

By Rachel Gunner

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Growing up in an Orthodox Jewish home, I learned that the G-d of the Hebrews forgives those who ask for forgiveness. I had experienced love, nurturance, acceptance and, above all, a spiritual belief that I was a child of a loving G-d.

Gabriele grew up believing that the wicked burned in the fires of hell for their sins. She believed that G-d wanted the death of sinners. She struggled with the concept of forgiveness — of a mother who had betrayed the love of a child with horrific acts of abuse, and of herself, as she felt shame, guilt and humiliation and that she deserved to be punished.

This self could not handle her pain alone. Thus, 26 personalities — known as “alters” — were born, ranging from age 2 to 18, both male and female, all sharing one body. Although one of the most courageous acts of survival, dissociation also served to make each of them feel crazy and question their own reality. As each alter came to exist to protect one another, each was abused, intensifying their belief that they were bad. Their only coping mechanism was to self-mutilate and find ways to die.

How could I, a psychotherapist, help 26 wounded souls choose the concept of life? For them, life had been a journey into hell. I did not believe I had the right or power to change anyone’s spiritual teaching. But William, one of the alters, was fascinated by Judaism. He and I would share ideas and beliefs. I shared that, during the High Holy Days of Selichot, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when I prayed to G-d for forgiveness, I gained comfort and solace from the liturgy that stated:

“You (G-d) are slow to anger, ready to forgive. It is not the death of sinners you seek, but that they should turn from their ways and live.”

Help us to use our strength for good and not evil You are the source of life and blessing. Help us to choose life for our children and ourselves.

IMPASSE

This concept of life was the impasse in helping Gabriele forgive herself and others and begin to heal. Judaism believes that, once man falls, G-d can offer guidance to help him go on and seek the good. In the book of Genesis, after Jacob wrestled with the angel, he was able to live and see the sunrise, and was given a new name to symbolize his victory.

I suggested that another one of Gabriele’s alters, called Death, change her name to Hanna, a Hebrew name meaning gracious and merciful, symbolizing — as in the song “Amazing Grace” — how a lost life could be found.

Hanna would ask repeatedly, “Can G-d really forgive me/us?” She felt too flawed and unworthy. I would tell her that in the Jewish doctrines it is written that man is imperfect and has the capacity to err. As Steinberg says in Basic Judaism, “There are none on earth so righteous that they never sin.”

It was, therefore, synchronous that during Rosh Hashanah services to which I invited Hanna to attend, the Torah portion of Abraham and Isaac was being chanted. Hanna learned that, though G-d was test-

Finding key to forgiveness

ing the depth of Abraham’s willingness to abide by G-d’s commandments. G-d did not condone the killing of children. It was our rabbi who reinforced that Hanna was not responsible for the atrocities in which she was involved.

As Hanna says, “To have a rabbi who was trained in the Bible telling me that G-d could and would forgive me, and did not hold me responsible, felt like the weight of the world had been taken off my shoulders.”

She began attending sabbath services, which gave her a sense of comfort, stability and life.

“Shabbat is the day of freedom, peace, a celebration of life and creation. May it open our eyes to the goodness we have attained and our hearts to the goodness we may yet achieve.”

Although Hanna wanted to embrace these new concepts of freedom, peace, life

and goodness, and no longer believe she was doomed to hell, she remained unsure how to live life unhaunted by her past.

To that end, the rabbi recommended she partake in a Mikveh, a healing bath, as a way to separate the past from the present, and as a symbol of receiving forgiveness from G-d and from herself.

TEARS OF JOY

Hanna and I both cried for joy after a Shabbat service when she realized that she, a woman who had lived to die, now prayed to G-d to give her life. She finally realized that G-d had given her the gift of forgiveness. She learned that life is stronger than death, light can overcome darkness, and night will be followed by a new day.

Today, Hanna lives as one person filled with inner peace, hope and faith. As it is written in “On Turning”:


Now is the time for turning. ... It takes

an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking with old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong; and this is never easy. It means losing face; it means starting all over again; and this is always painful. It means saying: I am sorry. It means recognizing that we have the ability to change. ... Loving G-d, help us to turn — from callousness to sensitivity, from hostility to love, from pettiness to purpose, from envy to contentment, from carelessness to discipline, from fear to faith. Turn us around and bring us back toward You. Revive our lives, as at the beginning. And turn us toward each other, for in isolation there is no life.

Gerald Jampolski said, “Forgiveness is the key to happiness.” I would say that forgiveness is the key to life. L’chaim.

Rachel Gunner has a private psychotherapy practice in Austin. Her new book, “Beyond These Walls: The True Story of a Lost Child’s Journey to a Whole Life,” is available at www.argunbooks.com, www.amazon.com and BookPeople.com.

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