Forgiveness as Self-Defense

By

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In Judaism, the right of self-defense against hostile pursuit is both obligatory and fundamental. As is taught in our Talmud, the great foundation of Rabbinic Judaism compiled in Babylonia—modern-day Iraq: “If a person comes to kill you, rise early to kill him first.” The principle is simple: The purpose of the rules of all of the Torah is that we shall “live by them.”

The right of self-defense, and the insistence that we are to live, brings to me a memory of the women at the Beverlywood Bakery in Los Angeles, where my mother would take me as a young boy. The women who served us there had tattoos on their arms. They were survivors of the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. The women who sold the staff of life and sweet cakes to my family had legitimate grievances as a part of their life experience. I remember a conversation in the spring of 2000 in Baghdad, at the bar at the top of the Palestine Hotel overlooking the Tigris River where the Iraqi bartender was talking bitterly about the Kuwaitis, and the way they spoke disrespectfully about Iraqis. The bartender at the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad had legitimate grievances as a part of his life experience. I recall Israelis speaking about the suicide bombers who blew themselves up, and in the process took the lives of young

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2 Yoma 85a, Berakot 58a, Sanhedrin 72a

The principle comes from the rabbinic understanding of Exodus 22:1 where the right to kill a burglar who is prepared to commit murder is affirmed.

Also see: Talmud, Sanhedrin 74a

Rabbi Yonatan ben Shaoul says: “If one is pursuing his fellow to slay him, and if the pursued could have saved himself by maiming the pursuer, but instead killed the pursuer, the pursued should be executed [for murder] on that account.” Note that here the right of self defense against a hostile pursuer is assumed, but the principle is not readily adjudicable.

3 See discussion on Leviticus 18:5 regarding the words קָרֵבָךְ בָּעָם in Talmud Sanhedrin, 74a.
children, innocent men and women. I recollect Israelis speaking about the incessant rocket attacks against Sderot and Ashkelon in southwest Israel. The Israelis have legitimate grievances as a part of their life experience. I think of when I listened to Palestinians speak, and the times I when I read e-mails and watched reports on Al Jazeera, concerning bombing attacks, disproportionate responses to Palestinian terror attacks, that ended up taking the lives of innocent Palestinians, men, women and children. The Palestinians have legitimate grievances as a part of their life experience.

Bitter life experiences are carried into my office by good people who are burdened by angry memories. Good people can recite for me names, dates, places in which some part of their personhood was violated by someone they love. The wounded people who come into my office arrive with legitimate grievances as a part of their life experience. All of us men and women, religious people gathered here in sacred convocation, have legitimate grievances as a part of our life experience.

We human beings repeat our legitimate grievances to those from whom we can find a sympathetic hearing. Many of us are what I call “scorekeepers.” Scorekeepers are people who self-righteously hold fast to their legitimate grievances, their earned anger. Anger is a self-destructive emotion, according to our rabbinic tradition. Rabbi Yudin, who taught in ancient in Babylonia, likened anger to a boiling kettle, or to someone who spits up in the air, only to end up spitting in his or her own face. If I allow myself to become a boiling kettle, the water will eventually evaporate, and fire—the raging anger of the scorekeeper with legitimate grievances—will eventually consume the kettle of the self. If I become self-destructive, then I am being pursued by a hostile part of my own being. My roiling anger can become the hostile pursuer of my own well-being.

My being human, according to our rabbinic tradition, is a struggle between inclinations, one good and the other evil, which contend with one another inside a healthy human self. We are neither all good nor all evil. The struggle going on inside

4 Rabbi Yudin, Kohelet Rabbah 7:9

"Be not hasty in your spirit to be angry." Ecclesiastes 7:9. Rabbi Yudin said: According to how the spinner winds [the yarn] on his distaff so he will manage to take it off from his distaff. When the kettle boils over it pours [the boiling water] on its own sides. If a man spits upwards, it will fall on his face.

5 Talmud, Berachot 61b

Rabbi Yossi the Galilean says The righteous are swayed by their good inclination, as it says, My heart is slain within me.[Psalm 109:22] The wicked are swayed by their evil inclination, as it says, Transgression
of us is necessary to make us strong, and at the same time decent, caring, empathetic beings. However, when we are ruled by the self-destructive anger born of scorekeeping, we can become transformed into a hostile pursuer of our own well-being, and thereby spit in our own faces, as it were. Judaism teaches that if we are being pursued by a hostile pursuer bent on destroying us, then we have an obligation to save our life and to destroy that hostile pursuer.  

When anger clouds the mind of a human being we are pursued by a hostile inclination inside or ourselves. Angry scorekeeping allows us—and here I make up a word—to “Hitlerize” our enemies. I have heard angry Israelis, who have legitimate grievances, speak about Palestinians as if Palestinians were Nazis running concentration camps during World War II. Likewise, angry Palestinians with legitimate grievances liken what Israel is doing to them as a Holocaust. We have heard that language in multiple venues of our life experience, especially among the scorekeepers, who become consumed by the concomitants of anger: fear and demonization. Anger is a self-destructive emotion leading to actions that fly in the face of reason. Israeli bombing of suspected terrorist centers, or Palestinian rockets launched into civilian population centers have been characterized by, Sir Michael Howard, as akin to trying to eradicate cancer cells with a blowtorch.

