

THE SUNFLOWER LIMITS TO FORGIVENESS

Time needed	30 mins
Age range	Any teen
Background of teen	Any background
Set up	Classroom style

Goals: The Jewish approach to forgiveness, Yom Kippur cannot atone for aveiros bein adam lechavero

Relevance: Forgiveness and its limitations and yom kippur

Active Learning:

Introduce the sunflower book. Give out the dilemma sheet and read together as a class or explain in your own words.

Explain a little more about the book if necessary.

Mention that Simon Weisenthal visited the Nazi's mother but did not tell her the truth about her son.

There are a number of ways you can run this session. You can give out a few of the responses printed below and ask groups to present the view they read and discuss as a group. You can ask them to write the view of the writer on big paper and present or ask groups to circle round and read each other's papers.

You could choose not to use the views of the religious leaders and just have small groups write their own ideas down to answer the question of Weisenthal's dilemma. You could give out large paper to write on or simply run a group discussion.

Supplies needed:

1. Dilemma sheets
2. Markers and large paper

Step by step planning:

<i>Time</i>	<i>Facilitator Activity</i>	<i>Teen activity</i>
5 mins	Introduce sunflower book	
5- 10 mins	Introduce the dilemma	Read the dilemma sheet together
10 mins	Present the world leaders essays Or facilitate discussion	Work through essays Or participate in discussion
5 - 10 mins	Torah view include Heschel's essay	

Wrap up message and Torah thought:

Mishna Yoma (8:9)	מסכת יומא פרק ח
<p>"Sins between one man and his friend, Yom Kippur does not atone for until one appeases his friend."</p>	<p>עבירות שבין אדם למקום, יום הכיפורים מכפר; שבינו לבין חברו--אין יום הכיפורים מכפר, עד שירצה את חברו.</p>
Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah Perek 2, Halakha 9	רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ב הלכה ב
<p>Teshuvah and Yom Kippur only forgive for sins between Man and Hashem, for example, eating something non-kosher... However, sins between a person and his friend, for example, hurting a friend or cursing a friend, or stealing, etc. can never be forgiven until you make up to your friend what you did wrong. Even if you return the money you stole, you still have to ask for forgiveness. This is true even if you only hurt your friend through words. If your friend doesn't want to forgive you then bring three people along and apologise to your friend in front of them, with the three people encouraging him to forgive you. If your friend still refuses to forgive you, do this a second and third time. If your friend still won't forgive you then you no longer have to ask for forgiveness. He is now considered the person in the wrong for not forgiving you. However, it is your rabbi [main teacher for Torah], then you have to return to ask forgiveness even a thousand times until he forgives you.</p>	<p>אין התשובה ולא יום הכפורים מכפרין אלא על עבירות שבין אדם למקום כגון...מי שאכל דבר אסור אבל עבירות שבין אדם לחבירו כגון החובל את חבירו או המקלל חבירו או גוזלו וכיוצא בהן אינו נמחל לו לעולם עד שיתן לחבירו מה שהוא חייב לו וירצהו, אע"פ שהחזיר לו ממון שהוא חייב לו צריך לרצותו ולשאול ממנו שימחול לו, אפילו לא הקניט את חבירו אלא בדברים צריך לפייסו ולפגוע בו עד שימחול לו, לא רצה חבירו למחול לו מביא לו שורה של שלשה בני אדם מריעיו ופוגעין בו ומבקשין ממנו, לא נתרצה להן מביא לו שניה ושלישית לא רצה מניחו והולך לו וזה שלא מחל הוא החוטא, ואם היה רבו הולך ובא אפילו אלף פעמים עד שימחול לו</p>

BACKGROUND FOR THE BOOK

Put yourself in the position of a prisoner in a concentration camp. A dying Nazi soldier asks for your forgiveness. What would you do? In **The Sunflower**, Simon Wiesenthal raises that question for readers to wrestle with, and they have been passionately doing so ever since.

As a young man imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, Wiesenthal was taken one day from his labour brigade to a hospital at the request of Karl, a mortally wounded Nazi soldier. Tormented by the crimes in which he had participated, including the murder of a family with a small child, the SS man wanted to confess to--and if possible, receive absolution from--a Jew.

Wiesenthal, left the room in silence, but remained intrigued by the issues the man's request raised about the limits and possibilities of forgiveness. Must we, can we, forgive the repentant criminal, no matter how heinous the crime? Can we forgive crimes committed against others? What do we owe the victims?

Twenty-five years after the Holocaust, Wiesenthal asked leading intellectuals what they would have done in his place. Collected into one volume, their responses became one of the most enduring documents of Holocaust literature and a touchstone of interfaith dialogue. Their answers reflect the teachings of their diverse beliefs, and remind us that Wiesenthal's question is not limited only to events of the past.

Simon Wiesenthal's story ends by inviting the reader to change places with him: "Ask yourself the crucial question, 'what would I have done?'" I find it impossible to answer this question. As an outsider to the Shoah twice over—first, as one who was not there, secondly, as a non-Jew—neither the most vivid imagination nor the deepest empathy can enable me to experience even remotely the horror in the midst of which the victims lived and died. Nor can the skill with which Wiesenthal tells this highly dramatic story bridge the gap. I shall therefore, instead, give my reaction to Simon's response to the dying SS man's wish.

Some might call it *lack of response*, since Simon leaves the room in silence. But I find him responding throughout, again and again: allowing the SS man to hold on to his hand, remaining seated on the bed when revulsion—at times fear—make him want to leave, chasing away the fly from the dying man. Simon was forced to come, he had no choice. But he chose to remain and hear Karl out. And years later, when he visited Karl's mother in Stuttgart, he made the decision not to rob the lonely old woman of the fond memories of her "good" son. All this, in my view, constitutes a significant and humane response on his part.

And yet, after leaving the room, and many times over the years since then, Simon is haunted by the question whether he should have granted Karl's request and forgiven him. The question, for me, is not whether he *should* have forgiven, but whether he *could* have done so. Was it in his power to forgive?

