

*Choosing a Place*, a Yom Kippur sermon  
by Karla Goldman, historian in residence at the Jewish Women's Archive

If we are able to remember every day that we are shaping our world, shaping those around us, and shaping the future, then it may turn out that even the everyday, seemingly mundane periods of our lives matter much more than we may have thought. And we should realize that, if we take our responsibilities seriously, if we appreciate the impact of what we do as Jews or as human beings, then we will realize that, although we cannot always turn frustrating situations to our liking, if we cannot find a way to effectively help a friend or challenge an institution or find a mode of worship that meets our needs or even do something to address the pain that is currently afflicting Israel, we still need to remember that our efforts matter, that they will not be lost on those around us.

We define ourselves by our choices and our commitment. And even when we are bound to fail, those to whom we offer support will not forget, and others will learn from our passion. Our stories may focus on the extraordinary, symbolic moments in our lives as individuals or as a people, but how we define ourselves in those moments is built upon whom we've chosen to be everyday.

Conclusion of the African folktale *The Blind Man and the Hunter*

The hunter and his blind brother-in-law returned the next day to the spot where they had set their traps. The hunter found a little, gray bird in his trap but discovered a bird with beautiful green, crimson, and gold plumage in the blind man's trap. He thought, "He'll never know the difference; he can't see them!" and handed the little, gray bird to the blind man, saying, "Here's the bird that was in your trap." They began to walk back toward their village.

Soon he asked, "If you're so clever and you see with your ears, then answer me this: Why is there so much anger and hatred and warfare in this world?" And the blind man answered: "Because the world is full of so many people like you, who take what is not theirs." And suddenly the hunter was filled with bitter shame. He took the little, gray bird out of the blind man's hand and gave him the beautiful green, crimson, and gold one instead. "I'm sorry," he said.

And they walked and they walked, and then the hunter said, "If you're so clever and see with your ears, then answer me this: Why is there so much love and kindness and gentleness in this world?" And the blind man answered: "Because the world is full of so many people like you, who learn by their mistakes."

And they walked and they walked until they arrived home at their village. And from that day onward, if the hunter heard anyone ask, "Blind man, how is it that you are so

wise?” he would put his arm around the blind man’s shoulders and say, “because he sees with his ears—and hears with his heart.”

As we drove with the Teton mountain range in our rearview mirror, we marveled at the continued beauty as we passed in and out of river valleys. Then, passing through the western Black Hills, we watched the landscape change, becoming more barren. We saw a sign noting that we’d entered the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. We’d taken this southern route home to visit the Wounded Knee massacre site. My partner, Lisa, had family involved at the massacre and, by genetic memory, so does our son, Thomas. So we thought it would be good for Thomas to see some of the land and learn more of the history of his family. As we neared the site, a Lakota man waved us over to a small, dusty parking area on the south side of the road. After we got out of the car, he met us and shared some of the history. He also described the struggles of reservation life—90 percent unemployment, no jobs, and no prospects. He invited us to take our time and walk around the site. The hill where most of the Lakota people were killed is now a cemetery. We walked up to see the mass grave from 1891 and many more contemporary graves. Thomas noticed the mixture of Christian and Native American symbolism on the markers. We also noticed how many veterans and teenagers occupied the hilltop cemetery.

After we walked back to our car, the man stepped over to my window. I lowered it and, after a few words, he said that his water heater was out and he had no money to fix it, and he asked whether we could help. He added that he and his wife could manage, but his kids needed hot water to bathe and have clean clothes. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the loose bills, handing them to the man, who put them into his pocket and stepped away with a thank-you. As we turned onto a narrow country road driving into the Badlands, I confronted how incredibly uncomfortable I felt about what had happened. It wasn’t being hit up for money—I’m used to that. It took me a long time to figure out what bothered me so profoundly about this interaction. I realized the incredible feeling of guilt I had, driving home from our vacation and happening onto a glimpse of the life of a family whose daily struggles are rooted in injustices that I can’t begin to fix—yet I still feel responsible. I felt guilty and helpless at the same time.

As I thought back on this experience, my longing for forgiveness for this continuing offense, I also thought, “Doggone it, I have enough things for which I need forgiveness in my daily life. Do I have to add the sins of the nation to my list?” The Jewish High Holy Days served to help me understand that my dilemma is not unique. The answer that I found isn’t easy or totally satisfactory, but it does help me to see the importance of this multilayered necessity of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a complex human need. The days beginning with Rosh Hashanah, which started at sundown Sept. 22, and extending through Yom Kippur, which begins at sundown Oct. 1, remind our Jewish friends and neighbors that forgiveness begins within ourselves, extends to our neighbors, and encompasses our land. Wrongs committed against another person need to be rectified with that person. Those committed against God go to God. This year, the Jewish High Holy Days coincide with the autumnal equinox, reminding me how the balance of the universe is entwined with the balance in our lives. And forgiveness is a necessary component for us to reach and sustain that balance.

