



70 Days for 70 Years

Remember the past to build the future

Sara Yoheved Rigler

The Struggle and Freedom of Asking and Giving Forgiveness

It was not a demonstration. The posters billed it as a *Maleve Malka* – a Saturday night music fest to escort out the Shabbos Queen, accompanied by my husband's klezmer band and circle dancing. True, the location chosen was an abandoned cul-de-sac a block away from Orient House, the infamous P.L.O. headquarters in East Jerusalem. True, the point was to assert Jewish sovereignty in all of Jerusalem.

True, the unveiling of the secret Oslo Accords eight months before had been followed by a series of massive demonstrations, which often deteriorated into hair-raising scenes of police brutality, complete with water hoses aimed at protesters' eyes. But this was not a demonstration. No placards, no speeches. Rather, an air of family festivity, with children and elderly people aplenty. I was glad I had come to hear my husband play.

While the band waited on the makeshift stage for the generator to be delivered, the organizers set up loudspeakers on high poles around the perimeter of the crowd. People conversed easily with a squad of border policemen, the paramilitary force known as the heavies of the defense establishment, whom we assumed were there to keep the Jews and nearby Arabs peacefully separate.

Finally, the music started, a lilting Klezmer tune. In the center of the crowd, a large circle of men joined hands and began to dance.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, the border policemen charged into the crowd, swinging billy clubs and beating everyone in their path. Amidst horrified screams and cries, they reached the generator and unplugged it. The music stopped mid-note.

Several policemen jumped onto the stage, grabbing clarinets and guitars out of the hands of the musicians. Other troops started to pull down the loudspeakers. Standing near the stage, in shock and horror, I noticed an old man positioned directly under one of the loudspeakers. I shouted to warn him, but could not be heard over the din of shrieks and wails. I ran toward him, but was cut off by the charge of a giant horse, twice the size of any horse I had ever seen.

Terrified, I retreated toward the stage, which by now was encircled by border policemen to prevent the musicians from escaping.

I was a veteran of anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in America in the sixties, but I had never in my life experienced such ruthless police tactics — and without any justification! Unnerved, I started yelling at the police: "What are you doing? How can Jews act this way? You are Jews, but you're worse than the American police!"

He pushed all my Zionist buttons: "You don't belong here. Go back to America!"

One tall, fortyish policeman with short, cropped hair hollered back at me: "You don't belong here. You're an American! Go back to America!"

He had pushed all my Zionist buttons.irate, I slapped him across the face.

He gestured to the policeman next to him. Each grabbed one of my forearms and pulled me away. The one I had slapped dug his fingers into my arm so forcefully that even a month later five bruises on my right forearm would testify to his brutality. They dragged me some twenty meters to a paddy wagon, then threw me into it so roughly that they tore my skirt and cut a three-inch gash into my knee.

At the police station, a police officer asked me what had happened. I told him the whole story: how without warning the police had attacked the crowd, how they had endangered an elderly man, how I had been prevented from saving him by giant horses, how a border policeman had insulted me, how I had reacted, and how, instead of a civil, "You're under arrest," they had brutally manhandled me. After signing my deposition, I was sent home.

That was the last I heard of the matter for over two years. One day, a registered letter arrived for me. I had been charged with striking a policeman, and was summoned to appear in court.

I hired a lawyer, a balding, religious man. "In Israel," he quietly informed me, "there is a mandatory prison sentence for striking a policeman."

"What?" I answered, appalled. "I'm the one who was hurt. I still have the scar on my knee. Besides, he provoked me. He insulted me, told me to go back to America."

"Nonetheless," the lawyer answered calmly, "You confessed to striking a policeman. Why did you incriminate yourself?"

"What did you expect me to do?" I countered with righteous indignation. "Lie?"

"You could have kept silent."

Silence? It never occurred to me (and rarely does)!

"The only way to keep you out of jail is for you to throw yourself on the mercy of the court. It's a first offence. You have a pretty good chance of getting off, if you humbly admit you made a mistake and promise the court you won't repeat it."

It was a few weeks before Rosh Hashanah, and I had been studying the steps of *Teshuva* (repentance):

1. **Admit the sin to God**
2. **Regret**
3. **Resolve not to repeat it**

The lawyer's prescription sounded eerily similar.

