

17 days ago, my father-in-law died. His name was Fred Goldhaber.

Of course in the two weeks since his death, there has been a lot of reminiscing. One theme kept emerging - Fred never spoke badly of anyone. He wasn't a pushover. I can remember very clearly, at various times, his standing up for himself, or for his family. But he did not take people's bad behavior personally, nor did he dwell on it.

But as we recounted all these memories of my father-in-law's generous spirit, I wondered a little - Was it really true? He never spoke badly of *any* one? I began searching my memory for counter examples.

I came up with one.

For background to this story, it helps to know that Fred's parents, grew up in Germany and Austria, both in wealthy Jewish families. They each fled the Nazis, leaving all of their material wealth behind. Fred's mother's parents refused to heed the warnings, and were killed in the Shoah.

Fast forward to Fred's young adulthood. He was admitted to Harvard college, at a time when strict quotas were in place to keep most Jews out. It was a hard time to be Jewish on campus.

His Freshman year, Fred's dorm room was a double - that is, a small, two-person bedroom, with an assigned roommate. His roommate was cold and unwelcoming, and seemed a little Antisemitic - kind of like Harvard itself at the time. But partway through the year, it got a lot worse. The roommate hung a huge swastika on his side of the room. Fred, whose grandparents had been killed in the Holocaust, whose parents refused to speak German though it was their native tongue – had to look at that swastika every day. He had to fall asleep at night, knowing that a few feet away was a man who had chosen to hang that on the wall.

Fred never told David - his son, my husband – about this experience. Until, about twenty years ago, when he received a surprising letter in the mail.

His Freshman roommate, whom he had not heard from in 40 years, had looked him up online and sent him a letter. Asking for forgiveness.

Fred did not respond.

I remember being surprised at the time. It seemed out of character. Also, I felt a little sorry for the guy. Many people do really stupid things when they are young, and if he had reformed and realized his mistakes, why not grant him the peace of knowing he's forgiven?

"I don't believe he means it," Fred explained. "I suspect he's running for public office, and he's just trying to cover his bases." That was the end of the conversation.

According to Jewish law, Fred was well within his rights. As we heard from Rabbi Greg on Rosh Hashanah evening, if a person harms another, he cannot repent until he has found a way to undo the harm. If the harm was monetary, he must pay back the damages. Or as close an approximation as he can. But when the harm is emotional, the offender must somehow find the right words to repair the damage as best as he can. If private apologies don't suffice, he should beg forgiveness in front of at least three people. And if that still does not suffice, he should make at least three, genuine, thoughtful attempts at reconciliation, before giving up.

What is the obligation of the person who was wronged? Says the *Mishnah* - the 1st century compendium of Jewish law, upon which all subsequent rabbinic law is based - "Don't be cruel."

I always found that formulation vaguely dissatisfying. Maimonides, in his codification of the laws of teshuvah or repentance, quotes the mishnah verbatim. If someone asks you for forgiveness, "don't be cruel." Shouldn't the Jewish standard be slightly higher than that? Even if we are talking about individuals who have wronged us?

Even more disturbing to me - the psychological harm of holding on to grievances is well known. Feelings of blame, anger, bitterness - they take a toll on our physical and mental health. When we can let go of the hurt, we ourselves are freed.

This year, a friend I had trusted let me down. She had promised to be there for me when I needed her, but when that time arrived she chose not to be. She apologized afterward, but she did not seek to undo the loss I had experienced. So what defines cruelty - to her, and to myself? Christian doctrine preaches to turn the other cheek. That has never been part of mainstream Jewish thinking. But what is the alternative?

David is a lot like his father. Like his father, he is a physicist. He is on the Autism Spectrum, as I'm pretty sure his father was, though neither ever received a formal diagnosis. There was a lot less diagnosing going on when we were young. And, like his father, David tends to emphasize the best in people.

To be honest - that last was not the case when David was young. In his 20s and 30s, he held onto grievances, and he had plenty of gripes about people. For all I know, Fred may have been like that when he was young, too. By the time I met Fred, he was about the age that David is now.

The fact that David was much more prone to grievances as a young adult, makes this story I'm about to tell you all the more remarkable.

It was when David was still a student, in his 20s. He was ambitious, and self-confident. He was also keenly aware that he had not yet proven himself, and that his success as a scientist was in no way guaranteed.

And then, he had a huge scientific breakthrough. A discovery that would ultimately earn him his faculty position at Stanford, and that continues to drive his research to this day.

And then, before he could reap all those benefits – an older, more established scientist, saw David present his a poster of his work at a conference, repeated what he did and published it without crediting him.

What would you have done?

In the DSM, the personality type that was once called Aspergers is now called Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD. I have always resisted that classification. A disorder implies that something is broken. In my family, Autism is a way of being in the world - with some very distinct advantages, as well as shortcomings. For both David and Fred, one of the advantages is an immunity to social norms and hierarchies. Also a separation from intense emotions - which is not a good thing, when emotions need to be felt - like when your father dies. But it can be helpful at times when emotions would only get in the way - like when you've just been scooped by an older colleague.

