

I'd like to share a story with you about a woman named Victoria Ruvolo. Chances are you've never heard of her. She did not invent a vaccine for an incurable disease, nor is she a candidate for high office in the Obama administration. Ms. Ruvolo is no movie mogul, not even Megan Fox's new hairdresser. Still, her incredible tale is worth telling.

In the fall of 2004, Victoria Ruvolo was minding her own business, driving her car on a Long Island roadway. A vehicle with six teenagers pulled up alongside. They were out for a night of joy riding -- an evening of "fun" that included various acts of theft and childish aggression. One of the young thugs, a fellow by the name of Ryan Cushing, conceived of the brilliant idea of throwing a frozen turkey -- which he just happened to have -- at Vicky Ruvolo's windshield. It was a direct hit. The windshield shattered as shards of glass and the 20 pound frozen bird came hurtling toward her face like a guided missile. Victoria suffered serious injury, and needed multiple surgeries to rebuild her crushed facial bones and restore her mutilated appearance.

The hoodlums were caught and tried. Ryan Cushing found himself facing a 25-year sentence for attempted murder. The prosecutor in the case sought harsh punishment for his brutality and reckless indifference to human life. Were it not for good fortune or God's grace, Ms. Ruvolo would have been dead. "This is not an act of mere stupidity," said the ADA, "This is not a seven year-old child."

It was in the courtroom that Ryan Cushing came face to face with his victim and had an opportunity to witness his gruesome handiwork. In the foyer outside, he apologized and begged her to forgive him.

Now, put yourself in Victoria Ruvolo's place . . . . Think about the months of agonizing rehabilitation, the depraved indifference of a teenage hooligan. If you were there, would you have glared? Shouted curses? Turned away with disgust? Flipped him the bird?

Any and all of those reactions would have been understandable. But Victoria Ruvolo did something else, something amazing. She forgave Ryan Cushing, cradling his head as he sobbed. According to the news report, she stroked his face and patted his back. "It's OK, its OK," she said.

“Just do something good with your life.” At Vicky’s insistence, the prosecutor granted Ryan Cushing a plea bargain: six months in jail and five years probation . . . considering the alternative, a considerable break for the young man.

Why? Why did she do it? Vicky stressed that her decision to forgive Ryan was not made blindly or passively. “I felt like I had someone’s life in my hands,” she said. “I had been through what I had to go through. I didn’t want to see a life rot away in jail. I didn’t see how that would help me move up and move forward.”

Perhaps some of you are skeptical -- by shielding the young man from the consequences of his own actions, wouldn’t this woman’s forgiveness encourage more hooliganism? After all, nothing like a 25-year sentence in the slammer to teach a punk that crime doesn’t pay.

Yet if Ryan Cushing had been incarcerated for a long period of time, chances are good that he would have learned more than a few unsavory skills behind bars. And, having served his sentence, it’s likely he would have emerged from prison, not with a sense of personal shame, but with the feeling of having done the time for the crime. Punishment is *not* synonymous with repentance, a person can easily be compelled to pay his debt to society without a shred of remorse. Indeed, American society deems the penalty of law to be an acceptable substitute for contrition. Consider the rates of recidivism that follow time spent in so-called “correctional facilities.” How often are prisons finishing schools for career criminals?

In Ryan Cushing’s case, however, it was precisely because he so richly deserved serious punishment, yet was forgiven by his victim, that he was able to grasp not only the magnitude of his sin, but the enormity of the forgiveness granted him. That a bond came to exist between victim and assailant was a far stronger corrective than a lengthy stay in an 8 x 12 jail cell.

So what ever happened to Victoria Ruvolo and Ryan Cushing? Let’s fast forward five years: Twice a month, Vicky talks to kids on probation enrolled in a local program. Called “TASTE”, the acronym stands for **T**hinking errors; **A**nger management; **S**ocial skills; **T**alking;

Empathy, and is designed for kids who have made mistakes. Each time she participates, the evening begins with a slide show of her life. Vicky watches as the image of her damaged face is projected on a large screen. The program's founder, lawyer and psychologist Robert Goldman, tells about the attack on Ms. Ruvolo and her decision to forgive Ryan Cushing. "What was she thinking?" Goldman asks. And then Vicky gets up and tells them exactly why she did what she did.

