

Turning Forgiveness Inside Out: Lessons from Sarah, Hagar, and Pixar

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Sermon, 5776

Josh Fixler

We haven't known each other very long, but already I'd guess it's not going to shock you to learn that I was a talkative kid. I know... surprising. My parents like to say that I learned to talk, but I never learned to shut up. My father came to spend the High Holidays with me. Go ask him. I'm sure he'll gladly share plenty of embarrassing stories.

Being a good talker when you are a kid is great. But sometimes it got me into trouble and annoyed the kids around me. For instance, there was one kid, with whom I carpoled, and I think I drove him... batty. So one night in middle school, he and a friend snuck out and TP'ed our house. It's a pretty normal middle school prank, except that they got carried away. TP'ed is an understatement. There were also eggs thrown. And some not terribly clever things written on the sidewalk... in mustard. So parents got involved, and the community police officer, and there were consequences. I remember my family was deeply hurt that someone we saw every day would act out at us so aggressively.

As part of his punishment, the kid had to write us a letter of apology. I have a memory of him reading it to us. I don't know if he meant it, or if it was just one of those annoying apology letters you're forced to write when you mess up as a kid. I imagine I probably said, "I forgive you." I know I didn't mean it. For years afterwards, when I'd see him in the halls at school or had a class with him, I'd be anxious. It took a long time to let go of the hurt of that silly middle school prank taken a step too far.

I talk a lot. But if there are three words that are difficult to say and really mean, they are "I forgive you."

The theme of the High Holy Days is t'shuvah. It's repentance and return. Not just to God, but also to each other. Many people make a spiritual practice of taking these ten days to seek out the people they have hurt and ask them for forgiveness. But there is a second half of that equation, one which we often overlook. We may be approached by friends and family asking for our forgiveness. How can we make a spiritual practice of forgiving? It can be difficult to forgive. But how can we ask God to forgive us if we are not prepared to do so for others?

Jewish tradition has an impressive amount to say about forgiveness. There are whole treatises on the how to apologize and when to grant forgiveness.¹ As I examined these texts, however, I discovered one topic which consistently gets glossed over. We read about if and when to forgive, but very little about how to forgive and really mean it. How do we convince our hearts to forgive? What should we do when we can't let go of a hurt, even though we know that hanging on is causing us further pain. There is a Buddhist idea that holding on to anger is like holding a hot coal, waiting to throw it at the person who hurt you, and after while discovering

¹ In particular, I would point people at this Article by Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig: *Jewish Laws of Repentance*. The Living Pulpit, April-June 1994, p. 20-21 and this fantastic lecture on Forgiveness, sponsored by Machon Hadar featuring Rabbis Joseph Telushkin and Shai Held: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNa5rB2lzZk>

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that you are burning your own hand.² What I want to look at this morning is method for dropping the coal.

Now I'm not talking about acts that are unforgivable, where one person is abusive or where the pattern of behavior has not changed. Jewish tradition certainly does not compel forgiveness in those situations. But what I want to talk about today what happens when we know, intellectually, that there is something we want to forgive, but the hurt is still swirling around inside of us, and we cannot expel it. If we are going to make this season a season of true forgiveness, then we are going to need tools to turn forgiveness from an aspiration into a reality.

And this is where I have some good news. This past summer, after years of work, researchers in California have released a new tool that is going to revolutionize forgiveness. A famous and powerful collaborative of scientists, engineers, and artists have come together to develop a new framework for understanding people's emotional lives. I'm speaking, of course, about the Pixar movie: Inside Out.

If you have not seen it yet, I have two things to say to you. First, don't worry; I'm going to try not to spoil it. And second. Go see it! It's terrific. It's funny. It's about an awesome teenage girl who isn't a princess. And it's an enlightening take on what is happening inside each of our minds.

So for those of you who haven't seen it yet, let me sum up the basics. I promise, no spoilers beyond what was in the previews:

The movie takes place inside the mind of an 11 year old girl named Riley. We learn that inside Riley's mind is a command center called "Headquarters" (get it?) and that the command center is run by 5 characters, each one a different emotion – they are Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust. These five emotions work at a Control Panel that drives Riley through her days. They all work together to make her who she is. None are bad or good. They are just the elements of her, and through the movie, all the emotions are trying hard, each in their own way, to help Riley traverse the difficulties of life. Sometimes one of the emotions seizes the Control Panel, and chaos ensues, but when the emotions are working together, Riley is a well-adjusted kid. Pixar based this on real science, particularly on the work of Dr. Paul Ekman, who found that each of us has 6 main emotions. (for the film, Surprise got combined with Fear).

