

The Radical Meaning of Forgiveness

A Response to Yotam Benziman's
"Forgiveness and Remembrance of Things
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Yotam Benziman's essay "Forgiveness and Remembrance of Things Past" is a thought-provoking and, at times, brilliant piece. I have been studying the topic of forgiveness for almost a quarter century, so Benziman and I have a common bond: that of wrestling with the meaning of forgiveness. Before I begin, however, I must confess that when it comes to understanding forgiveness, to borrow a line from Socrates, I am ignorant. I simply do not fully understand this mysterious and often elusive concept. Indeed, each time I think I have finally mastered it, it seems to recede farther away from me. And so I struggle on. It is in this spirit that I approach Benziman's very important essay—important precisely because it motivates us all to try and comprehend the enigma that is forgiveness in our lives.

Yet for me, by far the greatest challenge raised by Benziman's essay was its assessment of the nature of man. He asks, who are we? Who are we *to*

each other? Who *should* we be to each other, and why? In fact, attempting to answer all of these questions is a prerequisite to the asking of the central question of the piece, namely, what is the essence of forgiveness itself? It is only fitting, then, that I, too, begin with the conundrum of the nature of man, only afterward delving into our chosen topic, forgiveness.

What is the nature of man? Jewish tradition provides an explicit answer in its story of man's creation: In the first chapter of Genesis, we are told that man is created in the image of God. This response is repeated for emphasis: We, man and woman alike, are made in God's likeness. Because this claim is so important, it is repeated twice more in the next verse.¹ Where else in Hebrew Scripture is there such a rapid repetition of claims? The ancient Hebrew understanding of the nature of man, then, is that beginning with the first human beings, we have all been made in the image and likeness of God. This naturally raises the question: Who, then, is God? Genesis once again provides an answer: God, we are told, has attributes that include, among others, generosity, love and caring, creativity, and a deep concern for us as human beings. We can see, then, why we are enjoined in Leviticus to love our neighbor—to do so is to mirror the act of love God shows to all mankind.² And who is our neighbor? The original Hebrew uses the word *re'a*, which is not confined to blood relatives, or even to those living in close proximity; instead, it connotes *associates*, such as companions and others who share some part in our lives. In other words, it is a term that is open to some interpretation—and tellingly, it is interpretation of the inclusive rather than exclusive kind.

I believe that the Hebrew tradition gives us the most solid basis for understanding mankind that I have ever encountered. Consider, for comparison's sake, the preeminent Western philosopher Emmanuel Kant's views on the subject: People, he once famously stated, are ends in and of themselves and should be treated as such. Yet he did not—because his secular philosophy *could* not—tell us why this is so. Indeed, when it takes its collective eye off the Hebrew tradition, modern science quickly becomes entangled in moral chaos. After all, if we are nothing more than evolved animals, morals

have no meaning in an objective or metaphysical sense. They simply become subjective judgments that lack definitive purpose, since it is presumed that, as human beings evolve, our sense of right and wrong evolves as well. Taken to its logical conclusion, this perspective leads us to believe that we are striving after wind if we attempt to understand what the term “forgiveness” means beyond the here and now, since its meaning is changing even as you read this. The ancient Hebrew tradition, by contrast, grounds our understanding of morals. Kant himself seems to have conceded as much when he reasoned that, even if God does not exist, we should nonetheless act as if he does. Otherwise, he acknowledged, we have little basis for knowing how to interact with one another.

This discussion brings us to the question at hand: What is the nature of forgiveness? To make the case for his take on the subject, Benziman cites a wide range of scholars, several of whom refer to forgiveness as a moral virtue. Moral virtues—justice, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, etc.—all share certain characteristics.³ Namely, they are concerned with goodness toward other people. The moral virtues begin with a person’s understanding of their meaning—in this case, of what forgiveness *is*—and subsequently require the motivation to put them into practice, or in other words, to forgive. This motivation is then expressed in behavior that reflects, as best it can at any given time, the nature of the virtue in question. We rarely find perfection in any expression of the virtues, but practice undoubtedly helps our expression of them to mature.⁴ Yet even as we practice the virtues, we should take care not to isolate them, attempting to practice just one at a time; rather, we must recognize that all the virtues work together, so that when, for example, a person practices forgiveness, he can and should exercise justice as well.