Over the past twenty years I have frequently used *The Sunflower* as a text in my Holocaust course; it has invariably led to animated discussions. One striking feature of these has been that, almost without exception, the Christian students come out in favor of forgiveness, while the Jewish students feel that Simon did the right thing by not granting the dying man's wish.

What is going on here? Is there a fundamental difference between Jews and Christians in their approach to the question of forgiveness? And yet, forgiveness is no Christian invention. Along with so much else in our tradition we inherited from Judaism: the image of a loving, merciful God who waits eagerly and, as it were, with open arms, to welcome back the sinner (cf. Isa. 55:6–7; Joel 2:12–13; Ps. 130:7–8, etc.). These texts from biblical tradition—and they could be multiplied many times over—are reflected also in the teachings of the rabbis. To cite just one example:

A king had a son who had gone astray from him on a journey of a hundred days. His friends said to him, "Return to your father." He said, "I cannot." Then his father sent a message to him saying, "Return as far as you can and I will come the rest of the way to you." In a similar way God says, "Return to me and I will return to you."

(Pesikta Rabbati, 184b–85a,
quoted in Harriet Kaufman,
Judaism and Social Justice, p. 29)

Jesus' well-known parable of the Prodigal Son stands squarely in this Jewish tradition. The only requirement for being forgiven by God is genuine repentance—*teshuvah*, metanoia. Such a "turning" is required by Christian as much as by Jewish tradition. Without repentance, no forgiveness.

If this is so, if both traditions believe in a merciful God, if both stress the need for repentance, why the difference in response among my students? I attribute it to two factors.

The first is what I believe to be a widespread misunderstanding among Christians of Jesus' teaching of his oft-quoted admonition to his followers in the Sermon on the Mount to "turn the other cheek" (Matt. 5:39). Jesus is here referring to wrong done *to me*, and is asking *me* not to retaliate. He is not saying that, if someone wrongs me, someone else should "turn the other cheek"; or, if another is wronged, that I should forgive the perpetrator. In other words, the call is addressed *to me* to forgive evil done *to me*. The message is the same in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us" (not, "those who trespass against others").

I believe that Christians—and non-Christians in their wake—have misread, and continue to misread, these texts, interpreting Jesus' teaching to mean that we are to forgive anyone and everyone, whatever the wrong done to anyone. The element that is lost sight of is that Jesus challenges *me* to forgive evil done *to me* (in itself quite enough of a challenge!). Nowhere does he tell us to forgive the wrong done to another. Yet, the widespread impression persists among Christians that, to be truly Christian, we must forgive, plain and simple, no matter who has been sinned against.

Applying this to Wiesenthal's story: Karl asks Simon to forgive him for the horrendous murder of innocent and helpless Jewish women, children, and men in which he, Karl, participated two years earlier, and the memory of which now tortures him so much that he cannot die in peace. But, I ask again, was it possible for Simon to grant Karl's request? And I answer quite emphatically, no. Only the victims were in a position to forgive; and they are dead, put to death in the most inhuman ways conceivable.

The second factor which may account for the difference in attitude among my students relates to the concept of atonement, or restitution. As I write these lines we are approaching Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. Long ago I learned from Jewish friends that one of the most important ways of preparing for Yom Kippur is to look back over the past year, ask forgiveness of anyone you have wronged, and make up for it in some way. Only then, Jews believe, may they come before God and hope for forgiveness. For, as the Mishnah says,

For sins against God, the Day of Atonement brings forgiveness. For sins against one's neighbor, the Day of Atonement brings no forgiveness until one has become reconciled with one's neighbor.

(Yoma 8:9, Mishnah,
quoted in Harriet Kaufman's
Judaism and Social Justice, p. 30)

I remember one friend writing forty letters between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to people she felt she had hurt in some way. This is a long way from the "penance" usually given to Catholics in the confessional, "Say an Our Father or Hail Mary"—though the origin of this custom may well have been the idea of atonement, of which hardly a vestige is left nowadays.

Again, coming back to our story: Karl cannot atone for his crime, since the victims are dead. And Simon cannot forgive Karl in their name. It is helpful here to read Abraham Heschel's response (see pp. 170–71).

One concluding thought. Simon could perhaps have told Karl: "There is no way I can forgive you, since I cannot, dare not, speak in the name of the murdered Jews. But the God you believe in, and I too, is infinitely merciful, and asks of us only to repent of our sins. If your repentance is genuine, and I believe it is, and since you cannot make restitution, throw yourself on God's mercy."

But is not this asking a great deal—too much even—of Simon, given his situation? A situation of utter powerlessness and constant terror, totally devoid of hope, with death hanging over him every moment? Indeed, as I reread the story once more I am struck not only by the agony of the dying man, but by his obliviousness to the suffering, the inhuman condition, of Simon and his fellow Jews. The mere fact of having summoned

Simon to his room exposes the Jew to punishment, if not death. Yet Karl insists on seeing "a Jew"—any Jew—in the hope of being able to die in peace. His own suffering completely blinds him to the suffering of the Jews—not of the Jews in whose murder he participated and who continue to haunt him—but of those still alive in the camps and ghettos, also of Simon.

While this is understandable, humanly, given his deathbed agony, I am left with the question: Could Karl have done something to ameliorate their fate, or the fate of at least a few Jews, by speaking to his fellow SS instead of summoning a poor, helpless, doomed Jew to his bedside? Would such an act perhaps have constituted atonement?

Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* embodies one of the most compelling moral questions to have emerged from the Second World War. Its reissuance challenges a new generation of Jews and Christians to grapple with it. That is an event to be welcomed, painful as the grappling is likely to be for many of us.

When *The Sunflower* first appeared in English, I had not yet begun in my present position in Catholic-Jewish relations for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. I can remember being relieved that no one, then, asked me to respond to it. I would have had no way to start. In one sense, I still don't. As several of the original responders stated, no one can really know what she or he would have done in such a situation. One can only come up with what one would *hope* to have done. Nor can any Christian really speculate, as other commentators acknowledged, as to what a Jew should have done in the situation described. Christians simply do not have the experiential base to make a moral judgment on Jewish behavior with regard to the Shoah.

