

ON FORGIVING

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ON FORGIVING (from: The Mayo Clinic)

(The Ba'al Shem Tov said that we should study "musar" each day: Study that which leads us to grow spiritually and improve our behavior. Here's an example from the Mayo Clinic:)

Forgiveness: Letting Go of Grudges and Bitterness

When someone you care about hurts you, you can hold on to anger, resentment and thoughts of revenge — or embrace forgiveness and move forward. [\[1\]](#)

Nearly everyone has been hurt by the actions or words of another. Perhaps your mother criticized your parenting skills, your colleague sabotaged a project or your partner had an affair. These wounds can leave you with lasting feelings of anger, bitterness or even vengeance — but if you don't practice forgiveness, you might be the one who pays most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, you can also embrace peace, hope, gratitude and joy. Consider how forgiveness can lead you down the path of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

What is forgiveness?

Generally, forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge. The act that hurt or offended you might always remain a part of your life, but forgiveness can lessen its grip on you and help you focus on other, positive parts of your life. Forgiveness can even lead to feelings of understanding, empathy and compassion for the one who hurt you.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that you deny the other person's responsibility for hurting you, and it doesn't minimize or justify the wrong. You can forgive the person without excusing the act. Forgiveness brings a kind of peace that helps you go on with life.

What are the benefits of forgiving someone?

Letting go of grudges and bitterness can make way for compassion, kindness and peace.

Forgiveness can lead to:

Healthier relationships

Greater spiritual and psychological well-being

Less anxiety, stress and hostility

Lower blood pressure

Fewer symptoms of depression

Lower risk of alcohol and substance abuse

Why is it so easy to hold a grudge?

When you're hurt by someone you love and trust, you might become angry, sad or confused. If you dwell on hurtful events or situations, grudges filled with resentment, vengeance and hostility can take root. If you allow negative feelings to crowd out positive feelings, you might find yourself swallowed up by your own bitterness or sense of injustice.

What are the effects of holding a grudge?

If you're unforgiving, you might pay the price repeatedly by bringing anger and bitterness into every relationship and new experience. Your life might become so wrapped up in the wrong that you can't enjoy the present. You might become depressed or anxious. You might feel that your life lacks meaning or purpose, or that you're at odds with your spiritual beliefs. You might lose valuable and enriching connectedness with others.

How do I reach a state of forgiveness?

Forgiveness is a commitment to a process of change. To begin, you might:

Consider the value of forgiveness and its importance in your life at a given time.

Reflect on the facts of the situation, how you've reacted, and how this combination has affected your life, health and well-being.

When you're ready, actively choose to forgive the person who's offended you.

Move away from your role as victim and release the control and power the offending person and situation have had in your life.

As you let go of grudges, you'll no longer define your life by how you've been hurt. You might even find compassion and understanding.

What happens if I can't forgive someone?

Forgiveness can be challenging, especially if the person who's hurt you doesn't admit wrong or doesn't speak of his or her sorrow. If you find yourself stuck, consider the situation from the other person's point of view. Ask yourself why he or she would behave in such a way. Perhaps you would have reacted similarly if you faced the same situation. In addition, consider broadening your view of the world. Expect occasional imperfections from the people in your life. You might want to reflect on times you've hurt others and on those who've forgiven you. It can also be helpful to write in a journal, pray or use guided meditation — or talk with a person you've found to be wise and compassionate, such as a spiritual leader, a mental health provider, or an impartial loved one or friend.

Does forgiveness guarantee reconciliation?

If the hurtful event involved someone whose relationship you otherwise value, forgiveness can lead to reconciliation. This isn't always the case, however. Reconciliation might be impossible if the offender has died or is unwilling to communicate with you. In other cases, reconciliation might not be appropriate. Still, forgiveness is possible — even if reconciliation isn't.

What if I have to interact with the person who hurt me but I don't want to?

If you haven't reached a state of forgiveness, being near the person who hurt you might be tense and stressful. To handle these situations, remember that you can choose to attend or avoid specific functions and gatherings. Respect yourself and do what seems best. If you choose to attend, don't be surprised by a certain amount of awkwardness and perhaps even more intense feelings. Do your best to keep an open heart and mind. You might find that the experience helps you to move forward with forgiveness.

What if the person I'm forgiving doesn't change?