Furthermore, since in the end all the moral virtues are concerned with goodness, we must not distort the meaning of forgiveness by claiming for it the power—or necessity—of condoning, excusing, or forgetting immoral behavior. The virtue of forgiveness must not display weakness in the face of

injustice; were it to do so, it would cease to be virtuous. Moreover, because forgiveness is not a legal act of remission, we must not confuse the act of forgiving with that of absolving, pardoning, or offering clemency. Since, however, forgiveness is expressed by individual decisions and actions based on the virtue of *mercy*, and not justice, it can nonetheless appear (incorrectly) to be at times unreasonable, and even unfair.

Finally, moral virtues are *unconditional*. By this I mean that whenever a person wishes to be kind, just, patient, or compassionate, he is free to do so. I can think of no contingencies that would prevent someone from being just to others if he wished to be. If a person has a particular understanding of justice and the desire to be just (to the best of her abilities), then she can exercise justice. The same holds true for forgiveness, and the ancient Hebrew tradition is clear on this point. Indeed, in his essay, Benziman frequently cites the Genesis account of Joseph, who forgives his brothers for their sins against him. This is a truly significant narrative, because it is the first story in any ancient tradition that details the process through which a person forgives other people. A key feature of the story is the *unconditional* nature of Joseph's forgiveness: His brothers do not repent before he forgives them. True, he hears them lamenting their sins after they have been imprisoned; crucially, however, they do not recognize Joseph as the brother they sinned against, nor is their lament anything other than a product of naked self-interest. They lament because they believe they are being *punished* for their sin, not because they committed the sin in the first place. Theirs is hardly a strong moral basis for genuine repentance.⁵

Joseph's forgiveness, by contrast, is highly emotional (he weeps three times and finally embraces his brothers), and his behavior is characterized by generosity, love and care, creativity, and a deep concern for his family—all of which are, as stated, attributes of God. He also acknowledges his brothers' inherent worth despite the grave injustices they have committed against him. Significantly, once he reveals himself as Joseph, his act of forgiveness helps to save the Hebrew nation by ensuring its continuity. Thus, we may say that forgiveness played a vital role in preserving the Jewish tradition.

According to Aristotle, all moral virtues are expressed in relation to a mean (an average, a point of balance). In other words, their expression must be temperate and reasonable according to the situation at hand.⁶ Courage, for example, if expressed in an imbalanced way, can become reckless bravado, as in the case of someone who cannot swim but nonetheless dives into the sea to save a drowning man. At the opposite extreme is someone in whom the virtue of courage has never developed, and who hides under the bed rather than face any danger whatsoever. This principle of the mean also holds true in relation to forgiveness, which must be properly understood and expressed or else risk being distorted and misapplied. For instance, an extreme expression of forgiveness might be the forgiver's inclination to dominate the one who seeks forgiveness by constantly reminding him of his transgression and his need to be forgiven—or, likewise, the forgiver's inclination to be dominated, because he does not understand the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation: The former is a moral virtue, whereas the latter is not, since it always concerns at least two parties and is contingent on their coming together in mutual trust.

Societies do not require that all virtues be practiced to the same degree. For example, in order to preserve the virtue of justice, all societies have laws that prohibit certain behaviors. On the other hand, no society, past or present, has ever enacted laws requiring forgiveness. This is because forgiveness is a virtue grounded in mercy, and mercy is not a virtue required of societies. At the same time, even if not required by society, any virtue is good by definition. It is good, therefore, to act according to the merciful virtues, including forgiveness. We ignore such virtues at our own peril.

Finally, all moral virtues have a purpose.⁷ I do not mean that they have consciousness and move deliberately toward a specific end. Rather, once we understand what forgiveness *is* (an unconditional moral goodness directed toward those who have offended us) we can see a final purpose to it. Or, in the case of forgiveness, three final purposes: 1) for the forgiver to be as perfect as he can in expressing forgiveness, thus potentially restoring the forgiven to moral integrity and psychological wholeness; 2) for the forgiven to

repent, change his behavior, and ask for—as well as accept—the forgiveness of those he has harmed; and 3) for the two (or more) parties involved to be reconciled or come together in mutual trust, perhaps for the first time.

The Israeli psychiatrist Morton Kaufman, in his 1984 article “The Courage to Forgive,” was one of the first to suggest that when we forgive, we bear the burden—i.e., the wounds—of the injustice done to us.⁸ Benziman, in his essay, clarifies this idea further by noting that we bear this burden in such a profound way that the pain actually becomes a part of us, much like a scar on our bodies, and that the offender must carry the pain with her, too. In other words, we carry each other’s pain. This, to me, is an astonishing idea, one worthy of continual reflection and deep philosophical analysis.