The process starts with being able to forgive ourselves. I'm one of those people who lie awake at night remembering wrongs I've done, even those I've been forgiven for. Misspoken words that hurt unintentionally or ill-spoken words that were meant to have barbs; not visiting when I should have or intruding when I meant to help—those sins of commission and omission. Karla Goldman's sermon reminds us that we need to take our responsibilities seriously but shouldn't be paralyzed by what we can't do. Sometimes we have to begin by forgiving ourselves so that we can let go of the past and be open to who we are without that baggage. Forgiveness is a moment of change, necessary if we truly want to grow. This poem by Emily Dickinson reminds me to take advantage of that possibility while I still have the chance:

All but Death, can be Adjusted—  
Dynasties repaired—  
Systems—settled in their Sockets—  
Citadels—dissolved—

Wastes of Lives—resown with Colors  
By Succeeding Springs—  
Death—unto itself—Exception—  
Is exempt from Change—

A portion of the Torah that will be read during this season says, "I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity." "Choose life," the Torah instructs, choose life. We choose life when we understand the importance of forgiveness, as well as of our responsibility not only to ourselves and those around us, but equally to those who will come after us. If we have the ability to forgive ourselves, we can extend forgiveness to those around us and seek it when we have wronged.

Forgiving ourselves and others requires letting go, but avoiding a buildup up resentments may take us even further. This was a lesson taught by a Taoist sage who gave a disciple an empty sack and a basket of potatoes:

"Think of the people who have done or said something against you in the recent past. Carve each name on a potato, and put it in the sack." The disciple came up with quite a few names, and soon his sack was heavy with potatoes. "Carry the sack with you wherever you go for a week," said the sage. At first, the sack wasn't so heavy. But soon it became a burden, and after a few days, the potatoes gave off a ripe odor. Finally, the week was over. The sage summoned the disciple. "Any thoughts about all this?" he asked.

"Yes, master," the disciple replied. "When we are unable to forgive others, we carry negative feelings with us, much like these potatoes. It becomes a burden and, after a while, festers."

The master said, "That is what happens when one holds a grudge. So, how can we lighten the load?"

His student answered, "We must strive to forgive."

The master nodded, "Forgiving someone is the equivalent of removing a potato from the sack. How many of your transgressors are you able to forgive?"

"I have decided to forgive all of them."

“We can remove all the potatoes.” The sage then said, “Were there people who transgressed against you this last week?”

There were. The disciple panicked when he realized his empty sack was about to get filled up again. “Master,” he asked, “won’t there always be potatoes in the sack?”

“Yes, as long as people speak or act against you in some way, you will always have potatoes.”

“But, we can’t control what others do. So what good is the Tao in this case?”

“You can figure it out. If the potatoes are negative feelings, then what is the sack?”

“The sack is that which allows me to hold on to the negativity. It is something within that makes us dwell on feeling offended. Ah, it is my inflated sense of self-importance.”

“And what will happen if you let go of it?”

“Then the things that people do or say against me no longer seem like such a major issue.”

“In that case, you won’t have any names to inscribe on potatoes. That means no more weight to carry around and no more bad smells. The Tao of forgiveness is the decision to not just to remove some potatoes, but to let go of the sack.”

What causes us to take offense? How do we react when it happens? This story of the Tao asks us to see how often offense is taken because it tarnishes our self-image, an illusion. A story from Africa provides another image of seeking forgiveness by showing how a person is not living up to who they could be. Rather than damning a person, the villagers remind them of the story of who they really are. They re-craft the narrative of that person’s life so they are part of that flow that connects them to the community. This is a forgiveness that seeks reintegration rather than retribution.

There may well be times when that reintegration, as ideal as it may be, might seem impossible. Ethicist Lewis Smedes understood this when he wrote:

I worry about fast forgivers. They tend to forgive quickly in order to avoid their pain. Or they forgive fast in order to get an advantage over the people they forgive. And their instant forgiving only makes things worse. ... People who have been wronged badly and wounded deeply should give themselves time and space before they forgive. ... There is a right moment to forgive. We cannot predict it in advance; we can only get ourselves ready for it when it arrives. ... Don’t do it quickly, but don’t wait too long. ... If we wait too long to forgive, our rage settles in and claims squatter’s rights to our souls.

One former prisoner of war asked another whether he’d ever forgiven their captors. “No, never,” was the reply. “Well then, they still have you in prison.” Offering forgiveness can be a step toward freedom.

