1. What is Civility in the language of the Rabbis? It is called DERECH ERETZ and it’s interpreted in many ways during the period between the 2nd and 6th centuries in the Talmud. We’ll examine these core texts and define Derech Eretz.

**Babylonian Talmud, Sota 44a**
The Torah taught us derekh eretz: A person should first build a house, then plant a vineyard, and afterward marry a woman.

**Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 4b**
The Torah taught us derekh eretz: A person should not speak to another, unless he calls his name first.

**Genesis Rabbah, Parashat Vayetze, Parasha 70**
The Torah taught us derekh eretz: Do not stay as a guest with your relatives for more than a month.

**Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 87a**
The Torah taught us derekh eretz: A man must enquire regarding (the wellbeing) of his host’s wife. Did not Shmuel teach that one should never enquire regarding a woman? Asking her husband is different.

**Midrash Tanhuma, Parashat Hukat**
The Torah taught us derekh eretz: That a person who travels to a foreign country and has his own provisions should not eat from them but should rather leave them and buy from the local shopkeepers.

**Midrash Tanhuma, Parashat Vayishlach**
The Torah taught us derekh eretz: That one must be respectful toward the government (Malkut as those in power; however Melech as another name for God).
Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 10a

Those hooligans who were in R. Meir’s neighborhood, and were paining him greatly, he would pray for mercy that they would die. His wife Beruriah said to him: What do you think—because Scripture reads: “Let the sinners cease” (Tehillim 104:35)? But does it say those who err should cease?! No, it says sinners/sins! Moreover, go to the end of the verse – “and the wicked shall be no more.” Since the sins cease, there will be no wicked people. Rather, pray for mercy on them that they should repent, and then there will be no more wicked people. He prayed for them, and they repented.

Devontae Torriente, “I Don’t Owe You My Tolerance: How “Civil Discourse” Functions to Uphold Systems of Oppression,” The Blackprint, 6/17/17

It’s time for us to do away with the idea that we must be respectful or courteous to be entitled to our rights. Politeness isn’t a requirement when we are confronting anyone who uses their political and social power to further disenfranchise us. We are now charged with ushering in a new era of normalized discomfort in which people in positions of power know that in this fight for our humanity, we will not concede the raw power of our indignation. In this age of entitlement by those with problematic or seemingly unpopular views, remember this: I don’t owe you my tolerance, especially not when my life is at stake.

2. If people do not behave in civil ways, how can you / should you forgive them? Now, look to the Code of Jewish law, the Shulchan Aruch for guidelines and then three modern interpretations on asking forgiveness.

Shulchan Aruch Orah Hayyim 606 Key Jewish Forgiveness Text
(Code of Jewish Law, Joseph Karo, 1565, Safed and Venice, Italy)

Sins; between one person and another are not released by Yom Kippur prayer unless the offender apologizes to the victim (the hurt person). Even if one person hurt another through words alone, the apology is necessary. If one cannot ‘make forgiveness’ at first, return to the offended person and ask forgiveness twice or even three times, and bring 10 people along (as witnesses). If the hurt person will not forgive the offender even after 3 requests to apologize, the offender can stop asking for forgiveness.

(Rema, Rabbi Moses Isserles, Poland adds: Afterward, the offender can tell 10 people that he tried to ask forgiveness 3 times and it was not accepted.)
If he (the offended one) is one’s Rabbi, the offender must go to the Rabbi several times until
the Rabbi is satisfied (with the apology).

(Rema, Rabbi Moses Isserles, adds: One should not be especially cruel and withhold
forgiveness, unless it benefits the one asking forgiveness.)

If one was a victim of slander, one need not forgive.

Harriet Lerner, Why Won’t you Apologize?

Apologizing for our part is a good thing to do, when we know what our part is. It’s not a real
apology to say, “I’m sorry for my part” if we have zero motivation to observe and change our
contribution and we think our behavior is justified because we’re giving that person what they
deserve. Even slight acknowledgement and modification in behavior can make a big difference.


Forgiveness sees wisely. It willingly acknowledges what is unjust, harmful and wrong. It bravely
recognizes the sufferings of the past and understands the conditions that brought them about.
There is a strength to forgiveness. When we forgive, we can also say, “Never again will I allow
these things to happen.” We may resolve never again to permit such harm to come to ourselves
or another.”

Rabbi Harold Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People (Penguin-Random House,
2004):

Forgiveness represents letting go of the role of victim. What you did was despicable, BUT I
REFUSE TO GIVE YOU THE POWER TO DEFINE ME AS A VICTIM.

3. How can YOU ask for forgiveness? How can you forgive---to lighten your load in life?

Wishing you a Gmar Chatimah Tovah ---May you hold yourself and others with Chesed/
Kindness-in the Sealing of this Year 5781.

KLF
Rabbi Karen L. Fox
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