Ryan Cushing is now 22. He served a six month sentence in the Suffolk County jail and recently completed his probation. He has a full-time job, plans to complete his undergraduate degree, and is seriously contemplating a social work career with troubled teens. You see, as part of his community service requirement and at Victoria Ruvolo's insistence, Ryan was obligated to talk to kids in the TASTE program. He continues to participate, but now does so on a voluntary basis. "I keep going back on my own because I want to reach at least one kid a session in that room." he says. Vicky is never far from his mind. "She did a big thing. She did what a lot of people I know wouldn't have done. I owe her a lot," Cushing acknowledges.

Midrash offers an insightful parable into the nature of justice and mercy. Once upon a time, there was a king who owned cups made of delicate glass. Said he: "If I pour hot water into them, they will expand and shatter; yet if I pour cold water, they will contract and break." What, then, did the king do? He mixed hot and cold water, and poured it into the cups so they remained unbroken. So, too, when "The Lord God made earth and heaven" (*Genesis* 2:4). The Holy One said: "If I create the world exclusively with the attribute of mercy, its sins will be too many; but if I fashion it with the quality of justice alone, how long could the world last? So I will create the universe with both justice and mercy, may it long endure" (*Genesis Rabbah* 12:15).

The challenge, of course, is to find the proper balance between the two. When is justice called for, and when is mercy? The injuries we suffer may not be as dramatic as those inflicted upon Victoria Ruvolo, though in our minds, they're painful enough. Insults and humiliations, quarrels and betrayals of trust. To forgive or not to forgive, that is the question.

“But, rabbi, she doesn’t deserve my forgiveness; she hasn’t earned it.” -- I hear those words all the time. Yet a world of difference separates restitution and pardon. Compensation for wrongdoing can be judged and carefully calibrated; a person has either paid for his damage, or not. Forgiveness, however, cannot be correlated to an individual’s misdeed so easily. To pardon means to let go of the hurt; it is a gesture of spirit, not a calculation of payment made. To forgive doesn’t ask us to forget about justice, though it does require we forego vengeance; to give the offender a second chance . . . even when there’s no way of measuring whether or not he has earned it.

Children will often talk about second chances as exercises in magic. For kids a “do over” is a way to expunge the record, to wipe clean the slate. When youngsters shout, “It’s not fair! Let’s do it over,” what they really mean is, “Let’s erase the problem and pretend it never happened.”

Adults better understand, however, that second chances can’t turn the clock back. The passage of time brings healing to wounds, but is unable to erase the scar tissue left behind. A wife cheats on her husband and is caught. The couple may decide to give their relationship a second chance. It may even be that they achieve a stronger, closer bond, but the memory of betrayal can never be fully erased. An alcoholic who’s hit rock bottom finds a second chance through a twelve-step program. The life of a recovering alcoholic is a thousand times better than that of a drunk, but there’s no going back in time. As a wise man once noted, “When a cucumber becomes a pickle, it can never return to being a cucumber again.” Second chances can open the door to a new and improved world; what they cannot do, however, is to rewind life’s video recorder, which is ultimately a good thing. How will we ever learn from our mistakes if we don’t remember them, if there aren’t consequences to teach us about how to be better? And that, my friends, is how justice and mercy work in tandem with one another.

You may recall that *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Moses our teacher, climbed Mount Sinai not once, but twice. With disgust he shattered the *luhot ha-brit*, the Tablets of the Covenant, when he descended from Sinai the first time and found our ancestors cavorting around a Golden Calf. Though God was angry and punished the people for their sin, the Holy One forgave Israel, and invited Moses to ascend the mountain again with a second set of tablets. As for the shattered pieces of the first set, they were never discarded, but placed in the Ark next to the whole set of tablets -- a perpetual

reminder of a God who believes in second chances. Do you know the Hebrew date on which Moses came down the mountain that second time, bearing the new Tablets of the Covenant? Tradition teaches that it was on Yom Kippur, a day of judgment tempered by forgiveness.

