

Rosh Hashanah II – 5771

Rabbi Steve Goodier shares the following, true story. “During the Civil War, a young man named Roswell McIntyre was drafted into the New York Cavalry. The war was not going well. Soldiers were needed so desperately that McIntyre was sent into battle with very little training. Roswell became frightened – he panicked and ran. He was later court-martialed and condemned to be shot for desertion. McIntyre’s mother appealed to President Lincoln. She pleaded that he was young and inexperienced and he needed a second chance.

The generals, however, urged the President to enforce discipline. Exceptions, they asserted, would undermine the discipline of an already beleaguered army.

Lincoln thought and prayed. Then he wrote a famous statement. “I have observed,” he said, “that it never does a boy much good to shoot him.”

President Lincoln wrote this letter in his own handwriting: “This letter will certify that Roswell McIntyre is to be readmitted into the New York Cavalry. When he serves out his required enlistment, he will be freed of any charges of desertion.”

That faded letter, signed by President Lincoln, is on display in the Library of Congress. Beside it there is a note, which reads, ‘This letter was taken from the body of Roswell McIntyre, who died at the battle of Little Five Forks, Virginia.’

It never does a boy (or anybody else for that matter) much good to shoot him. But you might be surprised at the power of forgiveness.”

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are all about forgiveness and yet forgiveness often seems to be much more multi-layered and complex than in the case of Abraham Lincoln and Roswell McIntyre. There are some

extraordinary examples for us to contemplate, and their depth and meaning may serve as reminders that the effort is psychologically and emotionally complicated.

Many months ago, Hans Weurth, a retired Moravian College professor, brought to my attention an article in the May 4, 2009 edition of The New Yorker magazine. “The Life After,” a story about reconciliation in Rwanda, was written by Philip Gourevitch.

Gourevitch noted: “When I began visiting Rwanda, in 1995, a year after the genocide, the country was still pretty well annihilated: blood-sodden and pillaged, with bands of orphans roaming the hills and women who’d been raped squatting in the ruins, its humanity betrayed, its infrastructure trashed, its economy gutted, its government improvised, a garrison state with soldiers everywhere, its court system vitiated, its prisons crammed with murderers, with more murderers still at liberty – hunting survivors and being hunted in turn by revenge killers – and with the routed army and militias of the genocide and a million and a half of their followers camped on the borders, succored by the United Nations refugee agency, and vowing to return and finish the job. In the course of a hundred days, beginning on April 6, 1994, nearly a million people from the Tutsi minority had been massacred in the name of an ideology known as Hutu Power, and, between the memory of the slaughter and the fear that it would resume, Rwanda often felt like an impossible country. Nowadays, when Rwandans look back on the early years of aftermath, they say, ‘In the beginning.’

[In 2009,] On the fifteenth anniversary of the genocide, [Gourevitch continues,] Rwanda is one of the safest and the most orderly countries in Africa.... Government officials are required to be at their desks by seven in the morning. It is the only government on earth in which the majority of

parliamentarians are women.... Most of the prisoners accused or convicted of genocide have been released. The death penalty has been abolished. And Rwanda is the only nation where hundreds of thousands of people who took part in mass murder live intermingled at every level of society with the families of the victims....”

[Back] in 1996, [right after the genocide] Philip Gourevitch [explained, I] “had been collecting stories of the genocide for a year and a half ... and [Jean] Gikumuhatse was the first who told me that he had killed. Yet even as he announced his guilt he hedged. He said that he had ordered others to kill, allowing merely that he ‘might’ have been a killer himself. He would admit to having a part in ‘only’ six murders. Some of his accomplices ... said he had killed more. The survivors I spoke with in [his village of] Taba agreed: many more, they said. He had even tried to kill his own brother-in-law – [Gikumuhatse was obviously a Hutu, but] Gikumuhatse’s wife was a Tutsi – but the brother-in-law [also a Tutsi] had escaped into the bush, and when I met him he told me he believed that Gikumuhatse had killed at least seventy people.”

