

Forgiveness and Modern Germany  
Kol Nidre Yom Kippur Service, 5772  
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*Kol Nidre*, all promises and vows, null and void. What about promises to never forgive. I think that most of us agree that it is permissible to stop hating, and certainly we all agree that it is important to never forget. Yet when it comes to terrible injustices are we allowed to forgive? Is complete forgiveness in the face of extreme injustice permitted? This question of forgiveness is grappled with in *The Sunflower*, a book by Simon Wisenthal, the famous Austrian Holocaust survivor who pursued fugitive Nazis. In the parable of *The Sunflower*, based on his experiences, he writes about an unimaginable scenario.

Simon is a prisoner in a concentration camp. He is brought to the deathbed of another young man, an SS officer. This dying man is tortured by a guilty conscience. He witnessed the brutal killing of innocent Jews locked in a burning building. He knew it was wrong but he did not intervene and participated in the murders. The SS officer asks the young Jewish prisoner for forgiveness. The young prisoner is present for the dying man. He brushes away flies from his face and listens to his deathbed confession but he does not offer forgiveness. When he returns to his fellow prisoners he talks with them about what happened. His friend Josek said. "I feared at first, that you had really forgiven him. You would have had no right to do this in the name of people who had not authorized you to do so. What people have done to you yourself, you can, if you like, forgive and forget. That is your own affair. But it would have been a terrible sin to burden your conscience with other people's suffering."

Another inmate, Bolek, a man who had been studying to be a Catholic priest, had a different opinion. "In our religion repentance is the most important element in seeking forgiveness and he certainly repented. You ought to have thought of something: here was a dying man and you failed to grant his last request."

The young Simon concludes with these observations:

“Today the world demands that we forgive and forget the heinous crimes committed against us. It urges that we draw a line, and close the account as if nothing had happened. We who suffered in those dreadful days, we who cannot obliterate the hell we endured, are forever being advised to keep silent. Well I kept silent when a young Nazi, on his deathbed, begged me to be his confessor. And later when I met his mother I again kept silent rather than shatter her illusions about her dead son’s inherent goodness.” So Wisenthal could not offer forgiveness but he could offer compassion.

The Sunflower also contains essays from a symposium where many writers, philosophers, theologians and politicians were invited to share a brief response to the following dilemma.

“Was my silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi right or wrong? This is a profound moral question that challenges the conscience of the reader of this episode. There are those who can appreciate my dilemma, and so endorse my attitude, and there are others who will be ready to condemn me for refusing to ease the last moment of a repentant murderer.” He continues: “The crux of the matter is, of course, the question of forgiveness. Forgetting is something that time alone takes care of, but forgiveness is an act of volition, and only the sufferer is qualified to make the decision. You who have just read this sad and tragic episode in my life, can mentally change places with me and ask yourself the crucial question “ What would I have done.?”

The responses to this question run the gamut of possible opinions and I will give a small sampling of some of the reactions to this dilemma.

Like Yosek, Alan Berger, a scholar who has extensively studied the Holocaust, concludes, “ Do not forgive someone for whom forgiveness is forbidden. I may not forgive one who has taken the life of another.”

And like Bolek, the Dali Lama states, “- I believe one should forgive the person or persons who have committed atrocities against oneself and mankind. But this does not necessarily mean that one should forget about the atrocities committed. In fact, one should be aware and remember these experiences so that efforts can be made to check the reoccurrence of such atrocities in the future.”

Similar to the Dali Lama, Edward Fannery, a Roman Catholic priest who opposed anti- Semitism says,

“ I would have- I do hope- forgiven him and as an obstinate believer, suggested to him that he make his peace with God by asking for his forgiveness, and, taking full advantage of the situation, uttered a prayer for the repose of his soul and those of the victims of his inhuman behavior.”

Eva Fleischner, a Catholic theologian and Holocaust scholar, makes an interesting observation. “Over the past twenty years I have frequently used *The Sunflower* as a text in my Holocaust course...One striking feature of this has been that almost without exception, the Christian students come out in favor of forgiveness, while the Jewish students feel that Simon did the right thing by not granting the dying man’s wish.”

Eugene J. Fisher, a Catholic theologian and expert in Catholic – Jewish relations, touches on the Christian Jewish divide. “I believe it is the height of arrogance for Christians to ask Jews to forgive them. On what grounds? We can, as established by evidence of changed teachings and changed behavior, repent and work towards mutual reconciliation with Jews. But we have no right to put Jewish survivors in the impossible moral position of offering forgiveness, implicitly, in the name of the six million. Placing a Jew in this anguished position further victimizes him or her. This, in my reading, was the final sin of the dying Nazi.”

