



## HIGH HOLIDAYS 2022/5783

### On Shame and Forgiveness Yom Kippur Sermon, Kol Nidrei 5783/2022 Rabba Kaya Stern-Kaufman

The following is a Midrash - a Rabbinic Legend:

On the 6th day of creation, when God was ready to create human beings, God decided to give human beings a special gift. Each one of them would receive *nitzotzot* -- holy sparks of God's Divine essence.

When the angels heard about this they became very jealous and angry. They didn't want the human beings to have a special gift that they themselves did not have.

God heard about their unhappiness and thought it over. Finally, God said to the angels, "I will make a deal with you. I will still give the human beings the *nitzotzot*, the holy sparks of My goodness, but...you can pick the place where I will put those sparks. You can hide them anywhere you like and that is where I will put them.

So the angels gathered together to decide where to hide the sparks. One angel said, "Let's put them at the top of the highest mountain, Mount Everest!" It is very steep and very very far up in the sky."

Another angel said, no, these human beings are going to have both strength and perseverance. They will eventually find a way to get to the top of the mountain.

Another angel piped up, what if we drop the Divine sparks into the bottom of the ocean. These humans aren't fish, they won't be able to hold their breath long enough to get down there.

But then another angel objected. These humans are going to have intelligence. They will figure out how to build a machine that will enable them to travel underwater. The bottom of the ocean is not a good solution.

Now the angels were getting frustrated. They rejected putting the sparks deep in the forest or buried in the desert sand. They just didn't know what to do.



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Finally, the youngest angel spoke up in a quiet voice. She said, "I have a better idea. We will ask God to hide the Divine sparks of God's special goodness inside of each human being. They will surely never think to look *there.*"

And isn't it the case that all of us all have the tendency to forget that every human being emerges from the wellspring of ultimate goodness and contains the imprint of Divine goodness.

Yom Kippur comes each year to remind us, that despite our fallibility, or even because of it, we also have been given the capacity to forgive. Our Rabbis teach that forgiveness itself was created even before the world was formed. It was understood that we human beings, would inevitably stray from our best selves. Therefore, in anticipation, a way back was created before any human being was born into this world.

So how do we do it? How do we begin to make amends, with ourselves and with others? How do we find those hidden sparks in others and within ourselves which seem to be so elusive?

On this subject Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav taught the following: One must first understand that every human being does possess qualities of goodness, even if they're hard to see. It is our task, therefore, to search for those sparks of goodness in every person.

There is a human tendency to judge others, to separate ourselves and indulge in self-righteousness. This is a typical response and at times, even natural. But R. Nachman reminds us that it is our holy task to take an extra step and instead to actively seek out the positive qualities in those toward whom we feel judgmental. This is no small task, but this is the reparative work that has the power to heal relationships.

It is our obligation as Jews to cultivate the ability to see with a good eye - that is to seek out the goodness in others, even and especially when it appears to be hidden. This is the beginning of developing the capacity for forgiveness.

During these Days of Awe and culminating on Yom Kippur, we do the spiritual work of making amends between ourselves and God, but as our tradition teaches, Yom Kippur does not atone for the misdeeds and misspoken words between people. The interpersonal work of apology and forgiveness is part of the holy task of these past ten days and the 25 hours that remain.

But the work of asking and granting forgiveness does not only apply to our relationship with others; it applies to ourselves as well. For many of us, self-forgiveness may be the more challenging task. And yet, it may also contain the key to forgiving others.



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Self-forgiveness is so difficult because it is blocked by another very human quality we do not like to discuss, and that is Shame.

Brene Brown, a well-known research professor and author, explains shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging; that something we've experienced or have done or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.

Unlike guilt, which can be adaptive and help us to change negative destructive behaviors, shame is unproductive and often the **source** of hurtful and destructive behavior. Shame prevents us from speaking up and from taking risks. It prevents us from taking meaningful action because we doubt we are worthy of positive outcomes.

Self-forgiveness, on the other hand, frees us from these shackles. When we forgive ourselves we can connect more deeply with others. When we forgive ourselves we can more easily forgive others. When we forgive ourselves, we create an inner spaciousness to become more accepting and compassionate toward others.

Self-forgiveness means taking a long hard look at ourselves, at our shortcomings and being ok with our non-perfection. It does not mean that we stop working to better ourselves. It means we release ourselves from rigid, critical, self-judgement and shame.

Self-forgiveness means that we accept our fallibility and see ourselves as forgivable. If we do not experience ourselves as forgivable then it is very difficult to authentically forgive others. True forgiveness communicates to another that they are forgivable.

Authentic forgiveness is perhaps the greatest gift we can offer. And **this** is the gift of Yom Kippur- the day when God forgave the Jewish people for the sin of the Golden Calf, the day when Divine forgiveness came into the world and taught us that repairing relationships is not only possible, but is a mitzvah, the day we learned that we are worthy of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is fundamental to life, and perhaps that is why the Rabbis taught that it was created before the World itself. It is the one quality that holds the most transformative potential for every individual and for the world. The waters of forgiveness calm the fires of hatred, disconnection, and destruction while planting seeds of compassion and peace. It is the foundation of redemption. This is the power of Yom Kippur.



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Tonight, when we go home, let us spend some time and search out the *nitzotzot*- the holy sparks of goodness that reside within us. And then, let us search out the *nitzotzot*- the sparks of goodness that reside in those with whom we have damaged relationships.

It is on these High Holy Days that we give ourselves and one another a second chance; another chance to make whole that which is broken or frayed. It is, therefore, our precious custom at this time of year to actively seek to make amends and to humbly ask forgiveness from others for having caused any hurt, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

This practice trains the heart to accept responsibility for causing harm, to admit one's fallibility and to pursue peace. And we are taught to respond to the one who sincerely apologizes with a willingness to forgive. In this way we develop the capacity to forgive others, to let go of our grudges and resentments.

### **A Poem by Rumi- The Guest House**

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.



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Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

And so tonight, I ask you all for pardon. If I have unknowingly hurt you in any way, I do sincerely apologize and ask your forgiveness.

This is the hour when we dress in white, as if in shrouds. We confront our own mortality so that we may do the spiritual work of repairing what needs to be repaired and forgiving what needs to be forgiven. Let us begin again.

G'mar Tov- may we all be sealed for a healthy and good new year.