By 2009, Gikumuhatse had spent eleven years in prison [and proclaimed:] “... I confessed everything in ‘*gacaca*’ – a system of outdoor community courts, convened for genocide cases. ‘I asked for forgiveness,’ Gikumuhatse said....” A Hutu multiple-murderer asks for forgiveness in front of relatives of those he murdered in a communal setting established by a Tutsi run government. How do any of us understand forgiveness in this context?

“Gikumuhatse said that the judges at his *gacaca* trial had found his confession to be accurate and complete, so I asked him how many people he had confessed to killing.... Eleven people. [Gikumuhatse] said, ‘During the

gacaca trial, since everyone was there – all the people of the village – I said, I will tell you everything. I even showed them where I threw the corpses. And I was a witness in the trials of others, all the trials.’

[Gourevitch notes:] I had always been told that Girumuhitse killed with a machete, but he said that he preferred to use a *masu*, a nail-studded club. He described killing [one of the men] Oswald Twamugabo. ‘I hit him in the head with my club and when he fell to the ground I crushed his skull.... The Tutsis in ’94 knew they were to be killed,’ Girumuhitse explained.... ‘They expected it. We felled them like cows.’ Since his release from prison, he said, he had made amends with “everyone in the village”: ‘I went from door to door asking forgiveness.’”

What does forgiveness mean in this real life context? Is it possible for people to forgive a brutal, multiple murderer?

Philip Gourevitch makes an important observation. “Girumuhitse had revealed himself. The law required that he be accepted for that. ‘Now,’ [Girumuhitse] said, ‘when I go to people’s houses and ask forgiveness, they say, ‘O.K. – you told the truth.’”

“It was not so easy for the survivors....” Girumuhitse’s brother-in-law, “Evariste, had attended Girumuhitse’s *gacaca* trial. ‘He really said everything, everything,’ Evariste said. When Girumuhitse had come to him and asked for forgiveness, Evariste told him that he forgave him. But he said to me, ‘All this reconciliation and the confessions – that’s the program of the state. And when a killer comes and asks your pardon you can’t do anything else. You pardon him, but you don’t really know if it comes from your heart, because you don’t really know about the killer – if he is asking forgiveness from his heart.’”

Here is the complexity of the process we presumably embrace each new year. Who really seeks forgiveness in the first place, and even if someone does, is it from the heart? And if we are fortunate enough to have someone seek our forgiveness, do we give it – perfunctorily or from the heart?

“Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was born in Transkei, South Africa on July 18, 1918. ... [Mandela] qualified in law in 1942. He joined the African National Congress in 1944 and was engaged in resistance against the ruling National Party's apartheid policies after 1948. ...

After the banning of the African National Congress, the ANC, in 1960, Nelson Mandela argued for the setting up of a military wing within the ANC.... In 1963, ...[with] many fellow leaders of the ANC, Mandela was brought to stand trial ... for plotting to overthrow the government by violence.... On June 12, 1964, eight of the accused, including Mandela, were sentenced to life imprisonment. From 1964 to 1982, he was incarcerated at Robben Island Prison, off Cape Town; thereafter, he was at Pollsmoor Prison, nearby on the mainland.

During his years in prison, Nelson ...became a potent symbol of resistance as the anti-apartheid movement gathered strength.... Nelson Mandela was released on February 11, 1990.” - having served twenty-six years.

This summer I read Mandela's Way: Fifteen lessons on Life, Love, and Courage by Richard Stengel who also collaborated with Mandela on his autobiography: Long Walk to Freedom. Only about a year before the genocide began in Rwanda, “In 1993, South Africa was at a knife edge. While Mandela was continuing his negotiations with the government over a new constitution and the date of a democratic election, there were forces

within the country trying to undermine this new dispensation, including extreme right-wing military groups that were marshalling their strength and threatening violence. Within his own movement, the African National Congress, some were questioning ... Mandela's authority, suggesting that he was too conservative, too trusting of the government, and that young leaders like Chris Hani, the head of the ANC's military wing, should be vaulted forward....

Where Mandela said forgive and forget, Hani said remember and retaliate;..."

"In the election campaign in 1994, [Mandela's] smile *was* the campaign. That smiling iconic campaign poster was everywhere It told black voters that he would be their champion and white voters that he would be their protector. It was the smile of the proverb "*tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*" – to understand all is to forgive all. It was political Prozac for a nervous electorate.

