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Rabbi Joseph Telushkin explores forgiveness

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APPLAUSE for a speaker being introduced is practically required, but the warm and affectionate introduction by Rabbi Tirzah Firestone of Rabbi Joseph Telushkin was less like a formal introduction and more like a welcome of an old friend into one's home — which is basically what it was.

Temple Nevei Kodesh is her home, and Rabbi Joseph Telushkin — the educator and ethicist — is her friend.

The Telushkins lived in Boulder for several years in the mid-1990s and while they loved it then and love it now, life required them to return to New York. It is the friendships they formed while they were here that laid the groundwork for last Sunday's event.



Telushkin began his lecture, "Being a Good Person in a Morally Complicated World," with a discussion of how the word "religious" has come to mean only ritual observance.

This, according to him, makes it appear that keeping kosher or driving on the Sabbath is what makes someone more or less religious and "allows people to come to the conclusion that ethics are an extra-curricular activity" rather than an integral aspect of Judaism.

While "we need ritual to transmit teaching from generation to generation [which] allows Jewish continuity" and brings us together as a people, it is not, however, meant to be practiced in a vacuum, he said.

The fact that Yom Kippur has not been moved to the second Sunday of September for convenience "forces you to conform your life to ritual." This is important, he said, because if you can simply alter the ritual when it becomes inconvenient the ritual loses its power.

To illustrate, he expressed the opinion that those assembled were the last generation who would know that Abraham Lincoln was born on Feb. 12 because the holiday once called Lincoln's Birthday was

celebrated on that date, whether it fell on a Monday or a Thursday; but now it has been changed to “President’s Day,” which falls conveniently on a Monday each year.

According to Telushkin, while intended to honor all the presidents this change actually honors none of them.

MOVING to the subject of forgiveness in a world filled with evil, he talked about the concept of free will and Maimonides’ statement that if you don’t believe in free will, the Torah is void, because what’s the point of telling people to do this or not to do that if they lack the ability to decide whether or not to follow the instructions?

Given that people are responsible for their own actions, the Torah says that all forgiveness falls into three categories: obligatory, optional and forbidden, depending on the specifics of the situation.

Telushkin explained.

- Forgiveness is required when the damage done is not irrevocable and the petitioner seems genuinely sorry for the transgression.
- Forgiveness is optional when the damage is irrevocable or the transgressor does not ask for forgiveness.
- Forgiveness is forbidden when the damage is done to someone other than one’s self, meaning that we are not empowered to forgive on behalf of another.

The first situation is pretty self-explanatory, if not always easy to practice. Telushkin said that forgiveness doesn’t mean saying that whatever happened is OK. Rather, it means someone is willing to put it behind them, to let go of the anger, re-establish a repaired relationship with the person who hurt them, and not make reference to it anymore.

The second point is that is generally wiser to forgive than not, and that doing so is as much in the best interest of the forgiver as it is comforting to the forgiven.

Telushkin gave an example in which a woman had been cheated on and then divorced in a public and mean-spirited manner. She was understandably angry, bitter and resentful. However, 10 years later, she remains just as furious, and her rabbi observed that while she has been carrying a hot coal to throw at her ex-husband she had succeeded only in burning a hole in her own hand.

Who was more injured by her continued rage — her ex-husband or herself?

When one chooses to forgive, he or she should inform the person who injured them of exactly what was done did (especially in cases where forgiveness has not been requested) and how it hurt.

In many cases, the offender has no idea that his or her words or actions caused pain, or is unaware of the depth of pain they caused.

Telushkin said that in many cases where forgiveness has not been requested but the pain is explained and the action forgiven, the individual who inadvertently caused the pain is astonished by the results of the behavior and is genuinely apologetic.

It's good for people to know the results of their words and deeds, for how can they be expected to improve if they have no idea of their unintended consequences?

REGARDING the idea that some types of forgiveness are forbidden, Telushkin began with an example: Pope John Paul II's address to the world following the Sept. 11 attacks asked everyone to pray for those who were murdered, and then asked for "mercy and forgiveness for those who carried out this terrible act."

Telushkin said it is not the place of anyone except those murdered to offer forgiveness for their deaths. He did add that those who lost loved ones can offer forgiveness for their own pain, but not for the murders themselves.

This is what is meant by the injunction against offering forgiveness for acts of cruelty perpetrated against someone else.

Telushkin has written books on ethics, humor and history. *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People and Its History* is an accessible and intelligent look at history from the Bible to the 20th century.

He is also the author of the Rabbi Daniel Winter series of mystery novels.

His latest book, *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson: the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History*, is due out next month.

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