Those writing today do have some advantages over the original responders. One, of course, is to be able to draw on their reflections, which plumbed the depths of the issue from numerous angles. The statements supporting the narrator's silence and refusal to pretend to forgive are argued, to my mind, convincingly. Most of these are by Jewish respondents. In both Jews and Christians, however, I can discern an uneasiness with any "either/or" resolution, since repentance and reconciliation are liturgically central to both traditions as seen in the holy days of Yom Kippur and Good Friday. The difference in reaction, then, may not stem from theology as much as from existential stance.

The original collection was so trenchant and complete, it would seem that there would be little substantive to add. There is, however, much that has come out between Jews and Christians through the events of the past two decades of intense Jewish-Christian dialogue and equally intense controversy. We may well find in this second collection, then, a difference in tone and perhaps substance from the earlier responses. If so, this might be a valuable barometer of how the relationship has changed over the years.

Since the first edition of this book we have seen President Reagan's visit to Bitburg and the election of Kurt Waldheim, as well as controversies over Edith Stein, Cardinal Glemp, and the Auschwitz Convent. One of several leitmotifs running through them, often in the form of a charge by the Christian side, has been the question: Why can't they (the Jews) forgive? We Christians do. Why can't they let it alone and get on with living? In other words, the question so presciently raised and profoundly framed by Simon Wiesenthal has emerged as critical to Jewish-Christian relations.

With regard to Bitburg and Waldheim, I participated in what came to be called "the Forgiveness Debate" with two British Christian colleagues, who felt that it would be healthy for the Jewish community, if not to forget, at least to begin to forgive. I argued that it is, on the one hand, too soon for this, since the essential sign of repentance is a "turning away" (*teshuvah*) from evil and toward the good. While well begun by Christians, I believe that if I were Jewish, I would wait a generation or so to see if the official documents and statements of the Churches do, in fact, bring about the transformation toward which they confessedly aim.

Secondly, I believe it is the height of arrogance for Christians to ask Jews to forgive them. On what grounds? We can, as established by evidence of changed teachings and changed behavior, repent and work toward mutual *reconciliation* with Jews. But we have no right to put Jewish survivors in the impossible moral position of offering forgiveness, implicitly, in the name of the six million (as, again, several of the original respondents articulated quite well). Placing a Jew in this anguished position further victimizes him or her. This, in my reading, was the final sin of the dying Nazi.

Bitburg was a classic case in point. There, the Christian leader of the victorious Allies met with the Christian leader of the defeated Germans at a Nazi cemetery to "forgive" each other for what Christians had done and allowed to be done to Jews by Nazis. Jews who raised questions were dismissed by some other Christians as "unforgiving" and even "vengeful." It was a sad replay of the ancient stereotypes that had contributed to the problem in the first place.

Over the years, I have kept getting from my fellow Christians variations of the same refrain. And I keep rejecting them. I also receive the question from well-meaning Catholics and Jews: Has the Church officially apologized to the Jews yet and asked for their forgiveness? "The Church has done more," I reply, hoping that a theological response will satisfy a sociological and psychological question. It has expressed its repentance before God and before all humankind. It has refrained from asking "the Jews" (which Jews speak for all?) for "forgiveness." That could easily be seen as "cheap grace."

In 1990, at a meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (ILC) in Prague, which I had the honor to attend, Cardinal Edward I. Cassidy of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews spoke officially for the universal Church of its proper attitude after the Holocaust being one of "repentance (*teshuvah*)."

The Hebrew biblical term was used so that no one could mistake the intent. In December of 1990, at an ILC event in Rome commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council's formal declaration on the Church's relations to the Jews, Pope

John Paul II pointedly made the statement of Cardinal Cassidy his own. In the spring of 1992, the statement of repentance was made by a representative of the Spanish hierarchy before a large group of visiting American rabbis at an event in Madrid commemorating the expulsion of the Jews from Spain five hundred years earlier. In late May of 1992, it was repeated as the official position of the Catholic Church by Cardinal Cassidy at the ILC meeting in Baltimore.

These Church statements reflect sentiments expressed since the Second Vatican Council by Catholic bishops' conferences and their Protestant counterparts in the United States, Europe, Latin America, and Australia. So there is little doubt as to what official Catholic teaching is on this matter today. They represent a different sort of answer from the dilemma which *The Sunflower* so trenchantly sets up. In the person of its official representatives, the Christian community asks, through sincere repentance (the test of which is change of behavior) for forgiveness not directly of the Jews (for that would put surviving Jews in a morally intolerable situation) but of God. But one does this publicly, as the Pope has done it, since the offense is not only against the Jews but God and humanity as well.

And then the Churches must follow through with revised textbooks, improved New Testament translations, better sermons from the pulpit, and better lessons in the classroom. For the pulpit and classroom are the Church's key "delivery systems" when it comes to making a difference for the future in the long haul. Perhaps the Jewish community could offer a prayer or two that the efforts in this direction that have been begun by responsible Church leaders since World War II, and especially since the Second Vatican Council, will succeed in changing the face that Christianity presents to Judaism both radically and permanently.

MOSHE BEJSKI

The subject which I was asked to relate to is complex and complicated, not only because it involves issues of conscience, morality, psychology, religion, and belief, but also because the dilemma focuses on two individuals who met under abnormal circumstances and conditions, and who ostensibly behaved and reacted in a quasi-rational manner based on the appropriate ethical considerations of human beings created in the image of God.

What is more, I was asked to relate to these events fifty years after they took place. Can considerations and behaviors be analyzed after so many years and under conditions of peace and well-being, which include the ability to overcome the spontaneous emotions caused by unexpected events? Or perhaps the distance of time and different conditions makes it difficult, if not impossible, to examine what the appropriate behavior should have been given the emotional state, the severe mental pressure, and the circumstances, which cannot be reproduced because they have never existed before and because the human mind has never invented anything like them.