Ultimately, that was the single most important message [Mandela] wanted to send after his release; that he was a man without bitterness. His great task as the first democratically elected president of South Africa was to be the father of his country, to unite a heterogeneous battle-scarred land into one nation. From the moment of his release through his entire presidency and beyond, he was intent on showing people that he did not harbor any sense of grievance. From the first press conference where he talked about the generosity of his jailers to the literally hundreds of times he said, 'Forget the past,' the chief image he conveyed was of the paterfamilias who wanted to forgive and forget."

From 1964 to 1990, Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. For many years he lived a harsh, physically, mentally and emotionally brutal life. And

yet he, like the Tutsi leaders in Rwanda, recognized that there was something more important than nursing wounds or seeking vengeance. He overcame bitterness in an effort to find peace. Many books and articles on teshuvah, the repentance of these High Holidays, talk about the reality that the lack of forgiveness by a victim may lead to bitterness and distance; the total inability to find peace of mind.

But like Girumuhatse's brother-in-law, Evariste, real forgiveness in the face of such brutality and loss of life is no simple matter.

Richard Stengel points out: "But much of this [Mandela's public forgiveness] was for show. The private Mandela was deeply pained about what had happened to him. He was aware that he had spent the best years of his life behind bars. He found the views of his jailers and the government leaders to be crabbed and narrow.... He believed that he had sacrificed his marriage and his family to the struggle against oppression and prejudice. But he knew he could never let people see behind the curtain, that he could never expose his true feelings."

So in Rwanda, the government essentially demanded forgiveness, and to become the government, Nelson Mandela espoused forgiveness. Neither situation is ideal in terms of forgiveness. But fortunately, those of us sitting here today are unlikely to find ourselves in such a demanding situation when it comes to forgiveness. We are far more likely to find parallels to the life of Jay-Z.

In the September 23rd, 2009 edition of O Magazine, there is an interview by Oprah with Jay-Z. "In 1996, ... [Jay-Z] launched his own label, Roc-A-Fella Records. ... Since then, Jay-Z has released ten solo studio albums.... He has sold more than 30 million records, won seven Grammys, and built a business empire that includes the Rocawear clothing line and Roc

Nation entertainment company. In 2004 he became a part owner of the NBA's New Jersey Nets. ...

In the interview, "Jay-Z has admitted that he was angry with his father for years because he walked out when the rapper was 11. Speaking to Oprah Winfrey, he explained that he did not reconcile with his dad until shortly before his [father's] death in 2003.

'I just felt anger at the whole situation,' he said.... Jay-Z explained that his mother Gloria had insisted on setting up a meeting between her son and his father....

'I gave him the real conversation,' Jay-Z revealed. 'I told him how I felt the day he left. He was like, 'Man, you knew where I was.' I'm like, 'I was a kid! Do you realize how wrong you were? It was your responsibility to see me.' He finally accepted that. Jay-Z's father died a few months after their reconciliation."

Most of our lives probably are not even as dramatic as Jay-Z's. But many of us have a need to reconcile with someone, whether relative, friend or acquaintance. Very few of us have been touched by murder, but many more by abandonment and anger. The danger is that we remain bitter, while the other person involved moves on in life. Forgiveness is more about us than about someone else. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are an opportunity to free ourselves of such bitterness.

A few weeks ago, near the end of August, I went to the Hallmark store in Westgate Mall to buy an anniversary card and gift wrap. When I went to the check out counter, the total came to \$10.36. I looked in my wallet and found exact change and handed it to the lady at the cash register. She deposited the cash and handed me the receipt. Being a wise guy, which I am on very rare occasions, I looked surprised and asked her, "what, no change?"

Without missing a beat, the lady looked at me, smiled and said: “Today is not your day for change.” I knew exactly what she meant – no cash – but I heard something else. As I walked out of the store, I thought to myself, too many days are not days for change, for making the changes that would benefit our lives. But surely these holy days are a time for change, for forgiveness, even though changing and truly forgiving are not easy.

May this day be your day for change and these days be your time for forgiveness.

AMEN