Granted, there are many painful wrongs in the world. But sometimes a bit of perspective helps us to see them in a different light. Meditation teacher Jack Kornfield tells this story of a woman who approached Roberto de Vincenzo, a famous Argentinean golfer, in a parking lot after he’d won a tournament. She congratulated him on his victory and then told him that her child was deathly ill. Touched by her story, he endorsed his winning check over to her and said, “Make some good days

for your baby.” The next week at a country-club luncheon, a golfing official approached him and said the woman was a phony. “She fleeced you, my friend,” he said. De Vincenzo replied, “You mean there was no dying baby?” The official nodded. “That’s the best news I’ve heard all week!”

De Vincenzo’s response was an expression of what was ultimately important to him. Asking for forgiveness from God, for me, means seeking to understand where we’ve deviated from living in alignment with our source of ultimacy and seeking to realign our lives. I resonate with the traditional Jewish idea that my deeds need to be oriented toward creating heaven in this life. The covenant I hold sacred is with a creative force of possibility in the here and now. When I ask forgiveness, it is when I’ve come up short in my covenant to take seriously my responsibility to shape my world, to live my commitments to peace and harmony. When I can ask this forgiveness with honesty, then the creative energy opens up new possibilities. As Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams wrote, this divine love emanating from our ultimacy always has the characteristic of loving “in spite of” or of “forgiveness.” Each day is a succeeding spring.

This is where the actions we take as individuals intersect most strongly with those of our nation. We have been asked to witness attempts at forgiveness by our nation—but what were the results? Forgiveness is different than an apology. An apology is just words. It can be part of asking for forgiveness, but it’s not all that’s needed. Forgiveness requires a change of action. It may be letting go of our sack of potatoes, or seeking to bring someone back into the village, or re-establishing our covenant with that which matters most to us.

This is especially important on a national scale. Here’s an example: When confronted with irrefutable evidence of the mistreatment of prisoners in Iraq by U.S. forces, these are the words of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld issuing an apology: “To those Iraqis who were mistreated by members of the U.S. armed forces, I offer my deepest apology. It was inconsistent with the values of our nation. It was inconsistent with the teachings of the military to the men and women of the armed forces. And it was certainly fundamentally un-American.” These words acknowledged that the actions were outside of what our nation understands itself to be. But what action have we seen since then? The same administration that issued the apology is promoting legislation to allow actions that are considered by many to be torture.

Too often, we use apologies like scapegoats in the temple rituals of ancient Israel. The sins of the nation were transferred by a priest onto a goat, who was then sacrificed to alleviate the nation of its wrongs. If such a sacrifice is accompanied by a change of heart, which is the intention of the ritual, then it allows the people to move on and not dwell in the past. If, however, it is just an apology rather than a genuine search for forgiveness, the nation will continue to drift from the source of ultimacy of its people. Harmony is not possible for such a nation; peace will be an illusive dream. That’s the disquiet I felt driving away from Wounded Knee that day. Our nation, built on the genocide of the native people and the labor of an enslaved people, needs to seek genuine forgiveness.

My struggle with our national guilt is how I can own it but not be overwhelmed by it. Knowing that the experiences of Wounded Knee have never been forgiven, how can I go about my daily life? We can continue to search our hearts and root out the racism that still lives there. We can choose to

shape our actions to create more justice in our own lives, in our own communities, in our own families. By doing this, we are seeking forgiveness in the place that it matters—in our lives.

Nelson Mandela, who was imprisoned and watched his people bleed and die as they fought for their freedom in South Africa, offers us hope for forgiveness from these wrongs. He said, “When I think about the past, the types of things they did, I feel angry. But then again, that is my feeling. The brain always dominates, says, as I have pointed out, ‘You have a limited time to stay on earth. You must try and use that period to transform your country into what you desire it to be.’” Mandela’s words demonstrate the interrelationship of being able to forgive on a personal level to forgiving on a national scale. He undoubtedly could have had a lot of potatoes in his sack. Yet he chose to let it go to build on his ultimate value of peace for his people.

Let’s go back to the circle in that African village. To seek and offer forgiveness are acts of acknowledgement that we are all interdependent beyond our own egos, as people, as villages, as nations. Catholic monk Thomas Merton wrote, “The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another and all involved in one another.” The ultimate way to achieve and sustain balance and harmony—in our lives, in our villages, in our nations—is to know this fact in our hearts and to fulfill its calling in our lives. This calling echoes through our hearts to awaken compassion and love for all that is, just as that love is an expression of our ultimate concern.

I invite you to open a hymnal to page 637, where Rob Eller-Isaacs’ words summarize what I’ve been trying to impart. Each time we forgive ourselves and each other and begin again in love, we are acknowledging our connections and affirming the ability of love to heal, to bridge, and to reintegrate us. As we share these words, let us pause after each stanza and silently hold in our hearts the points of intersection of this statement and each of our lives. Then, let us offer forgiveness and let it go.

How will we begin again in love? Let us reach out in kindness, and by so doing let that kindness seep into our own bones so that we may be healed as we seek to heal.

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