Indeed, the Nazi, the SS man Karl, is a human being who was severely injured and in the throes of death. As such, and according to rational criteria, he may be worthy not only of sympathy and understanding for his suffering and his condition, but also of pardon and forgiveness for past crimes because he had confessed to them, assuming that the confession was not just formal, but based on true remorse emanating from pangs of conscience.

Yet, for Wiesenthal and others who lived under the same circumstances, Karl was a representative of German Nazism, or at least typical of the hundreds of thousands of SS troops and Sonderkommando who had joined up voluntarily and were fully aware of what they were doing. Together with others they not only routinely committed the most abominable crimes of oppression, starvation, humiliation, and forced hard labor to the point of death against the Jewish population, but were also involved in mass exterminations using methods that no human mind had thought of up to that time. Only the awareness of imminent and certain death induced Karl to think that his actions had been crimes against both humanity and God. Had he not been mortally wounded, he would almost certainly have continued to commit these crimes, along with his comrades, who had volunteered for these assignments of their own free will and in large numbers, never regretting their actions, but rather justifying them by claiming that they had only been carrying out orders.

At the time of this incident Wiesenthal is only an individual, a prisoner in a camp where he is being terrorized, worked to death, starved, and humiliated. His entire family has already been annihilated in Belzec or Treblinka and he knows that his death is certain, in another hour, another day, or another week. He, Wiesenthal, was also a witness. With his own eyes he had seen the mass shootings of naked people beside the death pits, the public hangings on the gallows. He had watched so many people die; he had seen all his relatives and fellow townspeople murdered. In this respect he is a representative witness for all those who lived or were no longer alive then and as long as the atrocities continued he certainly could not free himself of the revulsion and deep anguish he felt toward the actions of the SS man, Karl, and all his comrades who continued to commit these crimes. In his confession Karl described a mother and father who jumped together with their children from a building which had been set on fire by the Nazi troops and Wiesenthal was reminded of the child, Eli, from the Lvov Ghetto, who he had known well and cared for until he disappeared.

There are only two people in the death chamber, but each one represents an entirely different world: One—all the evil, and the horrible crimes that, up till the moment he was wounded, he himself perpetrated, and his comrades and the regime he is a part of continue to perpetrate, against human beings; and the other—the emotionally and physically broken victim of those crimes, whose pain is too much to bear because of what they have done to him, his family, and his people. Whose forgiveness was being sought—that of a Jew whose fate had already been sealed by the dying man's comrades, who did not then feel, and most likely never felt, remorse.

I never had an encounter with a dying SS man as Wiesenthal unwittingly did, but I shared his experiences in all other respects. My family was also deported to Belzec along with all the other residents of my town. I endured all the hellish nightmare of the war years in forced labor camps, in concentration and extermination camps. I saw so much death, so many executions. I was starved to death, I was degraded, made to feel sub-human; and I have forgotten none of the atrocities carried out against the Jews by the Nazi regime.

I am afraid that anyone who has been there and experienced it all would not have behaved any differently than Wiesenthal did then, and not only because the circumstances prevented him from thinking and reacting in a rational and deliberate manner, based on moral, religious, humanitarian, or philosophical considerations. But how can forgiveness be asked of someone whose death sentence will soon be carried out by the dying man's partners in crime, who are part of the same regime, when the dying person himself admits that he too has been committing these same crimes against the Jewish people and was only stopped when the hand of God overtook him.

Even if Wiesenthal believed that he was empowered to grant a pardon in the name of the murdered masses, such an act of mercy would have been a kind of betrayal and repudiation of the memory of millions of innocent victims who were unjustly murdered, among them, the members of his family.

Although Wiesenthal's reaction was instinctive and dictated by the deep suffering he was feeling for what he, his family, and an entire people had undergone, I doubt whether religious ethics (Jewish or Christian) or an altruistic conscience could lead to a level of self-sacrificing mercy beyond the ability of a human being, with the exception of saints and clergymen who act in the name of God.

In fact, religious belief had declined a great deal in the face of God's silence. A very observant relative of mine who had been preparing himself for the rabbinate before the war was with me in the Plaszow camp. On the day of the selection in May 1944 when the last two hundred eighty children remaining in the camp were deported to Auschwitz together with the old people and the sick my cousin said: "I don't believe in God anymore." Till the day he died he never regained his faith. Forgiveness could not be granted in the name of God either.

At a certain point during my testimony at the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, when I stood face to face with the embodiment of evil, I told the judges that I doubted whether the fear, pain, helplessness, depression, and hopelessness which we felt then could be reproduced now at a distance of so many years. This is certainly true with respect to the dilemma in question. Nevertheless, I exhorted myself to be faithful only to considerations, feelings, and behaviors that relate to the circumstances and conditions that existed then. In this way I was able to arrive at the above conclusion.

We can only be thankful that the passage of time dulls the pain somewhat and heals the open wounds to a certain extent, so that we can look at the issues in a broader perspective. Yet the crimes committed by the Nazi regime were so barbarous and so destructive to the victims that those who somehow managed to survive have never been able to free themselves of the horrors they had to endure. Moreover, the few survivors found themselves with no families, and their children grew up without grandparents. Thus, in addition to all their other injustices the Nazis themselves have prevented their crimes from being forgotten. The survivors have been sentenced to bear their pain and sadness to the grave. Without forgetting there can be no forgiving.

It is indeed true that not only the German people are interested in consigning the crimes of the Nazi regime to oblivion, the world has also begun to forget too soon. Even in the countries that suffered under the occupation of that sadistic regime, the number of Nazi criminals who have been found, brought to trial, and punished, even as a deterrent for potential criminals, is dwindling. Thus thousands and perhaps hundreds of thousands of Germans who participated in and committed genocide and crimes against humanity returned to their homes and to quiet, peaceful lives, without their consciences ever bothering them, without ever feeling any remorse. Certainly these people do not need to be forgiven by anyone, not by the victims and not by God.

Does repentance alone justify and bring about forgiveness and allow crimes to be forgotten?

