

Must We Always Forgive?

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Judaism is very unique in its attitude to the status of evil people. To begin with it regards man as a creature who possesses free-will which means that he is responsible for his choices and his behavior. If he commits sins or crimes he cannot blame it on anyone else and must assume full responsibility.

But Judaism does not condemn the sinner to an irredeemable life. He always has the option to do *Teshuva* which if he chooses will obtain for him full pardon and liberation from his sinful past.

Teshuva is a very powerful tool which can be effective even for someone who has lived a long life steeped in wrongdoing. According to the Rambam if a person only did *Teshuva* on his deathbed it will work for him, provided it is sincere, and it will earn him a place in the world to come.

A major theme of the Yom Kippur service is that Hashem does not desire the death of the sinner but “waits” for him to return. And when he does he is immediately received in forgiveness and even friendship.

But are there any limits? Are there sinners whose wickedness is so egregious that they are beyond the realm of *Teshuva*? There is no better example to consider than the Nazis. Can they do *Teshuva*? Can they have any hope of being pardoned for what they have done?

Full disclosure, I am not aware of any Nazi murderers who were or are genuinely repentant. They are not knocking at our doors for forgiveness. Rather most of them upon capture were extremely arrogant and did not display remorse. And that is not so difficult to understand once you have heard their refrain that they were just “following orders”. But the question we are asking is a purely hypothetical one: suppose an evil Nazi beast has a genuine change of heart and engages in authentic *Teshuva*. Must we forgive him?

Since the sins of the Nazis are regarded as “between man and man” the offender would have to make amends with his victims, ie. those who survived and could be contacted. The Rambam says that if a person sins against his fellow man he cannot repent before Hashem until he has settled matters with his victim. He must apologize and make whatever restitution may be called for. And then solicit the pardon of the offended.

The victim must not be stubborn and refuse to accept the sinner’s apologies. If someone has wronged him he has a right to demand that the offender display the requisite regret and contrition and do everything he can to “make things right”. But after all that has been done the victim must be able to let go of his hurt and say, “I forgive”.

Whoever adamantly refuses to forgive is regarded as cruel and, in fact, now becomes the sinner.

So the question is, if you are a survivor who lost everything in the Holocaust and one of your torturers seeks to repent and he has tracked you down and now seeks your pardon must you give it? Must you forgive someone who committed atrocities beyond the scope of anyone’s imagination and moral comprehension?

Perhaps you must, but before you can do so a practical problem emerges. Forgiveness requires trust that the sinner is sincere and has had a genuine change of heart. He has renounced the evil character traits that impelled him to transgress and is now, in effect, different person.

We regard such a change as within the realm of the moral compass of most decent people. They subscribe to an ethical code and strive to live by it and when they violate it from time to time they feel regret and seek to repent and make amends. So when they apologize to us we have every reason to believe they are sincere and we should therefore be gracious.

But can the same be said about those who have committed atrocities? They have cast off all restraints and have renounced all moral rules. They are, in effect, amoral beings. So how is one to know whether they are genuinely sincere in their protestations of remorse since they don't operate by the ethical code that we live by?

Perhaps a precedent for this can be found in the Torah narrative of Yosef and his brothers. Of course there is no intention to associate these righteous individuals with wicked people but we must place ourselves in Yosef's shoes. They had acted towards him with sheer cruelty first casting him into a pit to die and then selling him as a slave to the Egyptians.

These constituted cruel and unusual punishments. Were they even forgivable? When the brothers came down to Egypt in search of food Yosef recognized them but they didn't notice him. He acted as a stranger and treated them harshly forcing them to assume total responsibility for their younger brother, Binyamin, who was a carbon copy of Yosef.

In effect Yosef set it up so that the brothers had to confront their unresolved feelings toward their father Yaakov and his favorite son, Yosef. The brothers came through with flying colors and passed all the tests that Yosef had set for them. The apex of this penitential behavior was reached when Yehuda pleaded to take the place of Binyamin as a prisoner so that the favorite son could return to his father.

Yosef was able to see from their words and actions that the brothers had genuine regret for the crimes they had committed against him and therefore were worthy of being forgiven. And so at the conclusion of Yehuda's peroration he identified himself and tearfully reconciled with his siblings and forgave them with a full heart. This was possible because he had the opportunity to see from their actions that they had overcome the negative emotions that had impelled them to mistreat Yosef.

With regard to truly evil people the matter is more complex. How can we know if an Amalekite has done genuine *Teshuva*? It seems to me that there is a level of wicked behavior that causes you to lose any moral credibility in the opinion of society. And all expressions of remorse are then subject to doubt. A person in that category must turn exclusively to Hashem who alone knows our innermost thoughts. But he cannot expect mankind to forgive and forget.

If Nazis and other extreme anti-Semites want to do *Teshuva* they must demonstrate by word and deed that they have had a genuine change of heart. To do so they must actively support Israel and Jews in an effective and meaningful way over a long period of time. When it becomes clear to all that they are not putting on an act but are totally sincere we should not bear a grudge but accept their penitence and forgive them.

There is no *Mitzvah* to forgive, per se. it is only when we are convinced that the offender has mended his ways, truthfully regrets his prior actions and now contritely apologizes that we must overcome all our residual resentments and convincingly proclaim, "I forgive!" May we merit to be forgiven for all our sins and to assist all who have offended us in their search for complete atonement.