

Love Thy Neighbor

The Seductive Pleasure Of Getting Even

by Harold S. Kushner

(NAPSA)—Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, wrote, “Revenge, at first though sweet, bitter ere long upon itself recoils.” In other words, as Milton knew and as many of us painfully discover, revenge is sweet in the contemplation but bitter in the carrying out.



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The target of our revenge may deserve to be hurt, and part of us is eager to hurt him because of what he did to us. But another part of us feels diminished by doing the hurting.

The ambivalence in getting even is that our consciences condemn it even as our souls crave it. Once, in an age of religious faith, people believed they could depend on God to punish the criminal who cheated justice in court. But in our secular age, the gap between crime and punishment can lead to vigilantism and mob justice, as frustrated people take the law into their own hands.

What are we to do with this troubling emotion, the desire to get even? Most of the time when there is a conflict between impulse and conscience, we know that the right answer is to follow our conscience, even if we are not always strong enough to do it. But what do we do when revenge appeals to us in the noble name of justice, asking us to make the world a better place by giving someone what he or she deserves? Some voices, in the name of religion or in the name of a more compassionate society, would urge us to forgive as the only way to break the cycle of hatred and violence.

It is cleansing to be able to forgive, to rid your soul of the bitterness that is an inevitable ingredient of plotting revenge against the

person who has hurt you.

What can we do about this dilemma, when we feel part of our soul is strongly drawn toward dreams of getting even while part of us reluctantly recognizes that such dreams are unworthy of us. First, we have to separate judicial punishment from the issues of forgiving or seeking vengeance.

If criminologists are correct in believing that much crime is really about exercising power over another person, then perhaps the instinctive desire for revenge is less about hurting the person who has hurt us and more about restoring the power balance to what it was before the crime. We don't really want to hurt our assailant so much as we want to reclaim from him the power, the sense of being in control of our lives, that he stole from us.

Once we recognize that the thirst for revenge is really a need to shed the role of victim and substitute action for helplessness, we can find ways of meeting that need without hurting another person and compromising our own goodness.

All of us will be victims of cruelty, thoughtless behavior, and petty annoyances. At times like that, we will have to choose between the seductive appeal of getting even, attractive but harmful to our souls, and the cleansing force of integrity, reclaiming power over our lives precisely by not giving in to the temptation to get even.

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