

Forgiveness is a promise

This morning's Torah portion concludes the flood narrative in Genesis. Genesis 9 tells of the covenant made between the biblical God and Noah and his descendants, and every living creature. The angry vindictive biblical God of Genesis 6 who sought to destroy everything on earth by bringing a great flood has now pledged that he will never do so again. A promise of such magnitude ought to be easy to remember; think of the worst thing you might do and then back away from it. Yet, the biblical God requires a reminder, a visible symbol of the promise. So he establishes a rainbow, a *keshet*, as that symbol. The text tells us that when *he* sees the rainbow, he will remember his covenant. A covenant, a promise; an implicit symbol of the wrong done to every living thing and the request for forgiveness.

Traditionally, the Torah portion for the morning of Yom Kippur comes from Leviticus 16 and it retells the procedure of the ancient high priest for selecting two goats, one for sacrifice and one to carry the sins of the people into the wilderness as the literal scapegoat. As I much prefer metaphor to superstition, I find the Noah story, understood to be about promises, more fitting for Yom Kippur. For you see, forgiveness is a promise. It is a promise that we will act and behave differently; that our

words will be used differently; and that we will not suffocate in the past so as to not be able to function in the present. It is a promise that as we reconcile all those contradictory and paradoxical emotional twins represented by the animals on the ark, and about which I spoke last week, we will maintain the integrity of each. We will not allow any one to devour the others, or to irreparably damage another. We will follow the words of Martin Luther King who said “forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a constant attitude.”

And the story’s use of a rainbow to symbolize a promise is an apt one. Scientifically, we know that a rainbow is a meteorological event caused by the interplay of light and water. A recent article in Scientific American noted that, “if you pay close attention, you will discover that rainbows come in a surprising variety of colors and shapes. And scientists are finally figuring out why . . . Anything that modifies the light before it hits the water drops will impact the colors in a rainbow.” (“Think You Know Rainbows?” 2/16/2016) Thus the article explains there can be rainbows that are “completely red, white, nearly flat or full-circle.” Likewise, we each have promises to make and promises to keep but no two will look the same. The interplay of light and shadow, water and air in our own lives determines what we hold onto and what we let go of; what affects us deeply and what

moves us to make amends. Our wounds are personal and may not be understood by someone else. But the process of forgiving is a shared experience that can be supported and encouraged by others.

A promise is only made real in its fulfillment. Similarly its symbolic counterpart in nature, a rainbow, “is not located at a specific distance from the observer, but comes from an optical illusion caused by any water droplets viewed from a certain angle relative to a light source. Thus, a rainbow is not an object and cannot be physically approached.” (Wikipedia) So we can’t touch it, nor feel it, or even catch it. It eludes us even while it amazes us. It is unusual and special, that rare occurrence that can change the trajectory of our day if we pay attention to it. It is at once an illusion yet altogether real. Yet another paradox that affects our lives. That is what forgiveness can be too. It is almost entirely about the past but functions in order to give permission and purpose to the present and significantly affect the future.

The poet Jenim Dibia in *The Calligraphy of God* wrote, “We colour the world, Not with the darkness of our pasts, But with the rainbow of our hope.” Hope is a promise; love is a promise; life itself is a promise. But as we learned, these do not function in a vacuum. So we need to try to understand what does forgiveness look like? The closer we get to its

realization, it like a rainbow, remains paradoxically something seen not captured. “The root of “forgive” is the Latin word “perdonare,” meaning, “to give completely, without reservation.”” No holds barred and nothing held back. It is utterly complete; in the vernacular, we are all in. Given that root, forgiving is even harder than it might have been. There are no secret withholdings, nothing to retain as a weapon later on. It is a promise to not hold another’s past against him or her; a promise not to put the wrongs in a secret cache to be pulled out at a later time. Doing so can be personally burdensome and oh so heavy.

I am reminded of a story told of a psychological experiment about attitudes and stress management in which students were shown a glass that had water to the halfway point. They each expected the question to be is the glass half full or half empty, the quintessential question thought to sum up one’s attitude toward life. Instead, they were asked how much does the glass weigh? The answer given is informative. ““The absolute weight doesn't matter. It depends on how long I hold it. If I hold it for a minute, it's not a problem. If I hold it for an hour, I'll have an ache in my arm. If I hold it for a day, my arm will feel numb and paralyzed. In each case, the weight of the glass doesn't change, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes.” The instructor continued, “The stresses and worries in life are like that glass of

water. Think about them for a while and nothing happens. Think about them a bit longer and they begin to hurt. And if you think about them all day long, you will feel paralyzed – incapable of doing anything." (reddit/get motivated) Holding onto past and present hurts are like that too. They weigh us down, keeping us from moving forward. They are the emotional equivalent of stationary weights and barbells. Forgiving has within its very structure giving, a gift to ourselves if not for others. Forgiveness un-given is a promise not kept.

Yom Kippur is the day to deeply and profoundly ponder the meaning of forgiveness. We set it aside from all the other days of the year, and not coincidentally I think, we couple it with a remembrance of those who have died. We are not truly complete unless and until we forgive those who continue to live, and those who populate our lives even in their death. For as we say in the Niskor service that follows, quoting Morrie Schwartz, “death ends a life, not a relationship.” We must let go of any hurts that linger for our sake; realize the promise not to continue to inflict damage represented in the biblical story by the rainbow. The artist Paul Cezanne said, “we live in a rainbow of chaos.” But as we learned last week, the paradox of conflicting emotions need not be chaotic but merely coexistent. We have the sole authority over our lives to determine the impact of words and deeds. We can

pull back from the destruction we might be tempted to inflict in the heat of the moment and instead take the time to reflect on the consequences of our actions. We can actively forgive and turn our promises into the variety of rainbows that exist. They will not be identical nor will they necessarily all be as beautiful as one another. But if we are fortunate and dedicated to the practice of keeping our promises and forgiving, we just might have full rainbows, double rainbows and more frequent rainbows. We can accept the light and the water necessary to create them, and the exquisite vision they present. As we move from this space on this Yom Kippur, let us take the words we have said to heart and find the courage to forgive.