

## Love and Forgiveness

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When I was in fourth grade, Valentine's Day was on a Wednesday. Now, how would I remember that? Well, I went to St. John's School, loosely affiliated with an Episcopal Church, from Kindergarten through graduation, and we had Chapel every Wednesday. On the morning of that Valentine's Day, our teacher told us that we should feel surrounded by a "Valentine's circle of love," and that nothing should disrupt our "circle" that day. My "circle" was broken a short hour later, during Chapel.

Our rabbi spoke at Chapel once each year, but February 14 wasn't his day, nor was it an occasion for the Priest in whose church we held Chapel. Instead, the speaker was a Baptist Pastor. He preached that the "God of the Hebrews" was a God of strict and harsh justice, but that God had thankfully sent Jesus to replace that harsh divine presence with loving forgiveness.

I went home and told my parents about what I perceived to be an anti-Semitic occurrence in Chapel that day. They had never heard such a claim about the so-called "God of the Hebrews," so they called our rabbi and recounted what I had told them. The rabbi replied that I had correctly reported what I had likely heard. I guess my parents should have known then.

By the early 1970s, when that Baptist preacher came to St. John's, the theology he preached had been rejected by much of the Christian world. Nevertheless, for some 1500 years, ending only with Vatican II's response to the horrors of the Holocaust, that mischaracterization of our God was official Church teaching. The idea was that the more primitive Hebrews needed to fear God in order to do God's will. More sophisticated Christians, on the other hand, would respond to a God of loving mercy.

On Yom Kippur, I spoke about "the *Avinu Malkeinu* paradox," as we called on a God of both justice – *Malkeinu*, our King – and a God of love – *Avinu*, our heavenly Parent – on the High Holy Days. No Torah portion better exemplifies this critical aspect of our theology than *Ki Tissa*, with the sin of the golden calf and God's reaction to it.

You know the story: Moses is atop the mountain, receiving the Torah and God's commandments. The people become impatient. They convince Aaron to build a molten God for them, a golden calf. God is incensed. God quickly sends Moses down from the mountain. Overcome by his own anger, Moses smashes the tablets of the commandments.

God's rage flares, too. God proposes to destroy the whole Jewish people, with only Moses surviving. Now, that's a God of strict justice.

God offers to establish a new covenant with Moses as the father of this newly chosen people, but Moses resists. Moses uses multiple arguments in a layered attempt to convince God to forgive the people, and God is swayed. Ultimately, God invites Moses back to the top of the mountain and to "carve two tablets of stone like the first." God reestablishes the Covenant with the Children of Israel, despite their sinfulness. And God lovingly comes closer to Moses than ever before, proclaiming God's own name in front of Moses, laying out divine attributes of a God who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in loving kindness, and true; showing love to the 1000<sup>th</sup> generation, and granting pardon for transgression and sin."

As the story continues, and it does go on to this very day, the people continue to sin. God is angered each time. And yet, consistently, without fail, God always takes us back in love. In short, although the God of the Hebrew Scriptures is just and occasionally strict, God ultimately forgives the Children of Israel, whether we deserve it or not.

So that Baptist in my fourth grade chapel was wrong. At best, he told only part of the truth about “the God of the ancient Hebrews.” And perhaps I tell this story tonight, on Valentine’s Day, to mend that Valentine’s circle, proclaimed by my fourth grade teacher more than 40 years ago.

Don’t get me wrong: I understand that Valentine’s Day isn’t a Jewish holiday. It is St. Valentine’s Day, after all. Moreover, Jewish tradition has its own day for celebrating love, *Tu B’Av*, the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Av, in the summer. Still, our reality living in America is that love is in the air today. The ladies who work at the Roadrunner store up at Pleasant Ridge wouldn’t let me pay for my Diet Cokes today. Toni sent me flowers, a magnificent creation by Richard Estelita, which you can see in my office. And that gift that a little birdie told me Toni wanted finally came in today, just in time for me to pick it up and present it to her when we lit Shabbat candles.

Today, on Shabbat and on Valentine’s Day, I would like to suggest that God’s love can be a model for our own loving relationships. Justice happens. Forgiveness is required.

We conclude our weddings by shattering a glass. That act acknowledges that we live in an imperfect, unredeemed world. Even at a moment of greatest joy, like a wedding, we take note that not every moment of marriage will be as pure and loving as the moments under the *chuppah*. And yet, as soon as we hear the glass break, we all shout, “*Mazal tov!*” It’s as if we’re saying, “Congratulations on entering the complicated, easily breakable and often broken bonds of holy marriage.”

But isn’t that true of every relationship? How often do we all risk our relationships with thoughtless actions and unkind words? How frequently do we all become angry at the people in our lives, meeting out strict justice in response to a perceived or actual wrong done to us? Mistakes and wrongdoing, combined with a hesitation to forgive, threaten all of our circles of love.

Mussar, Jewish ethical literature, offers at least three different ways of preserving love after we have been hurt.

At the most basic level, we can either forgive or seek justice. In our tradition, forgiveness typically requires that the wrongdoer apologize and demonstrate a change in behavior, at a minimum. Torah doesn’t suggest that the Golden Calf builders apologize. Aaron makes excuses. Indeed, we see very little truly penitent behavior among the many sinners in the Torah.

In our own lives, too, most of us justify our behavior and aren’t quick to apologize or work to change our ways. Sometimes, though, remarkable forgiveness touches us. I recall an instance of marital fidelity by a woman I was counseling, years ago. She confessed his sin to her husband, and sought his forgiveness. He worked long and hard to get to the point that he could forgive her, that he could get to the place of trusting his wife again. But he did; and, in the years that followed, he frequently told me that their marriage was strong and loving in ways he had never imagined it could be. We, like God, can be forgiving.

There were two parties to that act of infidelity of course, and both were married. The other couple divorced. The betrayed wife found peace in the justice of divorce. While the divorce itself wasn’t always amicable, they couple later reconstructed a friendly relationship, more than just for the sake of their grown children. In that case, justice facilitated a modicum of reconciliation.

Sometimes, though, a third way is required. The wrongdoer doesn’t seek our forgiveness. Justice isn’t available. We need to find resolution another way.

My Mussar teacher, Alan Morinis, tells of the man whose father cruelly abandoned him as a child. Years later, the man has a child of his own, and his father is eager for a relationship with his grandchild. The man tries hard to forgive his father, but his father is unrepentant, justifying his

abandonment by spewing venom about his long-ago wife, the young man's mother. Finally, the man realizes that he cannot ever forgive his father. At the same time, justice doesn't bring him peace, cutting off his father as appropriate repayment to the father who had, after all, abandoned him. Instead, the man found that he could be generous with his father. He could offer his father a limited relationship with his grandchild, even if his father didn't deserve it, *per se*. That's called mercy. That's called grace. That's also an imitation of what God does after the sin of the Golden Calf, generously forgiving the Children of Israel, even without their earning forgiveness.

On this Valentine's Day Shabbat, I pray that each of us will focus on one relationship, on one issue that cries out for resolution. If we have received a sincere apology, let us seek to be forgiving, like God before us. If forgiveness is inappropriate, let us seek peace through justice, like God before us. Alternatively, let us conjure up a spirit of generosity, and forgive even the one who doesn't deserve it. Then, like God and the Children of Israel after the Golden Calf, may we find true love.

Amen.