

Give Me (and Everyone Else) a Break

Yom Kippur 5781

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For six months, we've been worshipping differently than ever before in human history. My own decades of rabbinical experience have never been less relevant. How could I know what would be meaningful for worshipers at the other end of the computer? Should I read the prayer book or be more extemporaneous? Would modern poetry be most comforting? And what about practical matters? Do I announce page numbers? Say when to rise and be seated?

I was terribly anxious in the early weeks of livestream services. Would congregants know how to join us? What if the connection failed? What if my dogs started barking when I'm streaming from home? What if prayer book pages didn't come on the screen at exactly the appointed moment?

I shouldn't have worried. Congregants expressed gratitude that we were offering services at all. Our Ritual Committee insisted that any number of approaches could be meaningful, and that nobody expected perfection. Congregation B'nai Israel gave me a break.

Yom Kippur is the central focus of our annual season of asking **God** to forgive our sins. This year, though, we would do well to concentrate on the mercy **we** grant, to ourselves and to the people around us. Virtually none of us is living as we normally do. Even if we are, our circumstances have changed. None of us should expect ourselves or anybody else to perform flawlessly under conditions that are anything but perfect.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman was not so forgiving in the early stages of the pandemic. In Israel, where he lives, many, though not all, ultra-Orthodox Jews failed to take the virus seriously. Instead of prioritizing public health, they continued to gather in large numbers for worship and study. Rabbi Hartman was livid when he learned that seventy percent of Israel's ventilators were usurped by ten percent of its population—ultra-Orthodox Jews who had behaved irresponsibly.ⁱ

Being an Orthodox rabbi himself, Hartman turned to Jewish law, specifically a regulation about redeeming captives—which seems to have nothing to do with Coronavirus or ventilators, but stick with me. When Jews were taken prisoner or sold into slavery, our sages required the community to pay ransom, to free the captive.ⁱⁱ But what if a person sold **themselves** into slavery? Logic tells us that the community ought not waste resources to free such a person, and the rabbis initially agreed. Upon further reflection, though, they ruled that the community should pay

to free even a person who sold himself into slavery, at least the first time, but not the second...or at least, not the third.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Every human being,” Rabbi Hartman concluded, “has the right to be a fool.” Hartman compared ultra-Orthodox Jews who had contracted Covid-19 after ignoring public health directives to people who had sold themselves into slavery—the first time. They merited forgiveness. Their redemption was warranted. They deserved the salvation that came in the form Israel’s ventilators, which Hartman ultimately understood to have been properly allocated to the sickest patients, even those who had behaved irresponsibly.^{iv}

Hartman has no love for the ultra-Orthodox community that doesn’t recognize him as a rabbi, but he acknowledges: Once they understood the virus, the overwhelming majority was careful.^v We must have compassion for people who make mistakes. For those who are wrong. For people who sin. Even if those people are infuriating. If Rabbi Donniel Hartman can forgive the carelessness of Israel’s ultra-Orthodox community, then we, too, can give others a break.

Americans need to give one another a break right now. We’ve all heard, or experienced, stories about people getting into shouting matches, or worse, for the “crime” of wearing a mask or because they asked somebody else to cover their nose and mouth. Our fellow citizens have been assaulted because of their political views. Ours nation is burning with anger, some of it righteous, and all of it inflamed by a triple-whammy of an upcoming presidential election, a population cooped up during a pandemic, and the license that too many take to express themselves with vitriol on the internet in words they would never utter face-to-face. Even on Zoom.

On this Yom Kippur, let us all resolve to give people a break—to be slow to anger, as God strives to be.^{vi} Then, we may achieve the ultimate goal of this day: God will forgive us. In the words of Rabbi Howard Kaminsky, citing the Talmud:^{vii} “[W]hen [we are] forgiving...God will reciprocate in kind by forgiving and overlooking [our own] sins.”^{viii}

We may start by giving ourselves a break. I began by discussing my own insecurity, unsure that I was up to leading livestream worship. I am not the first prayer leader who has needed to give himself a break. Countless generations of rabbis and cantors have approached the Ark at this season and declared themselves unfit: *Hineni he-ani mi-ma’as*, “Here I am,” the leader proclaims, before the open Ark, “My good deeds are few. I tremble, ... standing and pleading before God on behalf of God’s people Israel who have appointed me, though I am unworthy and

unqualified for the task.”^{ix} The heart of the matter: How can I ask forgiveness for others, when I, too, am a sinner? I need God’s help to give myself a break.

Rabbi Karyn Kedar offers a modern, poetic take on this ancient prayer, specifically for this challenging year; and I conclude with her words today:

Hin’ni

I am here

I stand resilient, determined,
though I have been taken down,
forced to live a different way.

The rhythm of life has been altered.

Time unfolds and morphs, expands and stands still.

I have been called to be present, to pay attention.

What have I learned?

What have I done with the time I have been given,
glorious time of never-ending possibility?

Have I squandered the beauty, the radiance of life,
an offering to my inner being?

Who am I?

Where have I gone astray?

Am I worthy to pray with my people?

May I be worthy to pray with my people.

Hear my plea,

grant me the faith, the courage and wisdom

to enter into [an accounting of my own soul],

The fragility and humility of self-examination.

Hin’ni,

I am here. I am here.

May this fractured heart soften
and hold love and compassion
in a way it never has before.

Hin’ni. I am here.^x

Amen.

ⁱ Rabbi Donniel Hartman, “Moral Principles and Priorities in a Changing Landscape: Ethical Pivots in the Age of Corona,” *All Together Now, Hartman Summer@Home*, Shalom Hartman Institute, June 29, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Maimonides, *Matnot Aniyim*—Chapter 8, supra note 188, at *Halacha* 10, *inter alia*. (Source in Rivka Weill, “Exodus: Structuring Redemption of Captives,” *Cardozo Law Review*, Vol 36:177, 2014, cardozolawreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/WEILL.36.1.pdf.)

ⁱⁱⁱ BT Gittin 46b, as taught by Rabbi Donniel Hartman.

^{iv} Hartman.

^v *Ibid*.

^{vi} Exodus 34:6.

^{vii} Rosh Hashanah 17a.

^{viii} Howard Kaminsky, “How We Benefit By Forgiving Others,” *My Jewish Learning*, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/how-we-benefit-by-forgiving-others/>.

^{ix} Opening words of *Hineni*, traditionally recited by Cantor at the outset of Rosh Hashanah *Mussaf*.

^x Excerpted from Rabbi Karyn Kedar, “*Hin’ni*: Here I am, The Confession of a Broken Heart,” *RavBlog*, Central Conference of American Rabbis, August 12, 2020.