Rebecca Goldstein, a Jewish novelist and philosopher, and Mary Gordon, an Irish – American writer, and professor, elaborate on the reasons why forgiveness is impossible in this situation, from their perspectives.

First Goldstein, “For had he understood the enormity of his crimes, he would never have dared to ask for forgiveness. Never. It would have been to know himself as having forfeited forever any questionable right to “die in peace.”

And Gordon, “Perhaps he imagines that forgiveness is a kind of magic eraser, a way of undoing what cannot temporally be undone, a way of saying “it never happened.” It becomes then a narcissistic rather than a moral act because it **places the perpetrator’s need to be purged of guilt ahead of the victim’s need for restitution or simple recognition of having been harmed.**”

**And as an aside, this dynamic, the perpetrator's need to be purged of guilt, is still one of the dilemmas underlying the relationship between Jews and Germans in Modern Germany.**

Some final thoughts about this dilemma:

Hans Habe, an Austrian writer, said "Atonement is the prerequisite for forgiveness. Exercised with love and justice, atonement and forgiveness serve the same end: life without hatred. That is our goal. I see no other."

Abraham Joshua Heschel – "According to Jewish tradition even God can only forgive sins committed against God, not against another human being." In Hebrew referred to as *bein adamh l'makom ve loh bein adamh l'havero*

Susannah Heschel – "Unlike South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Germany never established a public forum at which crimes against the Jews were publicly confessed. Perhaps the issue is not forgiveness but rather how the victims and their descendants can live without bitterness or vengeance, without losing their own humanity, when they hear the cry of the blood of their families."

I had pretty much completed this sermon, when I saw an article in yesterday's NY Times, "Germans Weigh More Charges For Nazi Guards," which began to address Susannah Heschel's concern that there was no accountability for the crimes committed. This article describes how in the wake of a novel tactic at the recent trial of John Demjanjuk, a former death camp guard, prosecutors are "busy scouring hundreds of cold case files, raising the prospect of an 11<sup>th</sup> hour reckoning for former Nazis, now in their eighties and nineties." The prosecutors argued that it was not necessary to submit evidence that Mr. Demjanjuk had committed a particular crime, just the fact that he was working as a guard at an extermination camp made him an accessory to the murders committed there. The court in Munich accepted this argument and now there is the potential to try hundred of others with the same legal strategy.

These questions about forgiveness and the Holocaust were heightened for me last spring when I had the opportunity to visit Germany as a participant in a Hebrew Union course taught by Professor Leah Hochman from the Los Angeles campus. The main focus of the class was current Jewish life in Germany, but thoughts of the Holocaust were on everyone's mind as we prepared for the trip. Although we would be visiting

Sachsenhausen , a concentration camp near Berlin, and the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe, the purpose of the trip was to experience modern Germany. To that end, the sponsor of our trip was an organization called Germany Close Up. This organization brings groups of Jewish American students and young professionals to visit Germany and participate in dialogs with academics, politicians, artists and representatives from a wide variety of German society. This is in an effort to expose American Jews to the transformation of Germany over the last fifty years into a unified, democratic country with a growing Jewish community.

I had apprehensions about the trip. How would I feel traveling in the country that was responsible for the *Shoah*? How would I feel interacting with people whose parents and grandparents may have been actively responsible for the killing of Jews?

What I discovered was a country that has made a commitment to remember and teach about the Nazi era and is committed to democracy. Many of the people I met who were teaching about and preserving Jewish sites and heritage were not Jewish. Their motivations varied but in many cases there was a genuine desire to make amends.

Until this trip I believed that there was no *teshuvah*, repentance, for the crimes committed against the Jews. So many of the perpetrators were unpunished and had lived out their lives in peace while their victims lost everything. After the trip I had a different perspective. The German government and many individuals in Germany are committed to ongoing *teshuvah* for the crimes of the *Shoah*. Monica Meyer a rabbinical student from Cincinnati introduced me to Ernst and Brigitte Klein during our trip. Two ordinary Germans who have devoted their lives to creating an organization Building Bridges to reconnect with and support Jews from their town who were harmed by the Nazis. They feel a sense of personal and national responsibility for the crimes committed against the Jews. Their organization funded trips for German Jews to return and visit Germany and to offer whatever help and support possible. Monica's grandparents returned to Germany to visit their hometown, something they never expected to do, because of the Kleins. Ernst is still investigating the circumstances surrounding the arrest imprisonment and death of Monica's great grandparent's. Individual and governmental acts of remembering, commemorating and seeking to repair the damage done by the German people and their government during the 13 years of the National Socialist regime are a

characteristic of modern Germany.