This understanding of forgiveness is important for two reasons: First, it shows what forgiveness is in its essence; and second, it challenges us to work toward a goal that is good for both individuals in particular and communities in general. Research has demonstrated that, over time, as a person bears pain (emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational) caused by the injustice of others, that pain eventually lifts.⁹ In other words—and paradoxically—when people carry the pain caused by others, healing occurs. The original injustice itself can never be wiped away, of course, but it seems that the damaging effects can be. In contrast, when people refuse to carry the pain of the injustice done to them, the results are deleterious not only for them but those close to them. Indeed, it is not hard to see how bitterness and continued resentment can cause lasting psychological damage as harm our relationships with our children, our neighbors, and our associates. To bear the pain of being wronged, then, is to accept, quietly, the fact that another person hurt me, and to make a commitment to do no harm to that other—or *any* other—in spite of my wounds. This is a portrait of courage, temperance, wisdom, and even justice (since we see the wrong for what it was). Most of all, it is a portrait of

extraordinary mercy and even love. Of course, as part of the nature of any virtue, we do not bear the burden or the iniquity perfectly: We can waver in our commitment to sharing the truth of the wrongdoing, and the other may do likewise. But if we do the best we can, then we do get better at it with practice.

When we bear the burden of a pain we do not deserve, we walk in the truth revealed to us in ancient Hebrew tradition: Namely, that the other who caused us pain, despite his wrongdoing, is made in the image and likeness of God, whether we like it or not. She is made in that image, in other words, *even if she does not repent or ask forgiveness*. My personal feelings are not the final arbiter of my decision to embrace this truth or reject it. Moreover, while the idea that man is created in the image of God is proof enough of the need to accept this truth for anyone from the monotheistic traditions, even a secularist or atheist might want to adopt it, as Kant suggests we do (i.e., to act *as if* God exists), since otherwise, we are left with no basis for morality whatsoever—including the decision to bear the pain of iniquity with the other, and on another’s behalf.

Despite my immense respect for Benziman’s insights into the nature of forgiveness, I do have some misgivings about his approach. Perhaps my discomfort stems from the fact that Benziman’s argument is not balanced in the Aristotelian sense I cited above—and philosophical imbalance, as we have seen, can lead to distortions in both the meaning and expression of the virtues. In particular, Benziman’s discussion of the Nazis and whether to offer them forgiveness—he is unequivocally opposed to the idea—seems to me unbalanced. Moreover, I believe that his argument against forgiving the Nazis is inconsistent with the rest of his essay. Inconsistency, of course, is not a philosophical problem if it is simply a matter of changing one’s mind over time. It *is* a problem, however, if two premises are in contradiction. Unfortunately, it seems to me that Benziman’s argument features two such contradictory premises, and I wish to address them through the questions below.

1. *Who is my neighbor?* If neighbor (*re'a*) includes associates, and if all human beings are associated because we are all made in the image and likeness of God, then it follows (whether we like it or not) that the Nazis are also made in the image of God and are, by definition, our associates. This is a painful conclusion but an inescapable one.

2. *Is the nature of forgiveness being confused?* If forgiveness is a moral virtue, and if all moral virtues, at their core, are unconditional (i.e., no one can prevent, morally, a person from expressing a moral virtue) then any person may, if he so chooses, forgive any Nazi, despite what that Nazi has done. This forgiveness, of course, is not to condone the Nazi's actions in any way. Likewise, because forgiveness is morally different from justice (forgiveness is not demanded by society, while justice is, at least in some respects), anyone who does *not* wish to forgive the Nazis need not do so as well. But to say, as does Benziman, that we *cannot* or *must not* forgive them on account of their evil actions, and that, further, by means of those actions the Nazis have become—in the words of Holocaust survivor Jean Améry—"antimen," appears to express a misunderstanding of what forgiveness is.

As we established, to grant or not to grant forgiveness is not contingent on another person's behavior. Forgiveness can be offered *unconditionally*, whenever the forgiver wishes to do so. While there is a Jewish tradition of granting forgiveness when someone asks for it, this does not mean that such a request is a necessary condition for forgiveness; while it may be a *sufficient* condition, if we are to remain true to the definition of moral virtue and to the meaning of the Joseph narrative, it cannot be a *necessary* condition. Otherwise, forgiveness would be the only moral virtue that requires a contingency for its expression. Even if one were to argue that this is, in fact, the case, and that forgiveness, unique among all the moral virtues, is conditional, this would simply present another dilemma: Now the freedom of the forgiver is restricted, and he is placed at the mercy of the wrongdoer, who does not or will not request forgiveness.

