Rambam on Forgiveness, Unity, and "Time to Move On"

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On January 6, 2021, the U.S. Capitol was stormed by a mob incited by the President of the United States and others who have insisted, without evidence, that the recent presidential election was "rigged" and stolen from him. On January 13, the President was impeached for the second time during his term. A number of American politicians have criticized the impeachment as a distraction from the work of national healing. It is time to unite this country, they say, and not to divide it further. It is "time to move on." But is it really? How does a community, a nation, draw a proper balance between the demands of justice – the work of investigation and punishment – and of reconciliation, the need to forgive and move forward?

These are difficult questions, to be sure, and this blog doesn't pretend to have the answers. But we thought it would be useful to offer in response some relevant material drawn from the halakhic tradition. Here, without comment, are some passages Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot T'shuvah* (Laws of Repentance), chapter two.

אי זו היא תשובה גמורה, זה שבא לידו דבר שעבר בו ואפשר בידו לעשותו ופירש ולא עשה מפני התשובה, לא מיראה ולא מכשלון כח.

(2:1.) How do we define "true repentance" (*t'shuvah g'murah*)? It is when a sinner has the opportunity to repeat the same transgression but refrains form doing so due to the fact that s/he has repented, that is, not out of fear or out of the inability to repeat the sin.

ומה היא התשובה! הוא שיעזוב החוטא חטאו ויסירו ממחשבתו ויגמור בלבו שלא יעשהו עוד שנאמר יעזוב רשע דרכו וגוי, וכן יתנחם על שעבר שנאמר כי אחרי שובי נחמתי ... וצריך להתודות בשפתיו ולומר עניינות אלו שגמר בלבו:

(2:2) Of what does *t'shuvah* consist? It requires that the sinner abandon the sin, to remove it from his/her thoughts, and to resolve sincerely never to repeat it, as it is said, "Let the wicked abandon his path, the evildoer his thoughts" (Isaiah 55:7).

Similarly, the sinner must feel remorse for what s/he has done, as it is said, "For now that I have turned back, I am filled with remorse" (Jeremiah 31:18).

And the sinner must recite a verbal confession, stating in words his sincere resolution not to repeat his sin.

כל המתודה בדברים ולא גמר בלבו לעזוב הרי זה דומה לטובל ושרץ בידו שאין הטבילה מועלת לו עד שישליך השרץ ... וצריך לפרוט את החטא שנאמר אנא חטא העם הזה חטאה גדולה ויעשו להם אלהי זהב:

(2:3) One who recites a verbal confession but has not sincerely resolved to abandon the sin is like a person who immerses in a *mikveh* for purification while holding an impure thing; the immersion does not effect purification unless s/he casts away the impure thing. And one must specify the sin that has been committed, as it is said, "Oh, this people has committed a great sin; they have made for themselves a god of gold." (Exodus 32:31).

מדרכי התשובה להיות השב צועק תמיד לפני השם בבכי ובתחנונים ועושה צדקה כפי כחו ומתרחק הרבה מן הדבר שחטא בו... ומשנה מעשיו כולן לטובה ולדרך ישרה וגולה ממקומו, שגלות מכפרת עון מפני שגורמת לו להכנע ולהיות עניו ושפל רוח:

(2:4) The path of repentance includes actions such as these: the penitent should cry out to God in tears and supplication, give *tz'dakah* in accordance with his financial means, keep far away from the matter which occasioned the sin... completely alter her behavior toward the good, and to leave his home, since exile atones for sin in that it causes one to submit (to God) in humility and lowliness of spirit.

ושבח גדול לשב שיתודה ברבים ויודיע פשעיו להם ומגלה עבירות שבינו לבין חבירו לאחרים ואומר להם אמנם חטאתי לפלוני ועשיתי לו כך וכך והריני היום שב ומתנחם, וכל המתגאה ואינו מודיע אלא מכסה פשעיו אין תשובתו גמורה שנאמר מכסה פשעיו לא יצליח.

The penitent is worthy of great praise should s/he confess and announce their misdeeds in public, revealing to others the wrongs they have committed against their fellow human being. Let the penitent say to them: "I have sinned against so-and-so, and I have done such-and-such, and I state today that I repent of this wrongdoing and feel remorse over it. The one who in arrogance does not announce one's misdeeds but rather conceals them has not done true repentance, as it is said, "The one who conceals his misdeeds shall not succeed."

אין התשובה ולא יום הכפורים מכפרין אלא על עבירות שבין אדם למקום... 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, אף על פי שהחזיר לו ממון שהוא חייב לו צריך לרצותו ולשאול ממנו שימחול לו, אפילו לא הקניט את חבירו אלא בדברים צריך לפייסו ולפגע בו עד שימחול לו:

T'shuvah and Yom Kippur effect atonement for sins between a person and God... but sins against other persons, such as injuring them, cursing them, and robbing them, are never forgiven until the sinner compensates the victims and reconciles with them. Even if the sinner has compensated the victims, he must reconcile with them and ask that they forgive him.

Even if the sin was a purely verbal one, the sinner must reconcile with the victims and beg them for their forgiveness.