And this realization, that we all have these characters in our heads, this Inside Out Thinking, helps us to understand the emotions behind other people's actions. Because here's what I think makes forgiveness so hard: Steven Covey teaches that we tend to "judge ourselves by our

² Some attribute this idea to the Buddhaghosa, a 5th century Buddhist commentator:
<http://fakebuddhaquotes.com/holding-on-to-anger-is-like-grasping-a-hot-coal-with-the-intent-of-harming-another-you-end-up-getting-burned/>

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intentions, and others by their behavior.”³ We know about ourselves that we are complicated people. We look at our own actions, and we see that complexity. I know I cut that guy off in traffic, but I was late picking the kids up at school because a work meeting ran long. And I remember feeling bad about it afterwards and hoping that the person I cut off knew that I was sorry. But when someone cuts me off in traffic... They are self-centered, inconsiderate jerks. Or worse. We rarely think about the intentions and motivations of those around us. It’s the actions we hold on to. It’s the actions that are hard to forgive.

Inside Out Thinking gives us a path towards forgiveness. Robert Enright and Joanna North, in their research on forgiveness, show that an important phase of forgiveness is separating the wrongdoer from the wrong-deeds he has done.⁴ But this is difficult to do. Pixar has given us a tool to try and peer into the other person’s brain, and see the intentions behind their deeds. What drove them to do what they did? Was it Fear? Sadness? Anger? I think it does not even matter if the story we create about their intentions is correct. Just the thought process that asks what’s going on in their brains opens up huge possibilities for empathy and forgiveness. The second we start thinking this way, we see the complex people behind the actions. People are easier to forgive than actions.

Let me give you an example of how Inside Out Thinking works: I have a hard time forgiving Sarah’s actions in this morning’s Torah portion. I feel profoundly challenged to try and make sense of the way Sarah behaves, in particular, the way she convinces Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael. The ancient commentators struggled with this text, too. Nachmanides calls Sarah’s treatment of Hagar “her sin.”⁵ Radak said she violates both her moral obligation and basic expectations of human kindness.⁶ But Inside Out Thinking can help me see the complexity behind the actions. Here’s what I imagine:

Sarah is sitting at the party for Isaac’s weaning. She is exhausted. Remember, she’s a 90 year old, with a baby. She looks across the tent, past all the people mingling, she spies a teenage Ishmael, playing with her baby Isaac.

At headquarters, inside Sarah, the 5 emotions are also looking out on this scene. Isaac is the symbol of Sarah’s Joy. When he was born, she named him קִנְיָה – laughter. She says “God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”⁷ These have been long and difficult years. Sarah had traveled with Abraham and supported him through all his trials,

³ The SPEED of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything by Stephen M. R. Covey, p 13

⁴ As explained by Professor Lews Newman: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scW51DpWsHM>

⁵ Nachmanides on Gen 16:6

⁶ Radak on Gen 16:6. Note that both the Nachmanides and Radak commentaries are on the earlier part of the Sarah and Hagar saga in Genesis 16, not Genesis 21, but I think the sin extends from one incident to the other. If Sarah “dealt harshly” enough with Hagar to make her leave in Genesis 16, the banishing her in Genesis 21 is even more harsh.

⁷ Gen 21:6

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through all their hardships. And all the time she hoped that God would keep the promise, that there would be a next generation. Now God had answered her prayers at last!

But Sadness also sees Ishmael with Isaac. She sees that he is part of her family, and yet separate. Sadness remembers that day, 15 years ago, when Sarah lost hope. When she felt like God was not keeping the promise to give Abraham an heir, and she took matters into her own hands. She remembers how she told Abraham to go to her handmaiden, Hagar. Ishmael is the constant reminder of that decision. Sadness looks out at him, the symbol of her pain, of her feelings of inadequacy, of her faltering faith. Then Sadness looks over at Disgust. Is this a decision we can live with, they wonder. Can we bear this daily reminder?

Then Fear speaks up. It's the fear that all parents feel when they look at their babies. It is the fear for the future. How can Sarah best provide for her son? How can she help him to find his place in the world? She knows that as the second-born son he gets almost no inheritance. Fear asks, "How can I make sure my son has a chance to thrive?"

