

Convincing God to Be Forgiving

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Throughout our High Holy Day worship, we plead with God to be forgiving. We cry: *Sh'ma koleinu*, “Hear our voice!” *Avinu malkeinu, chamol aleinu v'al olaleinu*, “have mercy on us and on our children.” The second of the three sets of shofar calls on Rosh Hashanah, *zichronot*, begs God to forgive us on account of our ancestors' righteousness.

We are hardly the first to plead for God's forgiveness. Torah's quintessential example is Moses after the sin of the Golden Calf. With God poised to wipe out virtually all the Children of Israel, leaving only Moses to propagate a new people, Moses objects: “Let not Your anger, Eternal One, blaze forth against Your people... Turn from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to punish Your people.”ⁱ And it works!

My teacher, Dr. Elana Stein Hain,ⁱⁱ demonstrates that our sages depict Moses as a defense attorney, even creating legal loopholes to convince God to forgive the wayward builders of the Golden Calf. Rabbi Yehoshua teaches that Moses points to

the First Commandment, *Anochi Adonai Eloheicha*, “I am Adonai your God,” using the singular word for “you.” Moses argues that his fellow Israelites could understandably get the idea that Adonai, speaking to Moses, is self-identifying as only **Moses’s** God, not theirs. Since God didn’t tell the Israelites that Adonai is **their** God, they could hardly have known better than to build a Golden Calf.ⁱⁱⁱ

In case that argument doesn’t work, Moses has yet another. A midrash depicts Moses as pointing to the idolatrous Israelites’ upbringing. “Did they not grow up in Egypt, [surrounded by] pagans?” Moses asks rhetorically.^{iv} This argument for leniency is not unlike what we may see in courtroom dramas, real and fictional, with mercy sought for a violent criminal who was raised amidst violence, without tools to resolve a conflict peacefully.

Dr. Meira Kensky, author of *Trying Man, Trying God: The Divine Courtroom in Early Jewish and Christian Literature*, writes: “When [humans are] tried, it is truly God who is on trial.”^v That is, after all, what Moses is doing in the rabbinic imagination, suggesting that God had never made the prohibition against idolatry clear to the offending Israelites, but only to him, Moses. In this vein, Rabbi

Aha contends that God’s plan to destroy all the Calf-building Israelites by fire is a sneaky attempt by God to get around the promise never to destroy with a flood, asking, “You may not bring a flood of water, but You may bring a flood of fire?” And accusing God: “You have not fulfilled Your oath!”^{vi}

I wonder how many of us use similar tactics when seeking forgiveness. Perhaps we are not talking to God, but to ourselves, or to others whom we have wronged, when we excuse our misdeeds on the basis of technicalities. We especially have a tendency to resort to a justification similar to one of Moses’s, namely that our upbringing conditioned us to behave in certain ways that now bring pain to ourselves and others.

Social scientists have taught us, after all, that children who have grown up impacted by domestic violence are more likely to propagate it as adults. If sarcastic, degrading comments are standard fare in one’s family of origin, we can become habituated to speaking caustically to others for a lifetime. Similarly, disordered eating and unhealthy attitudes about body image are passed from one generation to the next. Whatever we grow up with—good, bad, and indifferent—is,

by definition, “normal” to us. Even if we know on some level that a certain pattern of behavior is wrong, breaking the cycle is challenging.

From here, I could go start discussing how we may begin changing patterns of behavior, even those we have learned from observing the people closest to us throughout our lives. Mussar, for example, offers valuable texts and tools by which we may teach ourselves to improve over time.

On Yom Kippur, we will have plenty of time on Yom Kippur to continue cataloguing our misdeeds, as many of us have been doing since Rosh Hashanah or even since the beginning of Elul, nearly forty days ago. And we will aim at doing better in this new year.

For now, though, on Shabbat, I would focus instead on finding forgiveness, even on a technicality, from God and from ourselves.

Avinu Malkeinu, we cry, *choneinu va-aneinu, ki ayn banu ma'asim*, “forgive us and answer us, for we have little merit.” We do not ask God to forgive us because we are righteous. We do not try to convince God to be merciful because we can and will do better in the year ahead. Instead, we appeal to God’s grace.

Jewish people don't often use the word "grace," but the reason for avoiding it is not a good one. It sounds "too Christian." In fact, a perfectly good Hebrew word, *chen*, and a central Jewish concept is best translated into English with that word, "grace." Grace is God's capacity to love us simply because we are God's children. Even while professing to possess "little merit," we plead for God's forgiveness.

We owe ourselves no less.

However successful our work of repentance during these High Holy Days, however fervent our prayers, however sacrificial our *tz'dakah*, we will not come out on the other side Monday night as flawless individuals or a perfect community. We will continue to need God's grace and our own. And we deserve no less.

Rabbi Karyn Kedar puts this sentiment into magnificent poetry:

Be aware of what you let define you.

You are not the curses or the failures of your life.

Rather, define yourself by blessings and strength.

Do not let the power of what is harsh and negative

be all powerful.

That which pulls you and pushes you and
denies you and accepts you and
loves you and abandons you
is the story of a life.

Your life.

There is power in blessing and love,
though it is, at times, gentle, quiet, and subtle,
let it be all-powerful.

Pain can be a powerful teacher and
love can be a gentle healer.

We are forever students yearning to learn,
to live a life of enduring good.

God,

like wind against the autumn leaves,
scatter all the pieces of our life.

Show us, dear God,
how to gather and collect
so that the forces in our life may be seen
as seasonal, ever changing, and a lesson in
time.^{vii}

On this *Shabbat Shuvah*, this Sabbath of return, even as we strive to return to God, to do the hard work to repair our own lives and souls, let us be as gentle with ourselves as we are demanding. Let us temper our intolerance for our own wrongdoing with mercy. We seek forgiveness from God, not because we are so worthy, but because we need leniency. We plead for God's grace. We owe ourselves no less.

Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 32:11-12.

ⁱⁱ Elana Stein Hain, "Revelation and Love: Moses as Defense Attorney after the Golden Calf," Shavuot Rabbinic Webinar, Shalom Hartman Institute, May 18, 2023. The texts in this paragraph and the two that follow, and the concepts taught therein, were imparted to me by Dr. Hain in this webinar.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Sh'mot Rabbah* 43:5.

^{iv} *Sh'mot Rabbah* 19:33.

^v Dr. Meira Z. Kensky, "Getting Perspective: The Divine Courtroom in Tertullian of Carthage's Apologeticum," in in Shalom E, H., and Mermelstein, A., *The Divine Courtroom in Comparative Perspective*, 2015, p. 94.

^{vi} *B'reishit Rabbah* 39:6.

^{vii} Rabbi Karyn D. Kedar, "Learning from It All," Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007.