

## TORTURE: IS IT POSSIBLE TO FORGIVE?

I wish I could tell you that it *is* possible, that the answer is not complex and difficult; I wish I could tell you that society and History never forget victims of torture, of prison and abuse; I wish that I could tell you society strives for truth, reparation and reconciliation and that healing is possible on all sides of this horrendous equation... but sadly, I cannot.

The answers are extremely difficult and very much "in the eyes of the beholder"... society and History do (want or need to) forget the victims, their pain and humiliation.

A lot has been said in different historical and political times about the need and responsibility of finding the truth about these heinous crimes against Humanity, but little has been done to do so and bring those responsible to account for their crimes. Indeed, most torturers and war criminals roam free through the streets of our cities, living "normal" lives, raising their children and sometimes participating of democracy's guarantees and possibilities while the victims have to manage to come to terms with the reality of their tragedy, their pain and unending sense of loneliness and isolation.

What seems incredible to me as a victim of torture, imprisonment and exile during the Pinochet years in Chile, is that it is **we** who are expected to forgive, not to be resentful, not to ask for justice and reparation but rather to "*look to the future, turn the page, not to live in the past*"...

So I ask you and the whole world: how much pain, how much Holocaust, how much Guantanamo prisons, how much Rwanda, how much Pinochet and so many, many other cruel dictators are needed for the world to understand that the victims are not responsible for forgiveness and that their demands for truth are the only possible path to real healing and acceptance; that the scars will always be there as a personal testimony of courage and generosity and not as a shameful reminder of the world's wishful thinking, forgetfulness and compliance?

There are no "yes or no" answers to this question. I once read *Primo Levi's* answer to this; he said: "...when an act of violence or an offense has been committed it is forever irreparable: (it is quite probable) that public opinion will cry out for a sanction, a punishment, a 'price' for pain... but the initial offense remains and the 'price' is always (even if 'just') a new offense and a new source of pain..."

Let me tell you that it is impossible, even for neither the most vivid imagination nor the deepest empathy to experience even remotely the horror the victims of torture have to live and go through; plus the fact that we have to learn how to carry this horrible burden for the rest of our lives...

And yet, for reasons that are inexplicable and unacceptable to me (as one of those who some days find it extremely difficult to get up and get on with the painful business of living) we, on top of everything else, have to face trivialization by some people who seem to think this is just an exotic '*thing*' that happens to people who somehow '*deserve it*' or '*ask for it*' and '**let's try and see whether this is torture or not...**' as a reality show experience!

I cannot forgive those who tortured me. I have had to learn how to live with this truth which is **my truth** and nobody else's. I am not one to impose this on anyone as a foregone conclusion.

But also, no one can ask me to do this or do it on my behalf because no one can forgive crimes committed against other people. It is preposterous to assume that anybody alive can extend forgiveness for the suffering of any one who has died in torture or suffered torture.

Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that according to Jewish tradition, even God can only forgive sins committed against God but not against another human being.

I was taught in Judaism too, that forgiveness requires both atonement and restitution; sadly, it has been my experience that this is seldom the case.

With perhaps the exception of South Africa's "*Truth and Reconciliation Commission*" (and I say *perhaps* because I cannot speak with certainty for my South African brothers and sisters) war criminals, torturers and dictators never establish (or are asked to do so), a public forum at which their crimes are openly confessed. On the contrary, their crimes are largely concealed or minimized in order to "move to the future", "turn the page" or "not to live with hatred or

resentment". Indeed, many criminals remain in positions of power denying their responsibility and the world community has chosen in most cases, to cover up and condone rather than repent.

**Without truth, repentance and atonement, there is no possibility of moving forward to the future, not for anyone.** Rabbi A.J. Heschel said that: "... *the blood of the innocent cries forever...*"

You, my friends, are the cry for those with no voice! If that blood ceases to cry out through your voices, humanity will cease to be.

After all this time of sleepless nights and pain I have come to believe that the issue for me (for all of us who have been victims of torture and abuse) is not forgiveness but rather to learn through a very hard and long process how to live without bitterness or desire for vengeance; to live fully and in plain knowledge that when we do so, we become a witness and a testimony to something greater than ourselves and we do so without losing our own humanity. That is our greatest victory.

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