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Mrs. Kirk embraces it, Trump rejects it. The Jewish view is a happy medium.



POLITICS & IDEAS

Three Ideas About Forgiveness

10 days after Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year)

As Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, nears, the nature of forgiveness suddenly has become frontpage news. At the mass memorial service for Charlie Kirk, his widow, Erika, said that she forgave her husband's killer. "I forgive him because it was what Christ did, and it was what Charlie would do," she said. "The answer we know from the Gospel is love and always love."

President Trump didn't buy it. "He did not hate his opponents," Mr. Trump said of Kirk at the memorial. "He wanted the best for them. That's where I disagreed with Charlie. I hate my opponent. And I don't want the best for them. . . . I can't stand my opponent."

Here, on vivid display, were two opposed understandings: the Christian ethos of forgiveness and the pagan ethos of vengeance. In Colossians 3:13, Paul urges his readers: "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

This is a demanding spiritual standard. Mr. Trump's view is the opposite. If someone injures you, forget about forgiveness. Don't restrain your wrath or pull your punches. Hit back harder, and, if possible, destroy your enemy. Whatever may be the case elsewhere (if there is an elsewhere), retribution is justice here on earth.

The Jewish view stands between these poles. While forgiveness is a divine attribute, human beings must earn it. On Yom Kippur we are instructed that while we can earn forgiveness from God for sins through ritual confession and sincere repentance, which is hard, earning forgiveness from human beings we have wronged is even harder.

The latter requires us to admit our fault to the offended party, take responsibility for what we have done, feel genuine remorse, make restitution and strive never to repeat the wrong. Only when we have done this is the offended party required to forgive us. Only if he refuses to do so despite repeated entreaties does the fault shift to him.

The acid test of repentance is not succumbing to the impulse to do wrong even when we find ourselves in circumstances similar to those that sparked the earlier transgression. An abusive spouse may be overcome with guilt, go through all the steps Jewish law requires, and receive forgiveness from the injured spouse. But if the wrong is subsequently repeated, then the effort to repent has fallen short, and it will be harder for the wrongdoer to re-establish trust.

For Jews, repentance has two basic purposes—to promote individual moral improvement and to rebuild damaged relationships among human beings as well as between us and God. If our wrong is never forgiven, despite genuine effort to make

ourselves worthy of it, then the incentive to try is weakened. Conversely, if we are forgiven despite doing nothing to deserve it, then our incentive to do better disappears altogether.

More than half a century ago, George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama, was shot and paralyzed by a would-be assassin's bullet during his 1972 presidential campaign. While he was hospitalized, he received a visit from Rep. Shirley Chisholm, a strong champion of civil rights and the first black woman elected to Congress. They prayed

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together, and Wallace expressed his concern that Chisholm's visit might damage her politically. Her visit, a gesture of shared humanity, moved him and had a profound effect on history.

Years later, Wallace went to Montgomery, Ala., to visit a church where Martin Luther King Jr. had preached, and he apologized to the congregation for the wrongs he committed against black Americans. The Rev. Joseph Lowery, a civil-rights leader who had served with King, reportedly thanked Wallace and said, "You are a different George Wallace today. We both serve a God who can make the desert bloom. We ask God's blessing on you."

Although this remarkable event took place among Christians in a Christian church, it had recognizably Jewish elements. George Wallace didn't imagine that he could receive forgiveness without earning it. He changed, he apologized to those he had wronged, and he tried to right the wrong, hiring black Alabamians for government jobs, apologizing to several civil-rights leaders, and even addressing a meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Today, in these dark times for America, the recriminations resound, with no end in sight. We need leaders who are willing to acknowledge that neither side, including their own, is without fault. How else can reconciliation begin? You don't need to be Christian to say, as Jesus did, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

By William A. Galston

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