When fires of anger assault a healthy self, we defend ourselves by forgiving. Judaism, the great gift of our Rabbis, comes to teach us that when an evildoer makes amends, takes responsibility for an evil act and then asks forgiveness, the religious obligation of the injured party, the person with legitimate grievances, is to be forgiving. Our Rabbinic tradition is reasonable, and teaches also that if the same person commits the same offense over and over again, and asks for forgiveness repeatedly, then we need not be forgiving. But for one with a legitimate grievance, forgiving the genuine

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*speaks to the wicked, methinks, there is no fear of God before his eyes.* [Psalm 36:2] Common people are swayed by both inclinations, as it says, *Because He stands at the right hand of the needy to save him from them that judge his soul.* [Psalm 109:31] English translation based on The Soncino Talmud Berakoth page 385.

6 See Footnote 2.


8 Midrash Tanhumah, Buber, Wayyera, par.30. See also Moses Maimonides *Mishnah Torah, Laws of Repentance,* 2:9 where Maimonides explains that “”. The one who refused to grant forgiveness is the one considered the sinner.”

9 Maimonides, Moses, *Mishnah Torah,* The Laws of Repentance, 2:1:

"Who is a complete Repentant? A person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit [the same sin again,] and, abstains and does not commit it because of his repentance alone and not because of fear or lack of strength."
penitent is obligatory. Why? Because only by forgiving can we defend ourselves from the hostile pursuit of our own burning anger.

Yet, forgiveness is complicated. We could debate—and surely some will—the nature of the genuine penitent. Even worse many have confused forgiveness with acceptance or approval of that which is evil. If I am forgiving of someone against whom I have a legitimate grievance that does not mean I approve of the manner in which injury was inflicted upon me. Forgiveness is not about approval of the actions of another human being. Rather, forgiveness is a self-defense mechanism to restore our healthy self. Our tradition asks of me to forgive, because forgiveness saves me from the angry side of myself, so that I will not hurt just because I have been hurt. Forgiveness saves us from ourselves, and requires us not to punish because we have been wronged or punished by others. Forgiveness is the healing balm protecting us from the hostile pursuit of our own angry spirit.\(^{10}\)

Angry spirits come to mind when we contemplate the feud between the Campbell Family and the MacDonald Family that began with the Massacre of Glen Coe, February 13, 1692.\(^{11}\) Anger fed that self-destructive feud. In Scotland the kettle boiled. Scorekeepers were unrelenting as God’s children destroyed each other and themselves in the process. I wonder what others are going to say about all of us today. What are they going to say about Israelis and Palestinians, or Iraqis and Kuwaitis? How sad for our generation of religious leaders that we have not taught our own religious traditions about forgiveness after a fashion that was successful.

Forgiveness is not easy for any of us. So when I was asked by someone not so long ago if I thought we should forgive the Germans for the Holocaust perpetrated against the European Jewish community, my response was that those who conceived and perpetrated the Holocaust, and the destruction of the European Jewish community, and the murder of countless righteous Gentiles, and the destruction of those of those who were maimed or crippled, or homosexual, or mentally retarded, or different because they were deformed—all who were lost in the Holocaust—most of those perpetrators have died. So the question is not shall we forgive them, but shall we hold onto our anger against the dead? If we hold on to our anger born of legitimate grievances, are we not destroying ourselves, like so many pathetic and benighted scorekeepers? We have to be forgiving but not forgetting.

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\(^{11}\) http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/scottishhistory/union/trails_union_glencoe.shtml.
That is why I keep a Yellow Star framed on the wall in my office, in my field of vision all day long. That Yellow Star was from an outer garment worn by a Jew of Europe under Nazi occupation. On that Star I see the word "Jude" and some of the threads by which that yellow badge was sown on to an unknown garment. The Star is a reminder not alone of the atrocities committed during the demonic wedding of racialism and technology that we call the Holocaust that brought the destruction of some eleven million people, six million of whom were Jews, but also what happened to those who poisoned themselves with fires of animus, who could not put out the ragingly destructive fires inside of themselves by learning to forgive.

Until we can be forgiving, we cannot be forgiven. Until we are forgiving we cannot even forgive ourselves. Remember, forgiveness is not an act of approval, but the means, the path, by which we extinguish raging fires burning fiercely inside of a human heart. Forgiveness allows us to create the future we want for ourselves and for all of God’s children, a world with less enmity, hatred, fewer scars, fewer dead children to bury from wars and feuds. Self-righteous anger fueled by legitimate grievances has consumed too many Christians, Muslims, Jews, atheists—God’s good children. Let us then defend ourselves, our own well-being and advance our hopes by forgiving.