**Yom Kippur – Kol Nidrei Sermon**

Nadine Collier lost her mother Ethel Lance this June in the killings in Charleston. Along with other representatives and relatives of those who were killed, she did something that many of us would find difficult. She forgave the killer. Here are her words which could be heard in court by the killer himself, Dylan Roof:

“I forgive you. You took something really precious away from me. I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you and have mercy on your soul. It hurts me, it hurts a lot of people but God forgives you and I forgive you.”

Here is someone in pain. Here is someone who has experienced deep loss, at the hands of someone who has not even shown remorse. Here is someone who we might say has the right in this situation to forgive the perpetrator. Yes, the true victim is not alive to forgive. But Nadine here is a pretty good proxy for her, being a daughter.

And I know that we can too simply write this real happening off as not being our story. We don’t in the Jewish religion encourage that type of forgiveness. We need some modicum of justice as well. But today is the day of forgiveness. In fact according to Rabbi Judah the Prince, all of nearly 2000 years ago, God forgives us on Yom Kippur even if we have not done our bit and repented. So if according to this great Rabbi, unconditional forgiveness is God’s way – can we not investigate what it means to us.

**The first important point to make** is that the desire to forgive is the desire to want the other, the perpetrator to remain a part of the brotherhood of humanity. It cannot occur in a vacuum, and without any justice. In the case of Charleston, the killer has been found, charged and will clearly be punished. It clearly will work if there is some remorse on behalf of the perpetrator. But surely forgiveness is based on hope. It is based on the vision of human inclusivism that I laid out on the first day of Rosh Hashana. After all, when Abraham pleaded for the saving of Sodom, he surely was pleading for the safety of many perpetrators of crime. And again, the prophet Jonah runs away from his task of giving the morally corrupt town of Nineveh another chance to better its ways. He is challenged by God for not offering them forgiveness and another chance to better their ways rather than die.

And so offering forgiveness to one who has wronged me is not necessarily a natural position to take. It is not necessarily an easy stance to take. It is much more natural to have feelings of anger and a desire for revenge. Even if the feelings of revenge are channeled through faith in a system of justice – it may still satiate feelings of ‘they got what is coming to them’. So offering forgiveness to someone who has perpetrated a crime and who may be beginning in a small way to show remorse, is an incredibly brave and courageous act to undertake.

I recently read a most powerful book called ‘A human being died that night’, by a South African psychoanalyst Pumla Gobodo Madikizela. Pumla had sat as a member of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa in the late 1990’s. During this time, Pumla arranged to interview an individual who had been tried and imprisoned for crimes committed during the Apartheid period. He was known by many as the “Prime Evil” for his work in crushing ANC resistance. His name was Eugene de Kock. Pumla interviewed a chained Eugene in his prison over a number of sessions, opening up conversations about his work at the infamous Vlakplaas complex outside Johanousburg. She finds it deeply disturbing to develop a relationship through these conversations with an infamous murderer while hearing about the missions that he carried out both in and outside South Africa which lead to the taking of so many lives. But she is able to find in these conversations, small sparks of remorse. Pumla is not interested in absolving De Kock. But she is interested in testing whether she is able to grant him still the status of being part of the human community. And that is how she understands forgiveness.

In her last conversation with De Kock, he asks Pumla whether he killed any of her close family members. She is shocked by this question, and writes her opinion that

“Ultimately, what I heard was the voice of an outcast begging to rejoin the world of the living. His past it seems was unbearable. But his future, stained as it was with the memory of lives snuffed out, was equally unbearable”

Pumla senses the difficulty of understanding remorse after extreme criminal acts such as mass murder. But she feels that we should move from the philosophical question of whether or not forgiveness is an acceptable option, to the human question of allowing perpetrators who, to be sure, begin to show remorse, back into the human community.

And so our first important approach to forgiveness, is that it allows those who have committed crimes, and who begin to show some remorse, however small, to begin the reconnection to real, moral society. Yes, it is based on hope that the perpetrator will connect to feelings of compassion and empathy. In Pumla’s words: ‘When criminal offenders, even of the most egregious kind, show contrition and apologize, they are quintessentially acting as human beings’.

And I suppose we can all learn from this approach within our lives. Think how difficult it is to be a forgiving person. Many of you have relationships in your life which have, are, or will suffer. Sibling relationships are particularly sensitive to break down. But of course marriage relationships are – and I could even repeat the clear issue of relationships between adult children and their parents. The group of grandparents who have no contact with their grandchildren is growing, And their very often is a perception which does or does not match reality, that one side is being wronged by the other. Many grandparents are adamant that the simple truth is that they are being wronged by their child or child in law – and that is that. There is one couple who have carried on attending the group who now have contact with their grandparents. And the reason is that they did not argue and reason with their adult child, however irrational their demands may have been. They forgave the lack of derech eretz of their child, and hoped that if they maintained the connection and the relationship now, things would get better in the future. I could not but admire this couple.

My approach here then, is to value the relationship above the feelings of bitterness to your sibling, or spouse or parent. The approach is about trying again, persisting in correcting the relationship, and understanding that there are hang-ups and psychological baggage that will often cause the problematic behaviour in the other.