Even in normal criminology and penology only true regret accompanied by reformed behavior can be considered a justification for lightening a sentence, and even then not necessarily in the case of serious crimes. No matter what, regret never pardons crimes, except when the state declares an amnesty for certain crimes, generally for political reasons.

We all remember the heated debate during the 1960s over the issue of establishing a statute of limitations for prosecuting Nazi criminals for the crime of genocide and crimes against humanity. At the time the opinion was that, since the crimes in question were so terrible that humanity has never known anything like them before, there was no justification for putting a time limit on their prosecution, allowing the passage of time to atone for crimes which cannot be forgiven.

Another point about Wiesenthal's behavior, also in hindsight: I have already said that, by leaving the room after hearing Karl's confession, or more correctly, statement, Wiesenthal behaved in the only way he could have behaved, according to the reasonable feelings of an individual in his situation. He had no desire for revenge toward the person who had injured him and his people so cruelly nor did he feel any satisfaction about the circumstances. He went out of his way to visit Karl's mother, but refrained from telling her the truth about the crimes her son committed while he served in the SS, if only to help her preserve her image of a son she remembered as a good boy.

It seems to me that this restraint goes beyond what a human being could be expected to do.

Even considering the distance in time and the use of hindsight, I am certain that Wiesenthal's conscience should not be troubled by the manner in which he behaved during that macabre encounter.

THE DALAI LAMA

I believe one should forgive the person or persons who have committed atrocities against oneself and mankind. But this does not necessarily mean one should forget about the atrocities committed. In fact, one should be aware and remember these experiences so that efforts can be made to check the re-occurrence of such atrocities in the future.

I find such an attitude especially helpful in dealing with the Chinese government's stand on the Tibetan people's struggle to regain freedom. Since China's invasion of Tibet in 1949–50, more than 1.2 million Tibetans, one-fifth of the country's pop-

ulation, have lost their lives due to massacre, execution, starvation, and suicide. Yet for more than four decades we have struggled to keep our cause alive and preserve our Buddhist culture of nonviolence and compassion.

It would be easy to become angry at these tragic events and atrocities. Labeling the Chinese as our enemies, we could self-righteously condemn them for their brutality and dismiss them as unworthy of further thought or consideration. But that is not the Buddhist way.

Here I would like to relate a very interesting incident. A few years back, a Tibetan monk who had served about eighteen years in a Chinese prison in Tibet came to see me after his escape to India. I knew him from my days in Tibet and remember last seeing him in 1959. During the course of that meeting I had asked him what he felt was the biggest threat or danger while he was in prison. I was amazed by his answer. It was extraordinary and inspiring. I was expecting him to say something else; instead he said that what he most feared was losing his compassion for the Chinese.

MATTHIEU RICARD

For a Buddhist, forgiveness is always possible and one should always forgive.

According to the Buddhist teachings, an action is not considered negative or sinful in and of itself, but because it produces suffering. Likewise, a virtuous act is what brings about more happiness in the world.

There are all kinds of situations in life, far less tragic than murder and genocide, that we find difficult to forgive. This is because we believe that there is such a thing as a self that defines who we are for our whole lives; when this self is offended, we try to protect it. But our bodies and minds are not stable; they are changing every second. The notion of a stable and autonomous self is, from the Buddhist point of view, itself the source of inner poisons such as hatred, obsession, pride, and jealousy, for it divides us from others and prevents us from being more compassionate.

True compassion must embrace all things and everyone: the worthy and the guilty, the friend and the foe. No matter how bad someone is, we believe that the basic goodness remains. A piece of gold, after all, is still gold, even if buried in the ground. Once the dirt is removed, the true nature of the gold will be revealed.

"The only good thing about evil," goes the Buddhist saying, "is that it can be purified." In Buddhism, forgiveness does not mean absolution, but an opportunity for the inner transformation of both victim and perpetrator. The perpetrator of

evil will himself suffer over many lifetimes to a degree determined by his actions, until he is ready for inner transformation.

For the victim, forgiveness is a way of transforming his own grief, resentment, or hatred into good. To grant forgiveness to someone who has truly changed is not a way of condoning or forgetting his or her past crimes, but of acknowledging whom he or she has become. Only inner change offers the opportunity for the perpetrator to escape the whirlpool of wrongdoing that he is now in. Both individuals and society need forgiveness so that grudges, venom, and hatred will not be perpetuated as new suffering.

For the dying SS soldier, feeling remorse in recognition of the monstrousness of his deeds was a good first step. But he could have created much more good by telling his fellow Nazi soldiers to abandon their inhuman behavior. Wiesenthal acted with remarkable dignity. A Buddhist, however, could have said to the dying soldier, "The best thing you can do now is pray that in your future lives you will be able to atone for your crimes by doing as much good as you have done evil." Knowing that the soldier is destined to undergo much suffering in his future lives, a Buddhist would feel compassion not just for the soldier and his victims, but for all sentient beings who, until they become free from hatred and ignorance, will perpetrate endless cycles of suffering for themselves.

DENNIS PRAGER

I am a religious Jew who has come to admire many Christians and to appreciate Christianity. I have come to see it as a holy path to God for non-Jews (this is not a small theological metamorphosis for a Jew raised in the Orthodox yeshiva world), and I deeply fear the consequences of a de-Christianized America. Yet, more than a decade of weekly dialogue with Christians and intimate conversations with Christian friends have convinced me that, aside from the divinity of Jesus, the greatest—and even more important—difference between Judaism and Christianity, or perhaps only between most Christians and Jews, is their different understanding of forgiveness and, ultimately, how to react to evil.

When the first edition of *The Sunflower* was published, I was intrigued by the fact that all the Jewish respondents thought Simon Wiesenthal was right in not forgiving the repentant Nazi mass murderer and that the Christians thought he was wrong. I have come to understand that this is not because the Holocaust was particularly the Jews' catastrophe, but rather because of the nature of the Jewish and Christian responses to evil, which are related to their differing understandings of forgiveness. I do not know which came first, the different Christian approach to forgiveness or the different Jewish approach to evil.