From a theological standpoint, human beings deserve a second chance because no one does anything to earn a first chance. You heard me right: people deserve a second chance because no one does anything to earn a first chance.

The operative word here is “earn.” I don’t pretend to understand how God rewards the righteous or punish the wicked; There certainly are good people who don’t deserve their suffering, innocent children who die for no reason. These facts are undeniable. But beyond the many good people who don’t deserve their pain, there are millions and millions of us who haven’t earned in any demonstrable way the ordinary miracles of our daily existence. Each day the average adult inhales and exhales more than 21,000 times; each day our hearts beat more than 100,000 beats. Should either of those vital operations cease, that’s it -- game, set, match. Over-and-out. Done.

Is there any one here who can explain how he daily earns those 100,000 heart beats? What did any of us in this room do to deserve to be born? What did any of us do to earn the gift of waking up this morning, or yesterday, or the thousands of mornings before that? OK, you’re a law abiding person -- you mind your own business, you pay your taxes, you try to help people. Maybe you wrote a check to a charity yesterday, volunteered an hour of your time for a good cause, maybe you even helped an elderly lady across the street. Does that mean God owes you another day on earth, another day of health, another day of food, another day of family?

There are other days when our behavior is far less admirable. Perhaps you made a promise that you didn’t keep, engaged in gossip, knew the supermarket checker made a mistake in your favor but said nothing, deliberately turned away from the opportunity to perform a *mitzvah*. Surely there are days, and many of them, when our withdrawals from life’s bank of goodness exceed our deposits. Yet somehow we *still* wake up the next morning and get out of bed. There’s still food in the refrigerator and a roof over our heads. The sun may even be shining. The Psalmist got it right:

“אם עונות תשמר יה' ה' מי יעמד?” -- Who could survive, Lord, if you kept count of every sin?”  
(Psalm 130:3). Given our inevitable flaws and failures, are we really arrogant enough to claim that God owes us the countless blessings of daily life?

Our liturgy contains a beautiful prayer recited upon awakening in the morning. I have come to recite it each morning because it helps remind me that every day God gives me is a free gift. “מודה אני לפניך, מלך חי וקים, שהחזרת בי נשמתי בחמלה, רבה אמונתך” -- I am grateful to You, living, enduring Sovereign, for restoring my soul to me in compassion. Faithful are You beyond measure.”

Of course, God's beneficence exceeds the simple fact of our ability to get out of the bed in the morning. The smile of a loved one; the birth of a child; the taste of chocolate ice cream; the smell of an ocean breeze; the sight of a rainbow. The morning service puts it well, “המחדש בטובו בכל יום תמיד מעשה בראשית” -- God, in His goodness, renews the work of Creation day after day.” Friends, we haven't earned a first chance, like a kind of paycheck. These are free gifts from the God who fashioned us; they are ours to enjoy with no strings attached.

Judaism preaches the notion of *imitatio deo*, imitating the divine. As God is an אל מוחל -- a God of pardon and forgiveness, so must we be. Time and again in the Torah, God forgives humanity for its frailty -- “For God knows how we are formed; He is mindful that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14). Think about it -- it's God who creates Yom Kippur -- for our sake, not for His! In a world in which God generously gives us so many unearned gifts, in a world where the good Lord cuts us so much slack, it seems perfectly reasonable for the Almighty to expect us to extend a certain generosity of self to others. When we realize how little we do to earn the blessing of a first chance, real gratitude to God requires that we be willing to offer God's other children a second chance . . . And maybe they haven't earned our forgiveness, but be honest: have you really earned yours?