That's when Anger steps in. "Why should Ishmael inherit?" Anger asks. Anger remembers how Hagar had teased Sarah during her pregnancy, how her own slave had embarrassed her, and how she had tolerated it so that Abraham could have an heir.⁸ Now, she has a son of her own. "This is his time," Anger says.

Sadness tries to speak up. Sadness knows how much Abraham loves Ishmael, how he would be heartbroken to send the boy and his mother away. But Sadness's objections get drowned out by Anger and Fear.

Together, they make a decision. It's not a decision Sarah will be proud of. But it's her decision, and it comes out of these emotions: Joy at the birth of her son. Sadness and Disgust at her faltering faith. Fear for the boy's future, and Anger at the perceived injustice done to her by Hagar and maybe even by God. These are the emotions that are driving when Sarah approaches Abraham and asks him to banish Hagar and Ishmael. Like us, Sarah is human. Like us, her emotions drive her. Like us, her emotions help her to make choices, not always the best choices, but choices she must live with.

Reading the story with Inside Out Thinking enables me to try and move from judging Sarah's actions, which seem so harsh and so cruel, to trying to understand and forgive her for what is happening inside that might lead her to those actions. It does not make the actions any less problematic, but it helps me to remember that there is a human being behind those actions, someone who is trying, and maybe failing, but someone who is making hard choices. Inside Out Thinking is not about excuse making. I am not giving Sarah a pass on her actions by saying, "Anger made her do it." Rather, I am trying to acknowledge her in her complexity and humanity. And seeing Sarah this way helps me to forgive her.

⁸ See Gen 16:4 Hagar's "mistress was lowered in her esteem"

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This is the season of repentance. Today we begin 10 days of introspection, of taking an accounting of actions, and seeking forgiveness for the times we missed the mark. We are challenged to identify the people we have hurt, and to attempt to make things right. But it is also a season of granting forgiveness. Not for every wrong. Some acts cannot be forgiven. Or maybe it's not yet time to let go. But often, we want to forgive, but we don't know how. We want to let go, but we cannot loosen our grip. These are the situations where Inside Out Thinking comes in handy. Looking at the possible emotions behind the actions of others helps us to make sense of them. We could look at Sarah in today's story and see only the heartless action of casting out Hagar and Ishmael. Or we can try and imagine what is going on in Headquarters, to see that she is struggling with so many competing loyalties – loyalties to her son, to her husband, to her stepson, and to God. We might not be right. We are making an educated guess, at best. But attempting to understand her feelings opens us up to empathy.

What would it have meant to my middle school self if, when I said, "I forgive you" to the kid that egged my house, I had actually meant it? I would have been able to see him in the hallway, without getting tense. I would have been able to work with him in class groups without picturing my parents cleaning the mustard off the sidewalk. What would I have had to have changed so that I could have let go sooner? Maybe Inside Out Thinking would have helped. Maybe, after the initial hurt and betrayal had passed, I could have considered which of the many emotional voices in his head had driven his actions. Was it Anger? Or Disgust? Or Fear? Could this thinking help me to see him as a whole person, and not just see his actions? Could I have stopped talking long enough to try and listen to the voices in his head, and see how his unique arrangement of Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear, and Disgust made him who he was? Just like mine made me who I was? That likely would have made it easier to forgive. That likely would have made it easier to let go.

My hope for us, these High Holy Days, is that we engage in three kinds of spiritual work. First, that we spend time taking an account of where we have missed the mark this year, and, as a result, who we might have hurt. Second, that we spend some time apologizing to those we have hurt, and to God. But third, let us not forget to also be forgiving in this holy season. When people ask us, to the extent that we are able, let us try to forgive them. And, let us spend some time thinking about the people who have yet to ask for forgiveness. Who are the people who hurt us and who are now living rent free in our brains? Is it time for us to kick them out? If we can think of those people and do everything in our power to forgive and let go, I think this will be a powerful 10 days. On Yom Kippur, we are going to call upon God to forgive us, to see that we are complicated people who do not always live up to our intentions or others expectations. How can we use that model to forgive others? How can we mimic the behavior we want to see in God? On Yom Kippur Afternoon we are going to read the powerful charge of Leviticus 19. God says, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." From this we learn that we are to try and emulate God and God's holy acts. As we call on God to be compassionate and forgiving with us, let us be

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compassionate and forgiving with others. And in this way, may we all help each other to be sealed for a blessing, in the book of life. Shanah tovah.