First, forgiveness. As Wiesenthal's fellow sufferers and as a number of Jewish respondents noted in the first edition, the relevant Jewish view of forgiveness is that a person who hurts another person must ask forgiveness from his victim and that only the victim can forgive him. God Himself does not forgive a person who has sinned against a human being unless that human being has been forgiven by his victim.

Therefore, *people can never forgive murder*, since the one person who can forgive is gone, forever. Under circumstances of awesome contrition (which, I believe, must include the murderer giving up his life), God presumably can forgive a murderer, but as far as people are concerned, *murder is unforgivable*. Even parents cannot forgive the murderer of their child (to assume that parents can forgive their child's murderer is to render children property rather than autonomous human beings).

This belief of Judaism that only victims can forgive and that murder is therefore unforgivable reinforces its belief that murder is the most terrible thing a human can do (though there are gradations of sin even in murder—for example, murder accompanied by torture is worse than other forms of murder). Murder undermines the very foundations of the world God created. That is why the third Commandment given by God to humanity after the Flood (the first two are to be fruitful and multiply and not to eat the limb of a living animal) is that "he who sheds blood shall have his blood be shed by man." Not tolerating murder (and to the Torah, allowing all murderers to live is a form of murder-tolerance) is the moral foundation of civilization.

Conversely, tolerance of murder is the characteristic of a world in decay. Yet, as I write this essay in the last decade of the twentieth century, my country, especially its elite, has come to tolerate murder. There is no other way to explain the fact that in the United States of America the average murderer serves but eleven years in prison. We not only forgive most murderers—when they leave prison, murderers are said to have "paid their debt to society"—we do so even if they are unrepentant. The best educated of Western society view murder as an unfortunate act of "antisocial" behavior and seek the rehabilitation of the murderer, not his punishment (let alone his death).

Is this a function of a society deeply influenced by Christian notions of forgiving everyone? Or is it a society whose secular elite has rejected Judaism's and Christianity's notions of moral absolutes? Probably a combination of both.

In *The Killing of Bonnie Garland*, a book as depressing in its way as *The Sunflower* is in its, psychiatrist Willard Gaylin describes the Catholic priests who took a murderer—a Hispanic Catholic college student who had bludgeoned his girlfriend to death—under their wing and did everything they could to ensure that he was not prosecuted. While I could well imagine a group of secular Jewish therapists or social workers engaging in such behavior, I cannot imagine any group of rabbis, even the most liberal, acting that way.

Indeed, I tested my thesis in real life.

As noted, for ten years I moderated a weekly radio show on which my guests were a Protestant minister, a Catholic priest, and a rabbi, different individuals each week. During that time, the notorious rape and beating of a woman jogger by a gang of young men in New York's Central Park took place. After their arrest, a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church visited the boys at prison to tell them only one thing: "God loves you."

I was so furious that I publicly noted then that someone ought to write an article "How to Get a Personal Visit from a Cardinal." I thought of all the beautiful Catholics in New York, devoting their lives to the poor and the sick, who would give almost anything for a personal visit from a cardinal of their church. But the lucky recipients of such a visit were sadistic batterers and rapists who would have been murderers were it not for the wonders of modern medicine (they left the woman to bleed to death).

On my show, I wondered aloud whether my fury at the cardinal (a good man, hence I omit his name) was a personal or a Jewish response. I assumed the latter since virtually all my Christian callers agreed with the cardinal, and all my Jewish callers agreed with me. But I decided to test my thesis on the clergy. For four weeks, I asked the clergy what they would say to these torturers if they had met with them. Every Protestant and Catholic clergyman, liberal and conservative, essentially echoed the cardinal's words. All the rabbis, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox, said that they would not meet with the

youths, but if forced to, they would tell them of their disgust with them, that they should be severely punished and spend the rest of their lives seeking to redress their evil; and they certainly would not tell them that God loved them.

The Christian view of forgiveness and, as exemplified in the case of the rapists, the Christian view of God's love—in a lifetime of Jewish study and teaching, I have never heard a Jew say that God loves an evil person—have led me to conclude that Christianity and Judaism, or perhaps only Christians and Jews, have differing views of evil and what to do about it. Another example is necessary.

Under the totalitarian Soviet regime, both Soviet Jews and Soviet Christians were oppressed. Indeed, by the end of the Cold War, Soviet Christians were more oppressed than Soviet Jews. Thanks to worldwide Jewish efforts on behalf of Soviet Jews, by the 1980s no Soviet Jew was incarcerated for practicing Judaism, while quite a number of Soviet Christians were incarcerated for practicing Christianity. Why was there no outcry from the world's billion Christians while the thirteen million Jews of the world made Soviet Jewry a household word?

I believe that there are four reasons: the Christian doctrine of forgiveness has blunted Christian anger at those who oppress them; the notion that one should pray for one's enemies has been taken to mean "pray for them, do not fight them"; the belief that God loves everyone, no matter how evil, makes it impossible for a believing Christian to hate evil people and therefore difficult to fight them (I assume those who love mass murderers are less likely to want them dead than those who hate them); and the Christian emphasis on saving souls for the after-life has led to some de-emphasis on saving bodies in this life.

Thus, in 1982, when the world's best-known Protestant, the Reverend Billy Graham, went to the Soviet Union, instead of taking the side of his tortured coreligionists, he repeatedly took the side of the Soviet authorities, telling churches that "God gives you the power to be a better worker, a more loyal citizen because in Romans 13 we are told to obey the authorities." Had a rabbi made a similar pronouncement in a speech in a Soviet synagogue—something altogether unimaginable—he would have been read out of Jewish life.

None of this is meant to denigrate Christians; indeed I hold Christians responsible for the greatest social experiment in history, the founding of the United States. Nor is it an ode to Jews; their preoccupation with fighting evil has too often led to embracing terrible ideologies such as Marxism and its myriad nihilistic offshoots. It is only meant to explain why to Jews it is so patently obvious that it is morally wrong to forgive a man who has burned families alive, and to Christians it is equally obvious that one ought to.