My favourite Biblical image of forgiveness is Joseph towards his brothers. They clearly persecute their brother. And yet when they themselves suffer at the hands of the man who they do not recognise as their brother, they blame their original lack of compassion for what has befallen them. They show remorse. Not necessarily for the initial crime of taking Joseph hostage. But at least for not listening to his cries for help. And when their father Jacob passes on, the brothers fear that Joseph will exact revenge on them for what they originally did to him. They fear that the revenge was being stored up for the moment when the old man Jacob died. But Joseph does not want revenge. He does not directly use the word forgive in his reply to them – but he says:

 ‘Fear not, for am I instead of God – Although you intended me harm – God intended it for good…so now fear not – I will sustain you and your young ones’

Joseph has clearly forgiven his brothers – he is not condoning what they did through his forgiveness. But he is resurrecting the relationship, and allowing hope that it will become one of greater strength. I am always in such awe of Joseph for this reaction – oh that we could all learn from this type of forgiveness that saves relationships.

**But there is another element to the greatness of forgiving**. It empowers the person who undertakes to forgive. This is not now about the soul of the perpetrator and a desire for the redemption of that soul. We are no proxy for the perpetrator. The only person in control of the moral redemption of the perpetrator, is the perpetrator him or herself. But forgiveness is about the victim taking destiny into his or her hands and shaking off the label of victim. Pumla Madikizela puts it so well:

 “ Although forgiveness is often regarded as an expression of weakness, the decision to forgive can elevate a victim to a position of strength as the one who holds the key to the perpetrator’s wish. For just at the moment when the perpetrator begins to show remorse, to seek some way to ask forgiveness, the victim becomes the gatekeeper to what the outcast desires – readmission to the human community”

The victim’s triumph here is that they do not lower themselves to the level of the perpetrator. The perpetrator showed an absolute disconnection from compassion – but the victim still has that. There is always a fear that forgiveness will be seen as condoning the very act that it forgives. But it could equally be seen as rising above the act.

The Holocaust has clearly affected our approach to forgiveness. The evil of the Holocaust was so deep that many of us feel that it was and still is beyond the pale of forgiveness. And in many many cases, the Holocaust is sui generis, a totally unique scenario.

There are socioeconomic and geopolitical attempts to understand the genocides of the second world war. Many genocide scholars however do look at the Holocaust as something out there on its own. But even within the Nazi genocide machine, the potential for remorse would not be static and could vary. At one end of the spectrum is a man like Adolf Eichman. Eichman’s captor Peter Malkin writes in his book Eichman in our Hands, that when he explained to Eichman about the death of a dear nephew in Auschwitz, Eichman looked confused and said ‘But he was Jewish wasn;t he?’. Eichman seemed not to have the capacity for any remorse whatsoever and so who would possibly have the right to forgive him.

But maybe now, 70 years after the war, 2 or 3 generations later, can we dare to say that not all were Adolf Eichmans. It is true that nowhere near enough of the high or even middle level Nazi officers were brought to justice for what they had done. But is it possible that remorse exists in such dark pastures? Fascinating and to be honest quite confusing was the case recently of Oskar Groening, the man who admitted 10 years ago publicly that he was the book keeper of Auschwitz, taking money from those interred and killed there and sending it back to Germany. On the one hand, he felt that he was not legally culpable for what he had done, even if he was in his words ‘morally guilty’. He has been open that what led him to be part of the Nazi machine, was his shared belief in the Nazi worldview that Jews should be killed en masse. But now he has shown remorse. He expressed his sorrow at the end of the court case. Was this real or not – we cannot know for sure. He received 4 years in prison, and we would all be in agreement that that is justice.

But what about Eva Kor who survived Auschwitz. A young girl when she was taken to Auschwitz with her family from Romania in 1944. She and her twin sister were ripped away from their mother after exiting the wagon at Auschwitz and promptly used by Josef Mengele for experimentation. Eva Kor is quite unique in the depth of her forgiveness for those who caused her and her family so much pain. She herself felt that Oskar Groening should not serve prison time, but rather be a servant of the anti Nazi cause. Here are Eva’s words:

I discovered I had the power to forgive. Up to then I had always reacted to what other people did to me. Now I was initiating action and let the rest of the world react to it or not

And so we have seen, that the desire to forgive and the desire for justice are not always identical. Justice is part of our worldview. But it does not preclude the possibility to forgive, both in order to maintain and strengthen the relationship with the other as well as to liberate oneself from being defined constantly by what others have done to you.

And at the base of all this in my mind is one word: humility. It is humility that leads me to care for others. It is humility that leads me to consider the pain of others. It is humility that is drawn from that sense of being a stranger. It is humility that allows one to forgive an other who has caused one so much pain. Not a humility that crushes one and brings one down. A humility that is full of empowerment to create one’s own moral destiny.

If we termed Rosh Hashana as a Day of Exile – then Yom Kippur is a day of the empowerment of humility. It is a day on which we are confident in the morals and values that we are building up, and able to understand the mistakes and faults of others.

On this day God forgives us – so let’s make sure that we consider today how to forgive others.