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Shabbat Shuva Parashat VaYeLeKh

In the second chapter of his *Hilkhot Teshuva* (*halakha* 10), Maimonides establishes that repentance alone does not suffice to earn atonement for interpersonal offenses; one must also obtain the victim's forgiveness. He adds in this context that the victim, for his part, is obliged to accept the offender's apology and grant forgiveness. Maimonides writes:

It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and not grant pardon. One should rather easily forgive and not easily grow angry, and when the offender requests forgiveness he should forgive with a full heart and generous spirit. Even if he caused him distress and committed many offenses against him, he shall not exact revenge or bear a grudge. This is the way of the Israelite people and their principled heart.

These comments are drawn from the Mishna in *Masekhet Bava Kama* (92a), which states, "And from where [do we know] that if he [the victim] did not forgive him, he is cruel? As it says (*Bereishit* 20:17), 'Avraham prayed to God, and God healed Avimelekh and his household...'" Avraham's immediate response to Avimelekh's request for forgiveness establishes the precedent to be followed by all victims, who should willingly grant forgiveness to the sincerely remorseful and penitent offender.

Interestingly enough, Maimonides codifies this *halakha* in three separate contexts in his halakhic code. In addition to the aforementioned passage in *Hilkhot Teshuva*, Maimonides also makes mention of the requirement to forgive in *Hilkhot Dei'ot* (6:6), amidst his discussion of the prohibitions against exacting revenge and bearing a grudge: "And if he then changed [his heart] and asked him to forgive him, he must forgive, and the forgiver shall not be cruel." Finally, he returns to this topic in *Hilkhot Chovel U-mazik* (5:10), as he presents the laws relevant to one who inflicts injury on another: "It is forbidden for the victim to be cruel and not forgive; this is not the way of the offspring of Israel."

It is perhaps noteworthy that in all three contexts, Maimonides felt it necessary to emphasize the element of "cruelty." Rather than simply stating the importance of granting forgiveness, he underscores the "cruelty" entailed in refusing to grant forgiveness. How might we understand this emphasis? Why is refusing to grant forgiveness deemed "cruel," and why does Maimonides afford such importance to this concept?

At first glance, we might say that by refusing to grant forgiveness, the victim denies the perpetrator the possibility of atonement. Since, as mentioned, forgiveness is a prerequisite to atonement, a victim who denies the offender's requests in effect causes him to be liable to punishment. In truth, however, this does not appear to be the case. Maimonides writes (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 2:9) that if a victim refuses to grant forgiveness after the offender presented his request four times, "he [the offender] leaves him and goes

along his way, and this one who did not forgive is the sinner.” It seems that the offender is exonerated after making repeated efforts to earn the victim’s forgiveness, and thus the victim does not necessarily bear responsibility for the offender’s liability.

One explanation, perhaps, is that one who denies requests for forgiveness essentially denies others the right to be imperfect. In all our relationships with other people, we must acknowledge and accept the reality that people are prone to mistakes and misjudgments. We cannot expect people to avoid mistakes altogether; we can only expect them to try to correct those mistakes after they are made. As such, it behooves a victim to grant forgiveness to a sincerely penitent offender. Anything less would indeed constitute “cruelty,” refusing to grant one’s fellow what all people deserve – the right to make mistakes and then try to improve.

When a friend or family member says or does something distasteful, this should not be an occasion for anger or resentment. As Maimonides teaches, it is “cruel” to demand nothing less than perfection of other people. We should rather respond with compassion, patience and sensitivity, and help the person grow and move closer to perfection – rather than resenting the fact that he is not already there.