CHRISTOPHER HOLLIS

The Sunflower, whether wholly autobiographical or in parts fictional, is an intensely moving and vivid book. Were it my task to write a literary criticism of it, I should be loud in its praise. But the request that has been made of me is to give an opinion on one definite point. Did the author do right in refusing a word of compassion to the dying SS man who had made to him the confession of the atrocious murder of a Jewish child?

The author does not admit of any repentance for his refusal. But his two Jewish friends, now dead, thought that he would have done very wrong to have admitted such compassion. Only the Polish seminarist thought otherwise and he has vanished from the author's life so that he is no longer able to keep in touch with the developments of his thought. But it is clear from the author's visit to the SS man's mother that his mind is not at ease. It is indeed not clear what purpose that visit had or what purpose he could have supposed that it would have had, since he was not willing to tell the mother the truth about her son, but the fact that he made it is proof of a disturbed, uncertain, and restless mind.

I am asked what, absolutely, he ought to have done under these circumstances. Let me first make it clear that that is quite a different question from the question "what would I have done?" To that second question I can make no answer. I claim no capacity to resist temptation above the average and what fortitude I would have been able to show in face of horrors so incomparably greater than any that I have ever been called on to face I cannot say. We can all say that men ought to be martyrs if challenged on their faith. We can none of us say whether in the day of trial we ourselves would have the hardihood to be martyrs.

But on the absolute challenge what the author should have done I have no doubt that he should have said a word of compassion. The theology of the matter is surely clear and, as the Polish seminarist truly says in this book, there is no difference on it between Christians and Jews. Differences are here irrelevant. The law of God is the law of love. We are created in order to love one another, and, when the law of love is broken, God's nature is frustrated. Such bonds when broken should be reformed as soon as possible. We are under obligation to forgive our neighbor even though he has offended against us seventy times seven.

On the other hand we are all born in original sin. (Jewish orthodoxy, I understand, does not admit that exact phrase but the language in which they repudiate it shows very effectively that they do in fact believe in it as much as any Christians.) Indeed one could not well do otherwise, for original sin, unlike the other Christian doctrines, is a definite necessity of thought.

Men are born in sin and when God has been defied by actual sin there cannot be forgiveness unless there is repentance. We are indeed told to be reluctant to condemn others. "Judge not that ye be not judged." It is our duty to reflect how small is our own understanding and that, if we knew all of a story, we should often see how much more there was to be said for another's action, how much more—it may be—of the blame really is ours than appeared at first sight.

But these considerations, so often just, are here irrelevant. Here the SS man had committed an appalling crime. It was perhaps relevant for him to recount the impulses that had caused him to join the SS, the appalling corruption of Nazi propaganda to which he had been subjected, the military discipline of which he was the slave at the time of the act, but these are explanations. They are not excuses. The SS man does not pretend that they are excuses. He does not attempt to excuse himself. He was guilty of an appalling crime and he was frankly confessing his crime. Nor has the author any doubt of the sincerity of his repentance. Therefore, however difficult it was, there is surely no doubt that a word of compassion, indicative of his recognition of that sincerity, should have been said.

It is of course true that penitence involves a willingness to make restitution to the person wronged and, had the circumstances been other, it would have been reasonable to have demanded of the SS man that, even if he could not bring back to life the little child whom he had killed or discover any of his immediate relatives, yet he should in some notable way have attempted some service to the Jews which would have given evidence of the sincerity of his repentance. Whether he could or would have satisfied such a challenge had he lived and been restored to health, who shall say? Since he was to die in a few hours, the question is meaningless. Even if the author had doubted, one should give the benefit of the doubt.

'Tis God shall repay. I am safer so.

Nor indeed is it easy to see, as indeed the author himself confesses, for what reason the SS man should have sent for and made this confession to a Jew unless he was sincerely ashamed of what he had done.

Of course I am stating what seems to me to be the absolute moral law. I am not suggesting that obedience to that law could under the circumstances possibly have been easy or passing any personal condemnation. But surely the absolute moral law was stated by Christ at the Crucifixion when He prayed for the forgiveness of His own murderers. It is of course true that the persecution and murder of Jews was still going on and that the author fully expected that he himself would be murdered before long. But that, I should have thought, in the moral order made forgiveness easier rather than more difficult.

The author's two Jewish friends, Arthur and Josek, argued with him that maybe he had a right to forgive injuries against

himself but that he had no right to forgive injuries against other people. But insofar as this act was not merely a personal act of one SS man against one Jewish child but an incident in a general campaign of genocide, the author was as much a victim—or likely to be soon a victim—of that campaign as was the child, and, being a sufferer, had therefore the right to forgive. His forgiveness could not in the nature of things be the casual, idle word of someone who pardoned without caring the perpetrator of a distant crime to which he was really indifferent.

Nor of course has forgiveness anything to do with the refusal to punish. In this case since the SS man was just about to die the question of punishment did not arise, but, had he survived, the fact that he had been spiritually forgiven would of course have been no reason why he should not have been subjected to the appropriate punishment.

It is interesting to understand why the SS man wanted thus to confess to an unknown Jew. The SS man had been brought up as a Catholic but he had abandoned his religion when he joined the Hitler Youth. There seems some suspicion that on his deathbed he had a certain return of faith—or at least a desire to return to his faith. If that was at all so, if he had come to think that there was at least a possibility of future life and a judgment awaiting him, then it would of course have been reasonable that he should have confessed to a priest had one been available. If there were no priest he could be confident that the verdicts of God would be just and, if his repentance was sincere, need be under no fear that God would not show mercy.

Whichever way round, why was his state made any better, his mind at all relieved, by confessing to an unknown Jew? The Jew had no power to give him absolution. It is not easy to see

but it is a psychological fact that sinners on their deathbed often wish to relieve themselves by telling their story to some one and under any normal circumstances who would be so hard-hearted as to refuse to listen to such a story?