So David, immune to social hierarchy, and buffered from the anger that could have been seething inside of him, respectfully confronted the person. He didn't demand any kind of apology. He wasn't interested in the other person's repentance. He just wanted to be properly cited.

And then, amazingly, he went one step further. Recognizing that maintaining a functional relationship with this older colleague would only be to his benefit, David proposed that the two of them collaborate on the next phase of the work - and they did!

About 20 years ago, Stanford researcher Dr. Fred Luskin wrote one of the best books I know about forgiveness, called "Forgive for Good". His book has become canonical.

According to Luskin, forgiveness means three things.

One - Taking the hurt less personally. David often tells me: "Never ascribe to malice, what can be explained by incompetence." My rabbinical school

mentor, Rabbi Mordechai Finley, likes the acronym “SEGO”, which stands for “Something Else is Going On.” In other words, it’s not about you. Or, even when it is about you - I mean, that guy DID take David’s work - the fault is not yours, it’s theirs.

Two - Taking responsibility for your feelings. Anger is a normal, healthy reaction to being hurt. But prolonging anger only prolongs and deepens the damage we experience. That’s where I think David’s Autism really helped.

And three - Letting go of our victim mentality, and taking as much control as we can over the situation. Boy, did David do that!

Notice what is not included in Luskin’s list. Letting the other person off the hook. The Jewish concept of *mechilah* - what we usually translate as forgiveness - is something that can only be done for another person. I forgive YOU. God forgives US. Luskin’s forgiveness has nothing to do with the other person. It’s about ourselves. About claiming power over our own feelings.

It seems to me, that both David and Fred accomplished Luskin’s kind of forgiveness - inward focused, forgiveness for your own sake. David retained no ill-will towards his senior colleague. Concretely, David was called on over the years to review several of his papers, and always gave him a fair and positive review.

I don’t believe my father-in-law held on to any hurt from his roommate, either. I sensed no vindictiveness or anger when he described the history.

But Fred did not feel compelled to give the man the gift of *mechilah* - forgiveness directed outward, toward the offender. If someone hurts you, they have to work for your *mechilah*. And, by the way, that also means that if you have hurt someone, you have to work for theirs. The roommate’s letter was a good first step, but it wasn’t sufficient. In fact, the Talmud teaches that forgiving a person too easily actually harms them, by stunting their impulse to fully repent.

What about me, and my friend? Remember, she apologized, but she did not try to undo the concrete damage she caused me. I've mostly let go of my hurt - Luskin style forgiveness. But I don't trust her in quite the same way that I used to. Perhaps some day she'll notice, and work to really earn my *mechilah*. Perhaps someday she will be ready for me to point out how she could have done better. In the meantime, our relationship continues, just a little less close than before.

On Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Ezray spoke about the importance of coming together in a single bundle - *agudah achat* - with all of our different views and opinions. Most of us can remember a time when that was not so hard to do. But the lines have become so stark these days. When I hear certain, strongly expressed viewpoints about Israel, about Palestine, about the American elections - despite myself, my heart starts pounding. Physiologically, my body reacts as if the other person's opinion is a personal attack on me.

I know it's not. But I also know that most of us are having similar feelings. If Fred Luskin's form of forgiveness is about taking offenses less personally, and about reclaiming power over our emotions when someone has actually hurt us, well – I'm afraid, my friends, that as a society we have slipped backwards. We are having emotional reactions, as if to a personal insult, when someone makes a statement that is clearly not personal at all.

Rebecca Goldsmith Freedman, who is here tonight, asked me a profoundly important question about Rabbi Ezray's sermon. She said: "Can we forgive each other our differences of opinion enough to be civil, so our bundle does not crumble altogether?" No one is going to apologize to us, for holding views that are different from ours. Nor should they. *Mechilah* - our forgiveness of them - is not relevant here.

And yet, so many of us have felt hurt by another person's point of view. Can we bring ourselves to Luskin-style, inward focused forgiveness? Can we let go of the sense that we need to control the other person's opinion, or that

an individual's opinion poses a threat to us? Can we move from there to the curiosity that Tami spoke about so beautifully?

But letting go is hard. There's a reason we feel threatened by the other person's view. It's because we feel the reality of this moment as threatening. Separating the feelings of angst and fear about the state of our world, from the individual sitting before us - that takes real emotional work. The kind of training that many of us did with Irshad Manji last year, and that needs to be ongoing for all of us. Because Rabbi Ezray is right. Whatever the threats to our continued existence, we will face them best if we can face them together.

In addition to Luskin's internal letting go, and to the *mechilah* that we offer to the other, there is a third type of forgiveness - also called *mechilah*, in Hebrew. It is the *mechilah* that we ask for from God. Forgiveness for the wrongs that no one else can forgive. Also for the wrongs that have already been forgiven by another human being, but still a sense of shame remains. We turn to God to ask for release.

If we open ourselves to it, the private *mechilah* that God grants to each of us is expansive. Let's set our intention this Yom Kippur, to let go of grudges. Let go of grievances. Let go of hurts for which no apology will be forthcoming. If we do, we will find God to be as our ancestors described: *Harachaman*, the Compassionate One; *Adon HaSlichot*, the Master of Pardons.

May our prayers be sincere, and may we feel they are answered this Yom Kippur.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah.