

**Forgiveness**  
*Kol Nidre/Yom Kippur 5769/October 8-9, 2008*  
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In a single word, *Yom Kippur* is about forgiveness. During this season of the year, Judaism requires us to seek forgiveness from those whom we have wronged and also to grant forgiveness to those who seek it from us.

All of us come to *Kol Nidre* with some need for reconciliation and healing. Too many of us have hurt or mistreated someone this past year. And too few made it through this past year without being hurt by the actions of someone else. Emotional suffering and spiritual pain caused by others can be devastating to our self-image and our enthusiasm for life. So we struggle together again this *Yom Kippur* to find the courage to move beyond the words of “Gates of Repentance,” and to both seek and grant forgiveness in keeping with the highest ideals of our tradition.

Asking for forgiveness is exceedingly hard. It means admitting we have made mistakes, failed, perhaps even sinned; it means that we are fragile and vulnerable and imperfect human beings. Asking others to forgive us is a humbling experience, a challenge to our pride and ego. Begging pardon exposes our flaws and our deceits, as well as the smug air of self-importance and satisfaction by which we too often live our lives. In seeking forgiveness, we risk the additional humiliation of rejection, of embarrassment in the eyes of others, and shame in our own.

Yet the demands of Judaism are clear: the law regarding physical injury, for example, is explicit in that even after the various compensatory payments have been made, the inflictor of the damage must seek the forgiveness of the injured party for the suffering caused. Indeed the

rabbis teach that we are obligated to seek forgiveness from those we have hurt up to three times after which we have fulfilled our obligation.

Ironically, as difficult as it is to seek forgiveness, granting forgiveness can be just as challenging. The dictionary defines 'forgiveness' as "giving up resentment against something or someone." But often we resist that 'giving up' part with all our might.

Tomorrow afternoon's *Torah* reading, the Holiness Code, chapter 19 of the book of Leviticus, contains these important and powerful *mitzvot*: "You should not hate another person in your heart, but rather you should rebuke your neighbor and not bear sin on his account. You should not take vengeance nor bear a grudge...but rather you should love your neighbor as yourself."

The *Torah* is extraordinarily insightful when it links the potential for sin to feelings of anger that can fester inside of us when we carry grudges too long. The *Talmud* instructs us (*Ta'anit* 20a) that the one sinned against is duty bound to forgive. It says, "a person should be as pliant as a reed, not hard like a cedar." As the Greek-Jewish philosopher Philo taught, "If you want to ask pardon for your sins, you also have the obligation to forgive those who have transgressed against you."

In practical terms, the danger of sin from holding a grudge is rooted in that all too common refusal to forgive. When we have been wronged, it is tempting to take advantage of the situation by becoming angry, arrogant or caustic. We like to hold grudges because it is an exquisitely devious way of extracting revenge. Refusing to grant forgiveness to an offending person gives us a certain power over them, a power extracted from the debt of having been wronged. And we often keep on holding onto that power by continuing to assign blame and thereby exacting on-going guilt and emotional punishment.

Interestingly enough, researchers are currently pursuing links between forgiveness and improvements in physical and mental health. The act of forgiveness can have both direct and indirect effects on the body and the mind. When people forgive, they replace negative feelings with more positive emotions like empathy, compassion and caring. These positive emotions reduce the hostility and negative stress the person feels. Studies have found that forgiving people are more likely to have stable relationships, are happier and less prone to depression and anxiety.

One common misconception is that forgiveness is a sign of weakness. Exactly the opposite. Letting go of hatred is very difficult and often courageous. It can be harder to forgive than to hold a grudge.

For some of us, it is especially difficult to forgive God. Whether expressed as an anguished “why me?” following a cancer diagnosis or a rage against injustice when indeed life isn’t fair, or in the disturbing prose of an Elie Wiesel, anger at God is exceedingly common. And while the target of our wrath may be distant, even abstract, the effect of our anger is just as tangible, personal and potentially devastating as it is when directed at another human being.

In a study reported in the “Journal of Human Psychology,” Case Western Reserve University social psychologist Julie Juola–Exline and a team of researchers found that people who said they had experienced disappointment, frustration or a lack of forgiveness in their relationship with God reported more emotional distress than other people. This seems to be true even though many people profess not to believe in the very God whom they accuse of making mistakes or deliberately causing them harm! The most common reasons for anger at God, she reported, were the traumatic death of someone close to them, parental divorce, disappointment in parental role modeling, relationship break-ups and various types of abuse.

The study produced a surprising finding: those who said they didn't believe in God actually reported greater difficulty forgiving God! What a theological and psychological paradox: for some people, feelings of anger at God serve as barriers to belief and therefore, to religion as well. This is a spiritual knot that many of us need to untie. Yet the study also points out that those who are able to forgive God report lower levels of anger, depression and anxiety.

During this season of atonement, some may ask whether we are also required to forgive those deeds that may be truly unforgivable. Each fall as we approach the Days of Awe, victims of various kinds--victims of sexual and physical and verbal abuse, those who have suffered immoral and coercive behavior by others, and especially those who have survived psychological or physical defilement at the hands of those whom they loved and trusted--may ask themselves if they are required to forgive. At the very same time when we are expected to engage in healing acts of *teshuvah*, the survivors of monstrous acts may be so overwhelmed with anger or rage that they simply cannot find it within their hearts to do what they think they should.

*Teshuvah* is one thing. But how does a person who may have post-traumatic flashbacks and nightmares or a variety of physical and emotional ailments, forgive the perpetrator of the horrors they endured? How does a survivor forgive the Nazis? None too easily, to be sure. Most never reconcile with the perpetrator of the terrible acts against them: the perpetrator may have refused to even acknowledge the cruelty, or may have died without ever taking steps to make amends. Forgiving the offender in such situations may be far removed from our minds and, more importantly, from our hearts and our emotional and spiritual ability. There are some things we must simply leave to God!

While there indeed may be understandable circumstances where we cannot find a way in our hearts to forgive, we also cannot continue to live with the rage, fear and anger. Perhaps we

can find another path to help us move forward. In addition to *teshuvah*, atonement, Judaism also has the idea of *shleimut*. *Shleimut* means wholeness, personal integrity, and a sense of our own value and meaning. Pursuing *shleimut* may help us find our way toward a different kind of healing.

There are times when we must learn to give up our anger and resentment without granting forgiveness. Most times we must learn to let it go and move on for our own sake, so that we may be liberated of the demons of rage and bitterness. When we lay down our feelings of recrimination and retribution, we can move forward toward an internal level of *shleimut* that can liberate our spirits to live more fully at peace.

This requires honoring ourselves enough to do what's right even though it can be scary and difficult. It means taking a risk and making even more mistakes. Seeking *Shleimut* involves humility and compassion. Both granting forgiveness outright and finding *shleimut* without forgiveness can liberate us. They set us free from the ball and chain of resentment that too often prevents us from moving freely into our own best future.

Forgiveness is not a favor we do for the person who offended us. It is a favor we do for ourselves, cleansing our souls of thoughts and memories that lead us to see ourselves as victims and make our lives less enjoyable. When we understand we have little choice as to what other people do but we can always choose how we will respond to what they do, we can let go of those embittering memories and enter the New Year clean and fresh.

Seeking and granting forgiveness presents us with an additional challenge. For some it is too easy to say the words "I'm sorry" or "I forgive you." Spoken in a perfunctory, indifferent or mechanical way, reciting the words with no *kavannah* or truth or integrity—this may be worse than nothing at all.

In his book Calm Surrender, Kent Nerburn writes, “forgiveness cannot be a disengaged, pastel emotion...to be a real virtue, engaged with the world around us, forgiveness must be muscular, alive and able to withstand the outrages and inequities of inhuman and inhumane acts. It must be able to face the dark side of the human condition.”

Nerburn urges us to find a way of letting our bitterness go with a “gentle, almost invisible touch, cultivating the seed of hope, embodying forgiveness, and seeing this spiritual practice as love put into action.” Forgiveness is “a habit of the heart,” he reminds us, “an inclination of the spirit, a way of living our lives in homage to all the good choices and decisions we make each day.”

During this season of atonement, we are required to seek forgiveness from those whom we have harmed, wronged or offended. During this season of atonement, we are also required to grant forgiveness to those who seek it from us and, perhaps, to God as well. And, during this season of atonement, if we cannot find it within our hearts to forgive, may we turn those hurts over to God and pursue the goal of *shleimut* for our own souls.

“Gates of Repentance” (page 371) reminds us that:

We are not so arrogant as to pretend  
that the trial of our lives  
does not reveal our flaws.  
We know ourselves,  
in this moment of prayer,  
to have failed  
the ones we love and the stranger,  
again and again.  
We know how often  
we did not bring to the surface of our lives  
the hidden goodness within.  
Where we have achieved, O God,  
we are grateful;  
where we have failed,  
we ask forgiveness.

Remember how exposed we are  
to the chances and terrors of life.  
We were afraid.  
We sometimes chose to fail.  
And we ask:  
Turn our thoughts from the hurt to its remedy.  
Free us of the torments of guilt.

Forgiven, we shall then forgive others;  
failing, we shall learn to understand failure;  
renewed and encouraged, we shall strive to be like  
those who came before us: human.  
Sinners sometimes, yet a blessing.

During the *Yom Kippur* day ahead may we keep before us the words of Reb Nachman of Bratslav: “Imitate God by being compassionate and forgiving. God will in turn have compassion on you and pardon your offenses.”

O God, You have given us the opportunity and ability to mend our lives. May You also give us the courage and humility to make real *teshuvah* and *shleimut* in our lives.

*Amen.*

