

Among the major themes of this season are *humility, forgiveness, and reconciliation*. These are often hard. Humility, and seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, imply willingness to be embarrassed. On granting forgiveness and reconciliation: If someone, with whom I'm not close, apologizes for having offended me, I find it much easier to mouth "OK" than to let go of the hurt, although I know I must do the latter to effect real forgiveness. How easy it is to think the apologist is insincere; how easy it is to think we know what the other party really thinks; how often it is that we are wrong in such an assessment. Life, and our fellow human beings, are complex. Hillel cautioned us: "Do not judge your fellow human being till you stand in his situation."¹

Mordecai Kaplan, longtime professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary before becoming the patriarch of the Reconstructionists, wrote: "When you are on the point of losing faith in mankind, think of the following:

1. I am disgusted with the evil and corruption I see about me.
2. Since I react that way, I myself cannot be entirely bad.
3. Let me concentrate on the good that I myself possess.
4. That should lead me to have some faith at least in myself.
5. But I am an average person, no different from most people.
6. They, too, most likely have some good in them.
7. By concentrating on the good in them, I am bound to develop at least some faith in most people."²

We recently lost a *gadol hador*, a giant of our generation, Elie Wiesel, known as an author, champion of human rights, and Nobel Peace Prize winner. Perhaps less well known is that Elie Wiesel was a major scholar and teacher of Jewish literature and sacred texts. In his *Sages and Dreamers*³, Elie's chapter on Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah draws on Talmudic accounts of disputes between Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Joshua ben Hananyah to teach us about humility, forgiveness, reconciliation, and complexity.

The short version: A student asks Rabbi Joshua if the ma'ariv (evening) service is compulsory. Rabbi Joshua replies that it is not. The student then seeks Rabban Gamliel's opinion. Rabban Gamliel says ma'ariv is mandatory. Informed of Rabbi Joshua's opposing opinion, Rabban Gamliel bids the student to raise the question at the next gathering of rabbis and students. The scholars arrive, the student states his question, and, prior to discussion, Rabban Gamliel announces that ma'ariv is obligatory. He then asks if anyone else has something to say about the matter. Rabbi Joshua says there is no disagreement. Rabban Gamliel loses his cool and demands that Rabbi Joshua stand while informing all that Joshua had previously stated that ma'ariv is not obligatory. Rabban Gamliel proceeds with a lecture, before the incident is closed and discussion moves to other topics; all the while, Rabbi Joshua is left standing. The crowd, protesting Rabbi Joshua's public humiliation, removes Rabban Gamliel as *Rosh Yeshiva*, head of the academy at Yavneh. The young Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah becomes the *Rosh Yeshiva*.

Later on the same day, the scholars take up the validity of a certain person's conversion to Judaism. Rabban Gamliel says the conversion is not valid. Rabbi Joshua disagrees. Back-and-forth arguments are given and Rabbi Joshua prevails in this dispute. Seeing this, Rabban Gamliel decides to visit Rabbi Joshua at his home to seek forgiveness. He sees the walls of Rabbi Joshua's home are blackened and asks if Rabbi Joshua is a blacksmith. Rabbi Joshua erupts: "Woe to the generation whose leader you are, woe to the ship who claims you as its captain, for you do not even know how students of Torah make a living, and what makes them suffer." But Rabban Gamliel eventually wins Rabbi Joshua's forgiveness, which Rabbi Joshua proves by persuading the academy to restore Rabban Gamliel as *Rosh Yeshiva*. So Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaryah will not be hurt by his removal from the office of *Rosh Yeshiva*, he is honored with a Shabbat *d'var Torah* every third week.

¹ *Pirkai Avot* 2:5. See, e.g., *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*, p. 261

² Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Not So Random Thoughts*, Reconstructionist Press, New York, 1966, p. 80

³ Elie Wiesel, *Sages and Dreamers*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1991

To help understand this story, it's important to know that Rabban Gamliel was the *Nasi* – presiding officer of the court/legislature of Israel's self-government under Roman rule - as well as *Rosh Yeshiva*. Also, Rabbi Joshua was not merely a face in the crowd; he was a revered teacher with the title of *Av Bet Din*, literally the father of the court, a position second only to Rabban Gamliel's. Also recall that this takes place only a small number of decades after the Romans destroyed the Temple.

Concerning Rabbi Joshua, Elie Wiesel writes:

... consider Rabbi Yeoshua's apparent weakness of character [in the discussion of *ma'ariv*].... [He] understood that, having lost its sovereignty, the people of Judea needed another institution to symbolize royalty and authority; in effect, the president had succeeded the kings and princes of Judea and Israel. Thus, for a scholar to disobey his leader would be tantamount to incite general disobedience: the office would be adversely affected and so would the Jewish people.... once the president made his view publicly known, he refused to disagree with him, for the president represented Jewish continuity: to question his authority ultimately meant to doubt that of Moses.⁴

Elie Wiesel supports this view of Rabbi Joshua by observing that once Rabban Gamliel had been demoted, Rabbi Joshua challenged him, both in the matter of the questioned conversion and in his home, showing that Rabbi Joshua was not weak and might have prevailed had he challenged Rabban Gamliel concerning *ma'ariv*.

Concerning Rabban Gamliel, Elie Wiesel writes:

... he had but one obsession: to maintain and preserve the integrity and the sovereignty of Jewish law and life.... Was he always liked? Never mind. He looked for continuity, not popularity. And if that sometimes meant hurting his friends, he would hurt them – and himself.... The price of leadership was to accept his condition. To hurt and to be hurt. That may be why he did not attempt to argue with those who removed him from office.... Of course, he could have turned to Rome, but Rome's support was not what he wanted. He wanted to be Israel's spokesman to Rome, not the other way around.

... the most touching and gratifying element in the story... Rabban Gamliel did not go home; he remained in the House of Study.... he had just been humbled in public – and yet, instead of brooding or showing dismay, he stayed at the academy and took part – on that very day – in the scholarly discussions, thus teaching his peers and their disciples a magnificent lesson in humility.... he pushed his humility to the limit when he later decided to ... apologize to ... Rabbi Yeoshua.⁵

Humility, forgiveness, and reconciliation are hard, but they are especially our responsibility at this time of the year. Let's all work on them, using the examples of Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Joshua. Shabbat Shalom

⁴ Elie Wiesel, *ibid.*, p. 205

⁵ Elie Wiesel, *ibid.*, p. 206