was prepared to kill his on beloved child for a religious belief.

But emotionally it leads us to feel more than think about forgiveness, especially when read with the interpretative midrash – which is the commentary of the rabbis that fills in the gaps of the stories, with imagined detail and colour reflecting the hopes and imaginings of the authors.

Isaac and Abraham never interact again in the text after terrible episode– and our midrashic imagination fills the gap of what that means, to suggest that perhaps reconciliation was too much to ask, and that they never spoke again.

Midrash suggests that when Sarah heard about how Isaac was almost killed by his father that was the cause of her death, adding grief to trauma. We know from the text also that Isaac is the least adventurous of the forefathers, Unlike Abraham and Jacob he never leaves Canaan, and the sense we have is of a slightly fragile and tentative man.

But Isaac was resilient and thrived in some ways – the love story between Isaac and Rebecca is the closest thing to romantic love in the Chumash and the chumash gives us beautiful imagery of how Isaac was comforted by her after his mother's death, and we know that he loved his own sons deeply and, tried to be a decent even handed father.

Isaac buried his father and continued his traditions– he never turned from Abraham's faith and throughout he preserves his father's legacy in a way that speaks of respect and honour for the ways of his father.

It's a story of resilience in the face of an extreme and theatrical example of the kind of hurts parent inflict on their children. Isaac survived to live a good life, blessed with a loving partnership and a family of his own. when we say the words Avraham v Yitzchak as we often do in our tfilah and songs, we can imagine that Isaac was affected profoundly by this experience but also found compassion in his heart for Abraham's imperfection.

So I love reading this as a way to conceive of what it takes to forgive our parents and to hope that as parents and as friends and siblings and partners - we can be forgiven for being flawed and sometimes quite damaged.

Forgiving our parents for their failings, for being too critical, not strong enough, too controlling, too absent...letting us give up on piano lessons.... requires compassion for their humanity - and it is interesting how hard people sometimes find it to be generous about their parents' shortcomings. It's also a critical step to real adulthood - that moment - and it's not usually a moment it's a slow reveal, that our happiness, success, ability to thrive is not dependent on our parents or anyone else .

It's a lonely realisation but it is the key to the kind of self-knowledge that is required for the process of teshuva. Forgiving our parents and other people in our lives for being human builds better connections and better communities, but also helps us to see, own and forgive our own inadequacies – and if we want to, and our circumstance permit, to do something about them.

I want to finish off with some words from most inspiring voice of 5778, Hannah Gadsby who never mentions the word forgiveness and certainly doesn't talk about teshuva but shows what it is to move from brokenness to strength and dignity in a story that has started a million conversations and made countless people cry and laugh and understand their own stories a little better.

In her astonishing piece Nannette she tells us some of what it felt like to be what she described as “soaked in shame” – internalising the message of non-acceptance and more about her body, her sexuality, her very disposition - as she says *“The damage done to me is real and debilitating. I will never flourish”*

But like Isaac as her story unfolds, it's a story of resilience. She looks into the harm that was done to her, really faces it and doesn't pretend it was not hurtful, and key to her message is that she can no longer deflect her pain with humour.

“The only way I can tell my truth Is with anger... [And] anger is never constructive. Laughter is not our medicine, stories hold our cure.”, - this is her experience of teshuva, rebuilding, reshaping her life, letting go of what was hurting her through her authenticity: “There is nothing stronger than a broken woman who has rebuilt herself”

And we all get to tell our stories. And may ours all interwoven with the truth of Hannah Gadsby that underpins justice, and the compassion of Isaac that makes forgiveness possible, so that in in these days of facing the truth of our stories and repairing our relationships, we too may know forgiveness and rebuilding.