3. *Is the essence of forgiveness being confused with its purpose?* Here we must be careful not to confuse the *essence* of forgiveness (i.e., what it is at

its core) with the *purpose* of forgiveness (i.e., what we are striving toward when we forgive). We can bear the pain of being wronged (an *essence* of forgiveness), even if we do so alone (an imperfect *end*). The ideal purpose is to forgive as perfectly as we can, with the offender genuinely seeking and receiving forgiveness from us, so that we can reconcile with each other. However, we do not need any guarantees that this purpose will be fulfilled in order to play our part in the essence of forgiving, namely, the bearing of the pain of the wrongdoing as best we can, in the recognition of the other as made in the image and likeness of God. Benziman seems to disagree with this.

4. *Is the essence of forgiveness confused?* If we confuse *essence* with *purpose*, we invariably distort the former. In this case, we risk confusing the meaning of forgiveness itself. For example, if we cannot fulfill the purpose of forgiveness (reconciliation), we may conclude that we similarly cannot exercise the essence of forgiveness (bearing pain, exercising goodness toward the offender). This approach restricts our individual freedom to forgive and reduces forgiveness to a conditional action, thus distorting its meaning. After all, if we express goodness when the supposed moral law of conditionality tells us we cannot, then our goodness cannot be seen as goodness.

5. *Are the purposes of forgiveness confused?* If we confuse essences, then we confuse purposes, and our thinking about and expression of the virtues may become imbalanced. For example, suppose we are made to see forgiveness as being dominated by another person (a distortion of essence). The result will no doubt be fear, as well as a commitment to embrace our resentment rather than our scars (a distortion of purpose) and to shun all possibility of practicing forgiveness or receiving it from the offender (another distorted purpose). From a psychological perspective, such deep and long-lasting resentment can only be self-destructive.

6. *Are there contradictory premises?* Benziman makes an important statement when he says of all offenders, "We know the wrongdoer is human." When we forgive, he says, we do not forget the humanity of the other. Near the essay's end, however, Benziman begins to argue the exact

opposite point of view: Whereas at first he takes it as self-evident that we do not diminish the humanity of the other prior to forgiving him, when assessing the humanity of the Nazis, he throws up a contradiction, calling them both human and at the same time “antimen.” Now, the use of the prefix “anti” could indicate that the term means “a person who is against men.” It could also, however, mean “someone who is the opposite of a man.” Which of the two definitions is used here? The answer, I think, is contained in the statement by Améry that Benziman quotes at length: “When they led [the SS man] to the place of execution, the anti-man had once again become a fellow man.” Clearly, then, Benziman uses the term to refer to what he *is*, not what he is *for* or *against*. We thus have a dilemma: Benziman calls the Nazis both human and anti(hu)man, but one cannot, by definition, be both. If a philosopher states that actions play a part in defining a person, and that a person can thus be defined as an “antiman” because of his actions, then said person, because of his actions, is no longer truly (or perhaps completely) human in the eyes of that philosopher. So, too, if we follow Benziman’s argument to its logical conclusion, we see that his own “forgetting” about the Nazis’ humanity appears to nullify his earlier claim that we cannot forget the essence of the offender’s humanity. Even if Benziman were to argue that he did not mean to imply a *complete* cancellation of the wrongdoer’s humanity, it is obvious (because of the prefix “anti”) that he at least means a *reduction* in some (undefined) aspect of his humanity. Either way, it is clear he does not think the Nazis have the same status as others defined as human.

Perhaps we can resolve this contradiction by claiming that not all offenders retain their humanity in the eyes of those offended, and that the Nazis are therefore *perceived* as not fully human (even if they in fact are). But this merely sets up another, even more serious contradiction, since it stands in direct opposition to Genesis 1:26, which holds that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. So, either we must reject the idea that the Nazis are “antimen,” thus opening up the moral freedom to forgive them, or we must reject an essential, ancient Hebrew teaching.

Benziman can perhaps salvage something here by stating that he did not mean to deny the humanity of the Nazis in an objective (i.e., metaphysically real) sense, but rather was simply stating an opinion (as opposed to positing a true-or-false premise). He hints as much when he writes, “We do not *want* them as part of the human race.” (Emphasis mine.) To be sure, this is considerably different from banishing the Nazis outright, yet it still denies (for whatever reason) the humanity of one, and only one, group of people—in this case, the Nazis. While this denial is subjective, relative, and particular, rather than objective, absolute, and universal, it still presents us with a serious political and social problem. For what prevents others from taking a similar stance toward other groups, such as those who suffered through the horror of the concentration camps? Consider the statement “We do not want them as part of the human race” in this context, and the problem becomes clear.

