Forgiveness: Justice or Grace?

Shabbat Shuvah 5786

September 26, 2025 Rabbi Barry H. Block

The shiny words on our extraordinary hand-crafted High Holy Day Torah covers are תשובה, תפילה, and צדקה, "repentance," "prayer," and "charity." These three words appear toward the end of the most challenging liturgy in our High Holy Day worship, ונתנה תוקף—when we read "On Rosh Hashanah it is written; on the Fast of Yom Kippur this is sealed: … who will live and who will die…," before going on to **how** we might die, for example: "who by fire and who by water; who by war and who by beast,…who by strangling and who by stoning." Ultimately, though, we do find relief as the prayer draws to its close: ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזרה, "But through return to the right path, through prayer and righteous giving, we can transcend the harshness of the decree."

If we are discouraged or terrified by the first part, at least the end tells us that there's something we can do: If we change our ways, if we sincerely pray for atonement, and if we offer righteous charitable giving that redresses our wrongdoing, we can achieve God's forgiveness and find ourselves inscribed in the Book of Life.

Years ago, I explained this process when an Episcopal Priest and I led a discussion with our two congregations, "Jews and Christians Talk about Sin." I emphasized that Judaism places the onus on the penitent who seeks to be free of past misdeeds. We must confess. We must apologize. We are the ones charged to change our ways. We gather on Yom Kippur to pray for God's forgiveness. And our responsibility isn't complete until we have offered acts of צדקה, often translated as "charity," but really meaning, "justice." We are obligated to make the world right after we have done wrong.

I am a strong believer in this process of repentance, but I was faced with a challenge from the interfaith audience. An Episcopalian lay person rose and asked, "But Rabbi, don't you pray that God reaches into your heart, changes your heart of stone into a heart of flesh[i], aiding you in your work to change your ways?"

My critic was right. Jews often criticize Christian theology, which we may perceive to leave too much of the responsibility to a God who forgives with boundless grace. We, by contrast, tend to place all the burden upon ourselves. Searching our souls **is** important. Confession **is** required. And **we** are the ones who must change our ways.

But if so, why do we come to Temple on the High Holy Days? What is God's role in our forgiveness? Is God's role limited to being a judge, who decides whether our repentance, prayer, and צדקה have earned our forgiveness?

At the end of אבינו מלכנו, we plead with God to "answer us with grace," כי אין בנו מעשים, for our deeds are wanting." In our previous High Holy Day prayerbook, that last part was even more stark: "…for we have little merit." The final sentence is עשה עמנו צדקה וחסד והושיענו: "Save us through acts of justice and love." Lest there be any mistake, the acts of "justice and love" we are seeking are God's, not our own. Although we hope that God will forgive us because we deserve it, the "justice" part; God offers more, and we ask for that, too. We pray that God will forgive us with love—that is, through grace, which is defined as forgiveness that has not been earned.

Grace is a repeated part of our High Holy Day liturgy.

We pray: כרחם אב, "As parents show tenderness to their children, may You show mercy to those who worship you."

We pray: "Consider the clay in the potter's hand, stretched and rolled as the artist desires; so we are in Your hand, our loving Protector. Look to the covenant, not to our imperfection."

We pray: אבינו מלכנו חמול עלינו, "have mercy upon us."

And throughout the High Holy Days, we repeat: "Adonai, Adonai—God, compassionate, gracious, endlessly patient, loving and true; showing mercy to the thousandth generation; forgiving evil, defiance, and wrongdoing; granting pardon."

How do we square our prayers' emphasis on God's grace with our own responsibilities to do the work of seeking forgiveness?

A strange *midrash* about King David may help us. David is not permitted to build the Jerusalem Temple; however, the rabbis imagine him digging in the chosen spot to make space for the foundation. He digs too deep, though – so deep, in fact, that he reaches the primordial waters that covered the Earth before creation. Released from their vault, those waters threaten to flood the world.[ii] David now intervenes to prevent catastrophe. He takes a stone, and on it, he writes God's holy Name, י-נ-ה-ו-ה, four consecrated letters that we pronounce "Adonai," but which our sages considered too sacred to be uttered. David throws the stone into the water, which causes it to subside too deeply, triggering an opposite cataclysm. Without water, Earth could not sustain life. David then calls upon God's name again, inviting the waters to rise.[iii] The waters return to their safe level. Equilibrium is achieved. The world is saved.

The story is about moderation. We know that it's a true story about water: Nothing grows when there's no rain, but it's also true that too much rain can wash away the crop.

The *midrash* is also a metaphor about God. If God remained all-powerful, human beings could not possess free well; we would be drowned out. If God were absent, we would be parched, without nourishment for our souls. If God were to overwhelm us with automatic forgiveness, requiring no effort on our part, we would not become the better human beings we are commanded to be. But neither can we be left to do the work of repentance alone, in a drought of Divinity. God sets the path for our work of repentance. God takes our hand and reaches into our hearts. God graciously empowers us to free ourselves of sin. And when we fail, God forgives us anyway with חן, grace, an ancient Jewish concept before it became a Christian one: forgiveness, whether we deserve it or not.

When we gather in the week ahead to observe Yom Kippur, we will come before God as imperfect human beings, just as we do each year. We have all done wrong. We have work to do – confession, apology, changing our ways, prayer, and *tzedakah*. Judaism offers no shortcut to repentance, except that it does. It teaches us that our God is not only מלכנו, our Almighty Ruler, but also אבינו, our loving, merciful Parent. Yes, each of us must engage in the sincere effort that these High Holy Days require. Let us repent with faith that God is our Divine Partner, ever ready to reach into our hearts to help us repair our lives, always eager to forgive us, to set us on the right path, when we deserve it and when we do not.

Amen.

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[i] Based on Ezekiel 11:19, among other similar passages.
[ii] Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 52b.
[iii] Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 53a. Both texts cited in this paragraph were taught by Melila Hellner-Eshed at the Shalom Hartman Institute's Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Jerusalem, July 11, 2017.