But why should I do *teshuva*? I hadn't done anything wrong! I was the aggrieved party! I mulled over the matter for a couple minutes. Then, protesting my innocence (after all, I had been sorely provoked), I told the lawyer I would do whatever he said. I didn't want to go to jail.

When our meeting was over, I gathered up my things to leave. "You know," the lawyer said parenthetically, more like a brother than a lawyer, "you were wrong."

"But he insulted me!" I defended myself.

"If you're walking down the street and someone comes up to you and insults you," the lawyer said quietly, "do you have the right to slap him?"

I stared across the desk at the lawyer's penetrating expression. It was the first time it occurred to me that perhaps I *had* done something wrong.

If I *had* done something wrong, then I would have to do *teshuva*.

All the way home I weighed the matter. In three weeks it would be Rosh Hashanah, when every soul stands before God in judgment. I was accountable for my actions. If I *had* done something wrong, then I would have to do *teshuva*. But the three steps of confession, regret, and resolution for the future suffice only in sins against God. Sins against another person require two additional steps: asking forgiveness and (when applicable) making restitution. With horror it dawned on me: If it really was wrong to slap the border policeman, I would have to *ask his forgiveness*.

As soon as I got home, I telephoned my rebbetzin. "Of course," she confirmed in a plain-as-the-nose-on-your-face tone, "hitting someone, except in self-defense, is prohibited by the Torah. Even if he did something wrong, it doesn't give you license to do something wrong. Of course, you have to do *teshuva* for striking him."

"Including asking his forgiveness?" I asked, aghast.

"Of course," she replied. "You know God doesn't grant forgiveness until the person you've wronged forgives you."

Long after hanging up, I sat there holding the telephone. How was I even supposed to find the border policeman? I didn't know his name. And if I did manage to find him and ask him for forgiveness, now, with the trial pending, he would certainly suspect that I was trying some extra-judicial trick to get him to reduce the charges against me. He would certainly hang up on me.

The next day, I called the lawyer. "Is there any way to find out the name of the border policeman I slapped?"

"Sure," came the immediate response. "It's right here on your charge sheet... Ronny Tuito."

I gulped. That was too easy. "Well, how can I talk to him?"

"Just look up his number in the phone book," was his sanguine reply.

It took me a week, but, with Rosh Hashanah swiftly approaching, one day I summoned my resolve and looked up "Tuito, Ronny" in the Jerusalem phone book. There were two listings under that name. Apprehensively, I dialed the first number. A man answered the phone.

"I...I'm looking for Ronny Tuito, the border policeman," I stammered.

"That's my cousin. 581-3796."

Great, I thought. Now I have no excuse not to call. I dialed the number. To my great relief, an answering machine picked up. I hung up. What time of day would a border policeman be home anyway?

The next evening, I tried again. A man's voice answered. "Is this Ronny Tuito?" I asked, nervously.

"Yes," came the crisp Hebrew reply.

I took a deep breath and blurted out the speech I had rehearsed thirty times. "Two years ago at a *Maleve Malka* near Orient House, I slapped you. What I did was wrong, and I'm sorry. Since Rosh Hashanah is approaching, and I'm more afraid of the Heavenly Court than the earthly court, I'm calling to ask you for forgiveness."

Only a moment elapsed before I heard his cursory response: "I forgive you."

Relief hit me like an avalanche. Of course! This is a Jewish country. Even a non-religious border policeman understands the dynamics of asking and granting forgiveness before the High Holidays. I felt cleansed, as if a piece of gum which had stuck to my blouse was suddenly gone.

"Thank you," I breathed. "And may you and your family be inscribed for a year of life, good health, and blessings."

"Thank you. You and your family, too," he said politely, and hung up.

Postscript: A month later I was sentenced to two months, suspended sentence on condition that I didn't hit any more policemen for a three-year probation period. And I didn't.

Asking Forgiveness

It's hard to ask forgiveness. Sometimes the mechanics are sticky: locating a person from our past, initiating the conversation in privacy, getting the offended person to listen to us.