A possible rebuttal to my position on this matter might be to say that I have now turned the victim into the offender if she remains angry and refuses to forgive. That is to say, the *victim* is now the one with unacceptable thoughts about the wrongdoer. Let there be no misunderstanding me: The victim’s anger is not, in any way, a negative reflection on her, so long as that anger stays within reasonable bounds. When anger turns into resentment, however, the result can harm both the offender *and* the offended. This is precisely why forgiveness is so important: It can keep anger within the proper bounds and thus prevent vicious cycles of revenge.

In saying this, of course, I do not in any way condone the actions of the Nazis. Their actions were gravely wrong and always will be. Benziman asserts that a person can be defined, at least in part, by his actions; I wish to add my belief that even if we do define a person, in part, by her actions, we cannot define her *exclusively* on that basis.

It still seems to me that the safest position for human beings to take is the objective, absolute, and universal premise of Genesis 1:26, that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. If this is true, then anyone, by definition, may forgive, and anyone may be forgiven. If the Nazis (that is, the ones who are left, as they are passing away daily now) still pose a threat

to us on account of the evil they committed in the past, then they certainly should not be considered part of our actual, here-and-now community. Moreover, we should strive to bring them to justice. But we must not make the subjectivist turn and, in our hearts and minds, exclude them from the human community altogether. This is a danger we cannot afford to take.

The beauty of bearing pain, even if we do it alone, is that we do not pass it on to others, such as our families and especially our children. Allen Bergin tells us that if we can find it within ourselves to bear the pain of the burden imposed upon us, we can become a conduit for good for the next generation.¹⁰ In my own work with children in Belfast, Northern Ireland, my colleagues and I are hoping that years of forgiveness education will lead to just such a bearing of pain by both British Protestant and Irish Catholic children, so that when they grow up, they will be philosophically, psychologically, and theologically sophisticated forgivers, capable of taking the long view and perceiving the true purpose of forgiveness.¹¹ With this foundation in place, perhaps their divided community will also be capable of envisioning a future of justice for all. It is our hope that people on both sides will decide to bear the pain of thousands of iniquities accumulated over hundreds of years. It is our hope that they will share this pain together, as Benziman so eloquently puts it: Not to forget, but to move on together, both forgiver and forgiven, each bearing the consequences of the injustice committed. It is our hope that they will do this precisely because they have learned from the Jewish tradition that we are all made in the image and likeness of God.

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Notes

1. Genesis 1:26-27.
2. Leviticus 19:18.
3. Yves R. Simon, *The Definition of Moral Virtues*, ed. Vukan Kuic (New York: Fordham University, 1986).
4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Simon, *Definition of Moral Virtues*.
5. Genesis 42:21.
6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Simon, *Definition of Moral Virtues*.
7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; Simon, *Definition of Moral Virtues*.
8. Morton E. Kaufman, "The Courage to Forgive," *Israeli Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences* 21:3 (1984), pp. 177-187.
9. See, for example, Robert D. Enright and Richard Fitzgibbons, *Helping Clients Forgive: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, D.C.: APA, 2000); Gayle G. Reed and Robert D. Enright, "The Effects of Forgiveness Therapy on Depression, Anxiety, and Post-Traumatic Stress for Women After Spousal Emotional Abuse," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 74:5 (October 2006), pp. 920-929; Wei-Fen Lin et al., "Effects of Forgiveness Therapy on Anger, Mood, and Vulnerability to Substance Use Among Inpatient Substance-Dependent Clients," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 72:6 (December 2004), pp. 1114-1121.
10. Allen E. Bergin, "Three Contributions of a Spiritual Perspective to Counseling, Psychotherapy, and Behavioral Change," *Counseling and Values* 33:1 (October 1988), pp. 21-31.
11. Robert D. Enright, Elizabeth A. Gassin, and Jeanette A. Knutson, "Waging Peace Through Forgiveness in Belfast, Northern Ireland: A Review and Proposal for Mental Health Improvement of Children," *Journal of Research in Education* 13:1 (Fall 2003), pp. 51-61; Robert D. Enright, Jeanette A. Knutson, Anthony C. Holter, Thomas Baskin, and Casey Knutson, "Waging Peace Through Forgiveness in Belfast, Northern Ireland II: Educational Programs for Mental Health Improvement of Children," *Journal of Research in Education* 17 (Fall 2007), pp. 63-78; Robert D. Enright et al., "Waging Peace Through Forgiveness in Belfast, Northern Ireland III: Correcting a Production Error and a Case Study," *Journal of Research in Education* 18 (Fall 2008), pp. 128-131.