



Granting Forgiveness Rabbi David Silverberg

Among the numerous narratives presented in Parashat Vayera we find the story of Avraham's experiences while living in Philistine territory. Avimelekh, the region's ruler, abducts Sara, Avraham's wife, and God punishes Avimelekh by causing all the women in his family and palace to become infertile. Avimelekh, who beheld a nocturnal vision of God urging him to return Sara, beseeches Avraham to pray on his behalf. Avraham consents, at which point God cures all the women in the palace (20:17).

A famous Mishna in Masekhet Bava Kama (92a) cites this verse as the source for the obligation to grant forgiveness to offenders. The Mishna comments, "And from where [do we know] that if he [the victim] did not forgive him, he is cruel? As it says (Bereishit 20:17), 'Avraham prayed to God, and God healed Avimelekh and his household...'" Avraham's willingness to forgive Avimelekh for the wrongs he committed, and to even pray on his behalf, teaches us the value of forgiving those who have wronged us.

Maimonides cites this *halakha* in no fewer than three different contexts in his *Mishneh Torah*. In Hilkhot Dei'ot (6:6), he discusses the importance of granting forgiveness amidst his discussion of proper character traits and behavior. Proper conduct includes displaying flexibility and forbearance, the willingness to tolerate other people's mistakes rather than resent them. Maimonides returns to this topic in Hilkhot Teshuva (2:10), where he codifies the requirement to ask the victim for forgiveness as part of the *teshuva* obligation in cases of interpersonal offenses. It appears that *Halakha* calls upon the victim to cooperate in the culprit's process of repentance, by granting forgiveness as is necessary for the offender to achieve atonement. Finally, Maimonides codifies this *halakha* a third time in Hilkhot Chovel U-mazik (5:10), in a context similar to that in Hilkhot Teshuva. There Maimonides deals with an offender's monetary obligations in cases of damage or injury, and adds that one must ask for forgiveness in addition to making monetary restitution. Once again, the victim, for his part, must enable the guilty party to fulfill this stage of the process by showing tolerance and granting forgiveness.

In Hilkhot Teshuva, Maimonides emphasizes the fact that granting forgiveness is a "Jewish" trait: "This is the way of the Israelite people and their principled heart. But the idolaters...are not like this; rather, they preserve their wrath eternally. It thus says (Shemuel II 21:2) with regard to the Givonites because they did not forgive or grant pardon, 'and the Givonites were not among the Israelites'." The Givonites were a group of Canaanites living among *Benei Yisrael* since the days of Yehoshua, and Shaul, during his reign, had killed a number of members of this tribe. (Different theories have been suggested to explain when and why this occurred.) We read in the Book of Shemuel II (21) that God brought a drought upon the Land of Israel as punishment for Shaul's crimes. David, who had since assumed the throne, asked the Givonim what they

demanded in exchange for their forgiveness, and they demanded the execution of Shaul's remaining offspring. In this context, as Maimonides cites, the verse emphasizes the fact that the Givonim were not of Israelite origin. Maimonides explains this as an indication that members of *Benei Yisrael* would have granted forgiveness without any demands – let alone that they would not have demanded human lives.

Maimonides viewed the conduct of the Givonites as the polar opposite and antithesis of Avraham's conduct, noted by the Mishna. Avraham prayed to the Almighty on behalf of his nemesis, who abducted his wife, pleading with God to remove the plague that He had brought upon Avimelekh's palace as retribution. The Givonites, by contrast, specifically demanded a series of executions as compensation for crimes committed years earlier. Avraham establishes the precedent of wishing and even praying for the welfare of those who have wronged us, eliminating harsh, vindictive feelings and replacing them with the same care and concern which we feel toward our loved ones. This is, in Maimonides' words, "the way of the Israelite people and their principled heart."

Chazal describe the Jewish people as "compassionate, timid and doers of kindness." "Compassion" means, at least in part, accepting and tolerating the frailties, flaws and imperfections of our peers. Just as we ask God to show us compassion and not repay the wrongs we commit against Him, we, too, must show compassion to others and be prepared to forgive the wrongs committed against us.