Harder still are the inner dynamics: Examining actions we would rather forget; cutting through the rationalizations to admit that what we did was wrong, despite the provocations and extenuating circumstances; and humbling ourselves to ask for a gift (forgiveness is always a gift) from someone to whom we may have felt morally superior.

To forgive is tantamount to executing a divine function.

God promises us atonement on Yom Kippur. Atonement is a wondrous, miraculous reality that bleaches out even the most stubborn stains on our soul. Atonement reconciles us with God and our own highest selves. To procure atonement, all we have to do is *teshuva*, the sincere changing direction of our heart and actions. Asking forgiveness, one of the five steps of *teshuva* for a sin against another human being, is a relatively small price to pay for the soul-cleansing available to us on Yom Kippur.

And if the person we have hurt refuses to grant us forgiveness? The Torah requires that we humbly, sincerely ask for forgiveness three separate times. After that, the onus is on the one who refuses to forgive.

Granting Forgiveness

When asked for forgiveness, a Jew is enjoined to forgive. This can be the hardest act of all. After all, we may have been grievously hurt, in body, mind, or heart. To forgive is tantamount to executing a divine function. It leaves the offender off the hook (presuming he or she has done the other required steps of *teshuva* which would exonerate the offender before God).

A Jew is not required to forgive an offender who has not undertaken the steps of *teshuva* such as regret and concrete change. A recent article in the *L.A. Times* about the aunt of an abducted, molested child unilaterally forgiving the pedophile who raped her young niece is an anathema from the Jewish viewpoint. Forgiving unrepentant evil only encourages its continuance.

On the other hand, nothing more quickly procures divine forgiveness for our sins, both those we remember and those we don't, than forgiving those who have sinned against us. The principle of *mida k'neged mida* means that we get what we give. When we stand before God on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur our most compelling defense is: "I have forgiven those who sinned against me. Please forgive me in turn."

The Gate of Forgiveness

From the time she was three years old and until she reached puberty, Cindy was sexually molested by her uncle, with the knowledge of her alcoholic mother.

When Cindy grew up, she converted to Judaism. Eventually she married a man who was also a sexual abuser, and had two children with him. She would later say, "I married my mother in drag."

The only contact Cindy had with her mother as an adult was the time her mother telephoned and asked for a meeting. Was she finally repentant? Cindy wondered on the way to the meeting. Did she finally regret all the damage she had done her daughter?

They met at a secluded place on the beachfront. Cindy's mother withdrew some papers from a manila envelope and explained that she had applied for a job in the school system, but had been turned down because of the charge of child molestation on her record. Now she asked Cindy to officially deny the charges, to claim she had lied, so that her mother could get the job she sought.

Cindy threw the papers in her mother's face and stormed away. She did not see nor speak to her mother for the next eleven years.

During that time, Cindy fled from her husband, taking her children with her. For a year they hid on a remote island in the South Pacific, a two-hour boat ride away from the nearest grocery store. Eventually they made their way to Israel.

After seven years of living underground under an assumed identity, Cindy was discovered. In the court case that followed, the Israeli judge found in her favor; she would not send Cindy nor her children back to America.

In the course of the court battle, Cindy's husband came to Israel to testify against her. He was slapped with an injunction prohibiting him from leaving the country until he gave Cindy a *get*, a Jewish writ of divorce.

On a Monday afternoon two weeks ago, Cindy was notified by her lawyer that she would be receiving her *get* the next afternoon. Tuesday morning Cindy celebrated by telephoning her mother.

"You did not protect me as you should have," Cindy cried into the telephone. "But you gave me life. And now, after all these years, I love my life. I have a beautiful family. I love my children. And today I'll have my *get*. I'm grateful to God. And I'm grateful to you for giving me life. I forgive you for everything you did to me."

Every time we forgive, we open up the gates of forgiveness in the world.

Tearfully, she added: "You see things differently at forty than you do at twenty-five."

Cindy's mother sobbed back into the telephone: "You see things differently at sixty than you do at forty."

They spoke for two hours. When they hung up, Cindy said: "I feel like I received a *get* from my mother on the same day I'm receiving a *get* from my husband. I feel freer than I ever have in my life."

Every time we forgive, we open up the gates of forgiveness in the world. And we are the first ones to walk through.