

In the Jewish tradition, there are Midrashim which discuss how different names for God imply different of God's values. For instance, God's formal name, spelled in the Hebrew יהוה-י-ה-ו-ה—which we pronounce as Adonai—is thought to imply a special sense of God's mercy. On the other hand, God's name אלהים was thought to communicate a sense of God's longing for justice.

As we will read in a few weeks time, the Tanach begins, famously, with the line בראשית ברא אלהים, *In the beginning, God—Elohim—created the heavens and the earth.* In the understanding of God's names I just mentioned, this would seem to imply that God represented, more than anything else, justice when God created the world. However, in the next chapter of Genesis, we read a second version of the creation narrative. We read of a time: ביום עשות יהוה אלהים ארץ ושמים, *when Adonai-Elohim was creating the heavens and the earth.*

Why does the first version of the story only use God's justice-name, omitting God's name as a merciful creator? Why, in contrast, does the second story use both of these names? Rashi gives us one answer to this question and suggests that when God began to create our world, God intended to build a world centered only on justice. However, it did not take long before God realized that a world centered on justice alone would not survive. So, instead, God proceeded to change the nature of the world, and God chose to build a world in which justice and

mercy would forever be in tension, but in which they would always be tied together.

And we—we who may strive to do good, but almost certainly fail at least occasionally—should be very happy to recognize this. Justice demands that each person get precisely what he or she merits, no more, no less. Mercy on the other hand, demands that we each be given the benefit of the doubt and that God—and our peers—interact with us through a lens of loving-kindness.

--

Mercy is an incredibly important value during this time of year. As we approach Yom Kippur, we are all meant to seek forgiveness from those we have harmed. However, the reverse of this scenario is no **less** important. Being able to **grant** forgiveness is nothing short of merciful loving-kindness. It is an act of mercy that can be elevating for us and make us more like God.

When we are faced with a person who has harmed us, it really *does* require a true act of mercy to be able to say to them: “I forgive you.” Granting forgiveness *is* an act of mercy, and it is a complicated one. There are three elements of this process that I think are worth exploring. First, being merciful requires that we give time to those who have harmed us so that they are able to make amends, second, it requires that

we strive to identify with “the other”—people who have sinned against us—even as still experience pain they have caused, and, third, being merciful means that we accept that, in cases where we cannot fully forgive, peace may be found by at least letting go- letting go of the pain caused us and the hatred we harbor in order to be merciful to ourselves.

--

We have in our own history and tradition strong examples of all three of these merciful qualities. We all, for example, are likely familiar with the story of Jacob and Esau. These two rivalrous brothers are the antithesis of what any of *us* would hope to find in our own family. Jacob, the younger of this pair of twins, is favored by his mother, and Esau was favored by his father. Ultimately, we see Jacob not only trick his infirm father, but also abuse his starving brother, steal this same brother’s blessing and inheritance, and run off after having been caught in these misdeeds.

When the two brothers finally meet many years later, Jacob—quite reasonably— still expects his brother to be angry with him. However, when the two brothers reunite, we discover that in the course of time Esau found that he could not remain angry with his brother. We can only imagine that Esau, upon seeing how his formerly-contemptible younger brother has grown into a respectable man, feels that it is finally right for

him to grant forgiveness. The presence of great time in between the brothers' meeting cannot be missed here. Had the two been reunited sooner, we can only speculate as to what might have occurred. At the very least, it is doubtful that Jacob would have had time to have left his younger, more sinful self behind. And, by permitting this time to elapse, Esau himself is a model of mercy.

--

Another central aspect of what it means to have mercy, and thus to be able to grant forgiveness, is the ability to identify with “the other.” We might be able to take a lesson about this from an unexpected source. In the late 17th century, a new play was penned by William Shakespeare. In it, a Jewish character played a very tortured role: On the one hand, he himself did not appear to be a terribly scrupulous character, and the audiences who would have watched him would likely have been reluctant to identify with him. On the other hand, the remaining characters in this play are hardly saints, and we have to wonder for whom exactly Shakespeare meant for an audience to root? The play, if you haven't guessed it yet, is the infamous *Merchant of Venice*. I don't want to spoil the entire play if you aren't yet familiar with it—though I feel like 300 years should be long enough not to have to worry about

spoilers—still, I would like to focus on some of the Jewish character, Shylock's, words.