Consider this commandment of the Torah: “ואהבת, ולא תקם ולא תטר את בני עמך, ואהבת” -- לרעדך כמוך אני ה' -- You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your fellow; Love your neighbor as yourself” (*Leviticus* 19:18). The great 20th century Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, saw a vital connection between the first and second parts of the verse -- to refrain from taking vengeance or bearing a grudge is equivalent to loving one's fellow as oneself. There is a symbiotic relationship between self-care and caring for others.

In the end the desire to get even or hold a grudge doesn't simply hurt the other person, it also corrodes our own souls. Grudges are a kind of spiritual cancer, over time they can slowly poison even healthy emotional tissue. Indeed, both the *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* and the *Journal of the American Psychological Society* in recent years have featured reports on the physiological effects of grudge-holding. In a 2001 article on the subject, the researchers concluded, “Unforgiving thoughts prompted . . . significantly higher electromyogram (EMG), skin conductance, heart rate, and blood pressure changes from baseline. Forgiving thoughts prompted greater perceived control and comparatively lower physiological stress responses.” Plain and simple, in all my years as a rabbi, I have never ever seen a human being benefit from the refusal to let go of anger, a determination to hold on to resentments no matter the cost.

Maimonides teaches, “אסור לאדם שיהיה אכזרי ולא יתפייס, אלא יהיה נוח לרצות” -- וקשה לכעוס -- It is forbidden for a person to be hard-hearted and unforgiving; rather, we should be easy to appease and difficult to anger.” Jewish law maintains that, having been rebuffed after sincerely asking for pardon three times, we are no longer held liable for our our wrongdoing. Instead, the unforgiven sin is transformed into a transgression for the one who obstinately refuses to let go of his resentment. Grudges take on a life of their own, and when we deny another person forgiveness, we're actually denying ourselves the opportunity for a second chance. And in the end, that's why Vicky Ruvolo forgave Ryan Cushing. She had no say in the suffering inflicted upon her; but whether or not to continue to define herself as a victim, that *was* up to her. "I didn't want to have anybody else control my life. I put myself back in charge."

Did you ever see the movie *Field of Dreams*? The plot of the 1989 film focuses around an Iowa farmer named Ray Kinsella, played by Kevin Costner, who hears a voice saying, “If you build it, he will come.” In time, Kinsella learns that “it” refers to a baseball field in the middle of his cornfield, and at first, believes that “he” refers to Shoeless Joe Jackson, along with other members of the White Sox, accused of fixing the 1919 World Series. But the movie is just as much about Kinsella’s need to resolve his differences with the long-dead father from whom he became estranged years earlier.

The farmer heeds the mysterious voice and builds the field; and sure enough they come, these people from the past who never had a second chance to finish an unfinished game. You may remember that, at the end of the film, Kinsella learns that his dead father was really the person who was supposed to come. Together they have a catch, and share a moment of simple and beautiful reconciliation. And as the camera pans out into the evening, we see thousands of headlights silently winding their way toward that magical field. Who are the folks in those cars? In reality they are you and me, looking and searching for a field of dreams where we can give ourselves the second chance for which we desperately hunger. *Everyone* in this room has an unfinished game; maybe it’s with an estranged family member who lives hundreds of miles away, or with the person sitting next to you; maybe it’s with a loved one who is no longer alive.

But to reach that field of dreams you don’t have to wait until you get to heaven, or even travel to Iowa. It’s right here, deep, deep inside you. Nothing we do lasts forever, but there is a door in our souls that leads to an eternal world of forgiveness, the power of a loving God who can help us forgive ourselves and others, and in the process bring healing to a bruised world. To forgive is an act of faith; in God, in ourselves, in the potential we have for goodness; in our belief that, while we can’t choose what injuries we suffer, we can decide whether we will heal our hurts or allow them to rule our lives. Forgiveness is a cosmic force whose presence or absence builds communities up or tears them down with cataclysmic force. Are we willing to take a leap of faith? Are we willing to let go? If we forgive, we might just awaken the the sacred power of second chances in ourselves, in our loved ones, whether dead or living, and for all I know, maybe, just maybe, even in the players on the 1919 Chicago White Sox. If you forgive, God will come . . . if you forgive, God will surely come.