



Table Talk: Quotes and Questions for Family Discussions

Prepared by Rabbi Marc Eichenbaum

Yeshiva University's Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks-Herenstein
Center for Values and Leadership

Proactive Forgiveness

It is related that when Rabbi Zeira had a complaint against a person who insulted him, he would pace back and forth before him and present himself, so that the person could come and appease him. Rabbi Zeira made himself available so that it would be easy for the other person to apologize to him.

Yoma 87a

- **What did Rabbi Zeira do to encourage another to**

seek appeasement?

- **We generally consider it the responsibility of the sinner to ask for forgiveness and not the responsibility of the victim to seek forgiveness. Why do you think Rabbi Zeira went beyond the letter of the law in order to forgive?**
- **What practical steps can you make in your life to seek forgiveness?**

Forgiveness as the Antidote to Tragedy

In a world without forgiveness, evil begets evil, harm generates harm, and there is no way short of exhaustion or forgetfulness of breaking the sequence. Forgiveness breaks the chain. It introduces into the logic of interpersonal encounter the unpredictability of grace. It represents a decision not to do what instinct and passion urge us to do. It answers hate with a refusal to hate, animosity with generosity. Few more daring ideas have ever entered the human situation. Forgiveness means that we are not destined endlessly to replay the grievances of yesterday. It is the ability to live with the past without being held captive by the past. It would not be an exaggeration to say that forgiveness is the most compelling testimony to human freedom. It is about the action that is not reaction. It is the refusal to be defined by circumstance. It represents our ability to change course, reframe the narrative of the

past and create an unexpected set of possibilities for the future...In the face of tragedy, forgiveness is the counternarrative of hope. It is not a moral luxury, an option for saints. At times it is the only path through the thickets of hate to the open spaces of coexistence.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2003): 178-179

- **According to Rabbi Sacks, why is forgiveness such an essential idea to freedom?**
- **How do you think regret relates to forgiveness? Must there be regret in order to forgive?**
- **Is there an area of your life in which you feel "captive by the past?" What is holding you back from forgiving in that situation?**

Connecting to Others

On a more metaphysical level though, the spirit of unity that can be fostered by a humble stance may have profound effects on the teshuva that is attained. Teshuva that is achieved as an isolated individual may have a lower currency or metaphysical value than the same teshuva that is accomplished by one who is connected to the klal (whole). The supplication and transformation of the Jewish people is more readily accepted by G-d when done as a unified nation rather than as disjointed individuals.

Dr. Ilana Turetsky, "Humility, Self-Efficacy, and the Teshuva Process," (*Torah To-Go, Yomim Noraim 5775*): 30

- **According to Dr. Turetsky, why is humility an essential part of teshuva?**
- **What evidence in the Yomim Noraim liturgy suggests we are beseeching God as a whole as opposed to as individuals?**
- **At what points in your life have you felt the most Jewish unity?**

Understanding Jonah

We read this book on Yom Kippur not because of Jonah but because of the God of Jonah. If God can change, we can change. If God recruits all of nature to fight human nature in the story of one individual, then surely, we can all overcome the barriers to compassion, the niggling resistance to being different than we are, and the narcissistic pull that keeps our own worlds small and limited. Jonah was unmoved, but perhaps we will read this book as his critics and be moved precisely because he was not. Maybe we will see in the God of Jonah, the God of each and every one of us, a God who cares for us intimately and personally, a God who marshals the world's resources for our reformation, who asks us questions that force introspection. Can we adjust, amend, refine, and modify who we are on this holiest of days because God also changes? Or are

we, like Jonah, secret believers that nothing ever changes, least of all who we are? The God of Jonah changes; that should be motivation enough. It was not enough for Jonah. Will it be for us?

Dr. Erica Brown, *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet*, (Maggid Books and OU Press, 2017): xiv

- According to Dr. Brown, why do we read Jonah on Yom Kippur?
- How do you understand the concept that "God can change?" Does it pose any theological difficulties?
- Why else do you think we read Jonah on Yom Kippur?

The Opportunity and Obligation of Teshuva

So, if we ask ourselves whether teshuva is an opportunity, a chesed granted by God, or an obligation, a demand imposed upon us, the answer is not only that it is both, independently; it is both, intertwined. The very existence of the opportunity imposes a fresh obligation... It is inconceivable that a person who attaches significance to his own spiritual state should be totally impervious and insensitive to the ability to restore his relationship to God and to cleanse himself. If, indeed, he does not seize the opportunity, this is both a symptom and a cause of spiritual weakness.

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, *Return and Renewal: Reflections on Teshuva and Spiritual Growth* (Maggid Books, 2018): 7

- According to Rabbi Lichtenstein, how is teshuva both an obligation and an opportunity?
- What does the literal reading of the pesukim in the Torah (e.g. Devarim 30:1-10) imply regarding whether teshuva is obligatory or not?
- When was the last time you took advantage of an opportunity to do teshuva?

Encountering God

The most demanding day of the Jewish year, a day without food and drink, a day of prayer and penitence, confession and pleading, in which we accuse ourselves of every conceivable sin, still calls to Jews, touching us at the deepest level of our being. It is a day in which we run toward the open arms of God, weeping because we may have disappointed Him, or because sometimes we feel He had disappointed us, yet knowing that we need one another, for though God can create universes, He cannot live within the human heart unless we let Him in.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Ceremony & Celebration* (Maggid Books and OU Press, 2017): 94-95

- According to Rabbi Sacks, why does God "need" Yom Kippur?
- What other Jewish holiday is highly demanding yet is widely observed? How do you explain this phenomenon?
- In what area of your life can you do a better job at "letting God in?"

Partnering with God

Thus, out of the depths of her crisis, Chana proposes a new resolution that she had not yet previously considered. She uses her difficult circumstance as a springboard for a new life course for herself and for her child. In doing so, Chana's personal initiative becomes transformative not only in her own life, but for the entire nation as well. It is Shmuel HaNavi who is finally able to lead the nation out of the darkness and cyclical rut of Sefer Shoftim to an era of teshuva and change, and of ushering Am Yisrael into the era of kingship. Chana's message, in essence, is to call upon God as a partner in growth and change. She exhorts: I am not a victim in the hands of fate, but neither is the entire burden for my life's

outcome upon me alone. With God as my partner, I can shape my own future destiny.

Mrs. Mali Brofsky, *Why Do We Read the Story of Chana on Rosh Hashana?* Torah To-Go, Yomim Noraim 5772:15

- How did Chana transform her difficult circumstance into motivation for growth?
- How does Chana's reaction to her circumstance differ from Jonah's?
- How can you transform a current difficult situation into a spiritual experience?