The real issue is whether the Jew and Nazi were two of God's children sharing a common humanity or whether they are two different sorts of being, irrevocably at war with one another. If the second interpretation was that accepted by the Jews it was assuredly the Nazis who were responsible for it and they could not complain if the Jews accepted it. Yet for all that whatever the temptation to think otherwise, it is surely the inevitable consequence of any monotheistic faith that all men—even the least naturally lovable—are the children of God, in Christian belief that they are those for whom their Omnipotent Creator did not disdain to die, in Jewish belief that they are God's creatures.

One can well understand how the Jews in their camps had come to tell one another in the bitter sick joke which the author recounts to us that God was on leave. Yet it was precisely the rejection of this blasphemy that surely religious faith demanded—demanded the belief that somehow, however difficult it might be to see how, "God is not mocked" and that, as with Job, "though He slay me yet will I trust in him."

Man, what is this and why art thou despairing?

God shall forgive thee all but thy despair.

According to an old medieval legend the Apostles assembled together in heaven to recelbrate the Last Supper. There was one place vacant, until through the door Judas came in and Christ rose and kissed him and said, "We have waited for thee."

ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

Over fifty years ago, the rabbi of Brisk, a scholar of extraordinary renown, revered also for his gentleness of character, entered a train in Warsaw to return to his hometown. The rabbi, a man of slight stature, and of no distinction of appearance, found a seat in a compartment. There he was surrounded by traveling salesmen, who, as soon as the train began to move, started to play cards. As the game progressed, the excitement increased. The rabbi remained aloof and absorbed in meditation. Such aloofness was annoying to the rest of the people and one of them suggested to the rabbi to join in the game. The rabbi answered that he never played cards. As time passed, the rabbi's aloofness became even more annoying and one of those present said to him: "Either you join us, or leave the compartment." Shortly thereafter, he took the rabbi by his collar and pushed him out of the compartment. For several hours the rabbi had to stand on his feet until he reached his destination, the city of Brisk.

Brisk was also the destination of the salesmen. The rabbi left the train where he was immediately surrounded by admirers welcoming him and shaking his hands. "Who is this man?" asked the salesman. "You don't know him? The famous rabbi of Brisk." The salesman's heart sank. He had not realized who he had offended. He quickly went over to the rabbi to ask forgiveness. The rabbi declined to forgive him. In his hotel room, the salesman could find no peace. He went to the rabbi's house and was admitted to the rabbi's study. "Rabbi," he said, "I am not a rich man. I have, however, savings of three hundred

rubles. I will give them to you for charity if you will forgive me." The rabbi's answer was brief: "NO."

The salesman's anxiety was unbearable. He went to the synagogue to seek solace. When he shared his anxiety with some people in the synagogue, they were deeply surprised. How could their rabbi, so gentle a person, be so unforgiving. Their advice was for him to speak to the rabbi's eldest son and to tell him of the surprising attitude taken by his father.

When the rabbi's son heard the story, he could not understand his father's obstinacy. Seeing the anxiety of the man, he promised to discuss the matter with his father.

It is not proper, according to Jewish law, for a son to criticize his father directly. So the son entered his father's study and began a general discussion of Jewish law and turned to the laws of forgiveness. When the principle was mentioned that a person who asks for forgiveness three times should be granted forgiveness, the son mentioned the name of the man who was in great anxiety. Thereupon the rabbi of Brisk answered:

"I cannot forgive him. He did not know who I was. He offended a common man. Let the salesman go to him and ask for forgiveness."

No one can forgive crimes committed against other people. It is therefore preposterous to assume that anybody alive can extend forgiveness for the suffering of any one of the six million people who perished.

According to Jewish tradition, even God Himself can only forgive sins committed against Himself, not against man.

PUT YOURSELF IN THE POSITION OF A PRISONER IN A CONCENTRATION CAMP.

A DYING NAZI SOLDIER ASKS FOR YOUR FORGIVENESS.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

In *The Sunflower* Simon Wiesenthal describes an incident from his time as a prisoner in a Lvov work squad: he is summoned to the bedside of a dying Nazi, who wants him, the Jew, to grant him absolution for his participation in the extermination of Jews. Tormented by the crimes in which he had participated, including the murder of a family with a small child, the SS man wanted to confess to--and if possible, receive absolution from--a Jew.

After listening to the young man's lengthy confession, Wiesenthal leaves the room without saying a word. In the story he explains why he could not grant the man his last wish and forgive him for what he had done: he felt he had no right to forgive on behalf of others, in this case the people murdered by the man. The question of guilt and forgiveness, however, and all of the subtle issues connected with it would not let him rest – and so he writes in his story:

“Today, I sometimes think of the young SS man. Every time I enter a hospital, every time I see a nurse, or a man with his head bandaged, I recall him. Or when I see a sunflower....

I have often tried to imagine how that young SS man would have behaved if he had been put on trial twenty-five years later....

When I recall the insolent replies and the mocking grins of many of these accused, it is difficult for me to believe that my repentant SS man would also have behaved in that way.... Yet ought I to have forgiven him? Today the world demands that we forgive and forget the heinous crimes committed against us. It urges that we draw a line, and close the account as if nothing had ever happened.

We who suffered in those dreadful days, we who cannot obliterate the hell we endured, are forever being advised to keep silent....

There are many kinds of silence. Indeed it can be more eloquent than words, and it can be interpreted in many ways.

Was my silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi right or wrong? This is a profound moral question that challenges the conscience of the reader of this episode, just as much as it once challenged my heart and my mind.”

Wiesenthal, left the room in silence, but remained intrigued by the issues the man's request raised about the limits and possibilities of forgiveness. Must we, can we, forgive the repentant criminal, no matter how heinous the crime? Can we forgive crimes committed against others? What do we owe the victims? Twenty-five years after the Holocaust, Wiesenthal asked leading intellectuals what they would have done in his place. Collected into one volume, their responses became one of the most enduring documents of Holocaust literature and a touchstone of interfaith dialogue. Their answers reflect the teachings of their diverse beliefs, and remind us that Wiesenthal's question is not limited only to events of the past.