In the middle of Berlin on an open public square, a block away from the Brandenburg Gate is the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe. This stark monument designed by architect Peter Eisenman and engineer Buro Happold is an almost 5 acre site covered with 2,711 concrete slabs of varying heights from 8 inches to over 15 feet. On May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005 when the memorial was dedicated Sabina van der Linden told how she became her family's sole survivor of the Holocaust when German troops swept into her town of Borislav, Poland, when she was 11.

She said she does not believe in collective guilt, adding that today's German youth cannot be blamed for the sins of their elders. "But," she said, "You can hold them responsible for what they do with the memories of their ancestors' crimes."

This memorial is an attempt to keep the experience of the Holocaust forever present in the heart of Berlin. The slabs have been compared to tombstones. Peter Eisenman described his effort to create disorientation in the visitor walking through the narrow passages between the stele. The memorial appears to be a rationally laid out grid structure but 'the illusion of the order and security in the internal grid are destroyed.'

Throughout Berlin there are constant reminders of the *Shoah*. Outside of the main train station is a large sign listing the concentration camps that were destinations for prisoners who were transported by train. As you walk along the street you come upon 'stumble stones' embedded in the sidewalk. These are small metal plaques that commemorate specific individuals. They are located on the sidewalks outside of the homes of victims of the Nazis and are inscribed with short biographies of the person who was murdered or exiled. There are over 26,000 of these "stolpersteine" created by the artist Gunter Demnig of Cologne, throughout Germany. The project of commemoration continues.

In addition to the memorializing there is an active attempt to support the return of Jewish communities, and culture. There is a College of Jewish Studies, at the University of Heidelberg. Its purpose is to pursue serious academic research and study of Jewish culture, history and religion in the university setting. We visited the program housed in a beautiful new building that contains a library and archive. The program is jointly

affiliated with the Central Council of Jews in Germany and the University of Heidelberg. Jewish and non- Jewish students study together, and there is also the opportunity for Jewish students to continue religious studies and become Jewish educators, and rabbis. There are also two rabbinical seminaries in Germany. The Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin, which is Orthodox, and the Reform, Geiger College in Potsdam. We realized that the reemergence of Jewish life and culture is in its infancy. But the trip at least allowed us to begin to question whether the *Shoah* was an end to over a thousand years of rich German Jewish life or a terrible trauma and wrong against the German Jewish community, but not an end. Is there a possibility that over time there can be healing, allowing a Jewish community to again grow, thrive and claim the deeply interwoven German- Jewish heritage?

Returning to the question of *teshuvah*, forgiveness, I wonder about the Christian - Jewish divide. Is it because of different theological approaches? Is the Jew more influenced by the law? Therefore, unable to offer forgiveness for a crime committed against another human being despite the heartfelt repentance. Or is it more personal. Although there were many, many non – Jewish victims of the Holocaust, the intention of the Nazi regime was genocide against the Jews. When the intention of the attacker was the complete destruction of a person’s entire, self, and identity, past and future, forgiveness may also be impossible. I asked Lou Landau, a holocaust survivor and long time congregant at our Temple Beth El in Dubuque, about this question of forgiveness. His emphatic answer was. “I can’t forgive the Nazis. That’s it!!” But now with the second, third and fourth generations, children, grand children, and great grandchildren of the perpetrators we must ask ourselves if we can differentiate between Nazis and Germany as a whole. Simon could not forgive a crime committed against others; can these subsequent generations offer repentance for crimes they did not commit? Sabina Van Linden thought that subsequent generations could be held responsible for how they dealt with the memory of their ancestor’s atrocities. Establishing *teshuvah*, sincere repentance as a fabric of German society, is a way of honoring the memory of the Jews who were murdered. The perpetrators cannot be forgiven. The descendants of the perpetrators are not guilty of the crimes. But the societal act of remembering, asking forgiveness, offering reparations, and creating a transparent democracy that is committed

to protection of Jews and victims of oppression are acts of worth and significance. We do not forgive the Nazis, but we can consider supporting the resurrection of Jewish life in a transformed Germany.