

I remember being told as a kid that “never” is a really long time. I will never talk to her again. I will never believe what he says again. I will never forgive them. Never is a heat of the moment word, a manifestation of our hurt and anger and betrayal. It’s a reaching for the foreverist word we can find. A refusal to repair, or see an alternative, or imagine that things, or they, or we, could one day be different. Never comes up from inside of ourselves, from our most injured or sensitive places, and arises as a protection from further hurt and sometimes from facing what it might take to get from where we are now to somewhere else. “Never,” we say, from the center of our pain.

There’s a really big and challenging “never” in this week’s Torah portion, Ki Teitzei. We’re instructed by Moses, by God:

לֹא-יָבֹא עַמּוֹנִי וּמוֹאָבִי בְּקִהְלֵי יְהוָה גַּם דּוֹר עֲשִׂירִי לֹא-יָבֹא לָהֶם בְּקִהְלֵי יְהוָה עַד-עוֹלָם:

No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of יהוה; no descendants of such, even to the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of יהוה,

לֹא-תִדְרֹשׁ שְׁלָמָם וְטַבָּתָם כָּל-יְמֵיךָ לְעוֹלָם: {ס}

You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or their benefit as long as you live.

It’s not just a never. It’s a never ever. L’olam! For all eternity. No one from these two peoples can ever join the people Israel. Not by marriage or by conversion or by friendship or by repairing anything that had been done. And here, we are told that the “anything” that has been done to us - the reason they can NEVER join - is twofold. One: they did not meet us with food and water when we were in need on our 40 year journey through the wilderness, and two: because they hired the sorcerer, Bil’aam, to try to curse us. For these two sins, these acts of cruelty and betrayal, there is no forgiveness. They may never join our people and we are never to care about them, their welfare, or their benefit.

Now here we sit, on the eve of the High Holy Days, smack in the middle of the preparatory month of Elul. During this month, we begin the process of teshuvah, of repentance, and making amends with others. It’s a deeply reflective month during which we try to be really honest about the ways we’ve hurt people in our lives over the past year and also the ways that we ourselves have been hurt. It’s a time to consider forgiveness - so we might return to one another, even in the face of our pain, or our anger, or our shame for our actions. It is specifically a time to remember that there are ways to repair what has been broken. A time to remember that there are grave consequences to allowing our relationship to remain broken: we may never find our way back to our loved ones. Our walls may be forever between us, our words unsaid, our love unexpressed, our hearts lost to those we care about - maybe forever. Elul offers us an unmatched chance for healing. To begin to honestly address and maybe even reject our “nevers.”

And so it is jarring and dissonant to find such a contrary approach to forgiveness in our text during the month of Elul.

Now there may be people in our lives that may NEVER deserve our forgiveness - someone whose actions **are** beyond the pale. That is for each of us to determine. And in Jewish tradition, we **do** have such a category - the people Amalek. They and their spiritual descendants are the unforgivable enemy. That exists. But the Moabites and the Ammonites are specifically *not* the Amalekites. And yet, here we have this “never ever” in our text. And especially during the month of Elul, it’s important that we try to understand it.

The rabbis also are trying to understand it. In the Talmud, they immediately start to qualify this “never ever.” We find in Masechet Yevamot, the assertion that **actually** Torah means that only the male Moabites can never be forgiven, while female Moabites are fine.

What is their evidence for this? Well, they teach: if women were meant to be included in this prohibition, the Hebrew text would not just have said “Moavi,” a Moabite, but also would have explicitly said: “Moavit,” a lady Moabite. In addition, they continue, it would only have been the job of the male Moabites to greet the Israelites in the wilderness with food and water, while the women would have stayed in their homes. So the women shouldn’t face the consequences for this sin.

And honestly - these are some really weak tea arguments. Creative, but not great.

First of all, Hebrew is a gendered language and when including multiple genders in a sentence, the male conjugation is used inclusively, like it is in Spanish. And, just a couple of verses later, we read about our people’s relationship with the Mitzri, those from Mitzrayim, and it’s clear that the entire population is included, not just the men - a concession that the Talmud itself makes.

So what’s going on here? Why are the rabbis doing such linguistic fancy footwork to limit this “never ever” of forgiveness for the Moabites and the Ammonites? Well, the rabbis have a problem. They’ve read the Book of Ruth. **רִוְתַּת הַמּוֹאָבִיָּה**. Ruth is a Moabite woman, and arguably the most well known convert to the Jewish people. She famously says to her mother in law, Naomi: where you go, I will go, your people will be my people and your God will be my God. And she marries Boaz, and becomes one of our people.

Now, the rabbis could have said - yes, and that was a huge problem, or even a mistake. Except that they’ve read to the end of the story, so they knew, as we know, that Ruth and Boaz begot Obed and Obed begot Jesse. And Jesse begot David. Who becomes King David. The progenitor of the Messiah. About which the Prophet Jeremiah records God saying: In that future time, I will raise up a true branch of David’s line, v’asah mishpat u’tzedakah, and he shall do what is just and right in the land. And about whom the Prophet Isaiah says: he shall have a spirit of wisdom and insight, compassion for the poor, bringing about a world in which the wolf shall dwell with the lamb. A redeemed world of peace and love and gentleness. All because a Moabite woman, who was forbidden to do so, joined our people.

So here we have these two competing worldviews. One that says that the Moabites' actions are unforgivable - we may never have contact with them again. And one that suggests that forgiveness and a chance for return between our peoples is the very thing that leads to a world of greater righteousness, compassion, and peace.

Torah demands a "never ever" from us. To hell with those guys. They weren't there for us when we needed them most. And that's where the story would end. But Jewish tradition gives us a way back. The rabbis see it. We can see it. The endless possibilities that become available to us when forgiveness and teshuvah, return, is on the table.

It's really wild. But the choice between these two paths is ultimately ours.

There's so much going on in the world right now. Swirling around us and outside of us. It is constant and it calls on us in so many critical ways. AND, we are in Elul right now. And there is so much swirling here inside of ourselves, too. Our hurt, our bruises, our guilt, our longing. And the gates are open.

We are facing a time of increasingly serious never evens. The neighbor whose sign in their window is an unforgivable breach. The member whose political leanings make you angry and sad. The child who seems to have rejected you. The parent who doesn't understand you. We are in a soup of never evens - both because of this moment in history, but also just because we are human and it has, as we can see in Ki Teitzei, always been this way.

Are you thinking about a "never ever"? A breach of your trust - or theirs, a cruelty, a betrayal that seems like a chasm you cannot cross. A future that seems utterly closed to you, until the 10th generation, there can be no repair? But what if we, like the rabbis did, cracked through it just a bit, qualified it, refused it, tested it to see if the walls really must hold, and wondered: is teshuvah possible here? And if it is, what could a next part of our story be, what different future, what wholeness or peace or compassion or love, might be out there waiting?

We could settle comfortably into all of our never evens, but I pray this year, in this month of Elul, full of what is yet possible, for the sake of our families, our neighborhoods, our community, our people, and our world, we might instead trace our roots back to Ruth, the Moabite, and do what we need to do to find out what worlds might be possible on the other side of our teshuvah. Shabbat shalom.