In the year 1700, roughly the time original English audiences would have watched this play, odds are that they would have only recently begun to meet Jews. It was only about 40 years earlier that Oliver Cromwell had allowed Jews to reenter English territories—something that had been forbidden since 1290 when King Edward I expelled the Jews from England. Thus, we should take Shylock's words, spoken to a predominantly non-Jewish audience, as something groundbreaking, something that could be both provocative and controversial. Shylock, imploring the Gentiles who mean to do him harm to see him as something more than “the other,” speaks some of the most memorable lines of this play. He says:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?

We can have no doubt that Shylock and his interlocutors were greatly at odds, and it seems quite probable that much of their conflict revolved around their religious differences. In all likelihood, this play and speech

represented more than just imaginations in the mind of a playwright. Instead, it was an appeal to audiences that they see past others' differences and refuse to dehumanize people based on superficial qualities. This ability to identify with the other is what can, in fact, help us to grant forgiveness even when it may be difficult. The ability to identify with a person who has wronged us is incredibly challenging to master; however, it can allow us to show mercy in even the most challenging of situations. So long as we can view ourselves as diametrically opposed to those who have done us harm, and force the world to adhere to a simplistic and false binary of right and wrong, it will remain incredibly difficult for us to have mercy when it matters the most. However, if we recognize that none of us is perfect, it may lead us to see the humanity even of those who have made our own lives more challenging. This is a way to forgiveness. This is mercy.

--

The most difficult type of mercy might be made necessary when it is truly impossible to forgive someone in the conventional sense. This could be because the person whom we would forgive is no longer with us, because he or she simply is uninterested in seeking forgiveness, or even because though we might wish to forgive this person, the way in

which they have harmed us is simply too much for us to let go. In cases like this, perhaps more than any others, mercy is paramount.

It was 10 years ago today that Terri Roberts, a mother and grandmother who had led a quiet and peaceful life, was forced to confront this kind of reality head-on. Precisely 10 years ago, her son—who had shown no conspicuous signs of problems—attacked a school of Amish girls in Pennsylvania. In the course of his attack, he killed five innocent girls and injured five others. We might ask ourselves: What mercy is there to be found in a situation like this? However, in fact, the people whom Roberts' son had so irrevocably harmed were among the first to comfort her. While forgiveness, in any practical sense, for Roberts' son may have been unattainable, this community did not allow that to stop them from showing mercy. By letting go of the hatred and anger that any person would naturally feel after such an unjust act, they were able to act in a way that showed loving-kindness. They refused to harbor anger for a person in their hearts. While such an act certainly is not expected of any of us, it is undoubtedly something to admire and is an act of mercy. Even more so, those who are able to let go when they cannot forgive may find that they themselves have a greater sense of inner peace.

--

This is, in essence, what we read in Pirkei Avot. Written nearly 2000 years ago, this book of rabbinic wisdom teaches us:

“Rabbi Yochanan instructed his disciples: Go and see which is the worst path, the one from which a person should distance himself:

Rabbi Eliezer said: **An evil eye.**

Rabbi Joshua said: **An evil friend.**

Rabbi Yosi said: **An evil neighbor.**

Rabbi Eleazar said: **An evil heart.**

Rabbi Yochanan said: I most prefer the words of Rabbi Eleazar, who said “an evil heart,” for it contains all of your words.

All three of these ways of dealing mercifully with those who seek our forgiveness are, in essence, strategies for distancing ourselves from having “an evil heart.”

As we celebrate the Rosh Hashanah, our Jewish new year, we recall the foundation—the creation—of the world we live in. Likewise, we are called to reflect on the way in which our tradition thinks about the beginnings of our world. It is a good time to remember that—apparently—even **אדני-אלהים**, God, needed a moment to remember that mercy is essential for the world to function. How much the more so with us, who are flawed in a plethora of ways. And as we remember to act mercifully with others, we can likewise hope to participate in the creation of a more mercifully society. This is something from which we

would all benefit. It is a way that we all communally can act to make ourselves more whole. It is a chance for us all to become more distant from the threat of an evil heart, and to become enriched with the goodness, the sweetness of a heart filled with compassion, and love, and mercy.

Kein yehi ratzon- may it be God's will.

Shanah tovah.