Getting another person to change his or her actions, behavior or words isn't the point of forgiveness. Think of forgiveness more about how it can change your life — by bringing you peace, happiness, and emotional and spiritual healing. Forgiveness can take away the power the other person continues to wield in your life.

What if I'm the one who needs forgiveness?

The first step is to honestly assess and acknowledge the wrongs you've done and how those wrongs have affected others. At the same time, avoid judging yourself too harshly. You're human, and you'll make mistakes. If you're truly sorry for something you've said or done, consider admitting it to those you've harmed. Speak of your sincere sorrow or regret, and specifically ask for forgiveness — without making excuses. Remember, however, you can't force someone to forgive you. Others need to move to forgiveness in their own time. Whatever the outcome, commit to treating others with compassion, empathy and respect.

[1] <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/forgiveness/MH00131>

S'LICHAH – ON FORGIVING

by
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TaNaCH is filled with examples of rape, violence, betrayal and murder, to be sure.

Yet, there are also moments of such deep forgiveness; it's impossible not to be moved and inspired by them. They show the promise of the best that we can do.

With no rancor, blame or resentment, Yosef reunites with the brothers who almost killed him.

People who are, by nature, not easily angered find it easy to forgive. But I don't think Torah necessarily intends for us to understand Yosef as being this way. If he were, it would mean that he was naturally unfazed by others' negative words and deeds towards him. Torah gives no such picture of Yosef. He tests his brothers before he reveals himself. His test might imply some hesitance – even conflict -- in his own heart.

His forgiveness of his brothers, at first cautious, is ultimately filled with warmth and willingness.

For most of us, forgiveness can involve a struggle. We say that we forgive, but in our hearts, we still resent. A great many personal questions and issues must be faced, before true forgiveness – not the simple words, “I forgive you,” -- can take place.

Forgiveness is often more of a gradual, than a sudden process. Yosef underwent that process.

We can, too.

One great benefit of psychotherapy, in its various forms, has been to encourage us to accept our “negative” feelings as “human” and “natural,” as long as we express them (if and when necessary) in an appropriate manner. As I once heard a student say in a “Casework” class: “The ‘Gospel’ of therapy is that all feelings are OK.” We need not feel guilty about having these feelings or thoughts. Nor should we be surprised when we discover that others, even infants, have them, too. “Peace of mind,” in this sense, means learning not to be upset or disturbed by the feelings themselves, but somehow employing them instead as “stepping stones” in our growth as human beings.

If in life we fully accomplished only this and no more: “Dayyenu.”

But spiritual practice, especially in Hasidut, offers the vision of a step beyond even this one, to “spiritual purity.”

The word “purity,” often associated with “cleanliness,” can also mean “unmixed” – e.g. “pure gold” is gold unmixed with any other mineral. Spiritually, a “pure heart” is a heart “unmixed” with conflicting emotions and impulses. Yosef’s heart was pure, because his forgiveness of his brothers was, in the end, unmixed with resentment at the wrong they had done not only to him, but to Yakov, his/their beloved father, as well.

The love we’d expect him to feel for his own brothers was unmixed with any desire to avenge himself for the ghastly, malicious treatment he had received at their hands.

To forgive, we must first look at the effect of not forgiving on ourselves.

If we have been wronged – and who hasn’t been, at some point? – we might feel justified in feeling anger towards the one who has hurt us. We are justified. But who is hurt most by our anger? We are, ourselves. Our anger robs us of our own peace. Moreover, the unalterable spiritual truth, taught by every spiritual teacher, is that our real “peace” is the Divine Quiet in us. The first step in forgiving, then, is to know that Divine Quiet is the unchangeable essence of who and what we are. Divine Quiet is perpetually the pure state of our hearts and minds.

We can’t separate ourselves from it, but we can block our view of it by our own anger and resentment – just as a child can block the sun, by putting a penny against his or her eye. If we choose to block the Divine Quiet that is always part of us, we give the person who hurt us once the power to hurt us over and over. We have not only given them the power; we have agreed, as it were, to do it for them. And we do it without any compensation for what we lost to begin with.

Forgiveness is not always achievable by intellect or self-control alone. It’s hard to imagine on what power a human being could draw, to achieve such purity, but that is the subtle message of Yosef’s forgiving of his brothers. Realizing the Divine Quiet in him, Yosef’s heart was gradually emptied of hurt and anger. Each moment of awareness of that Divine Quiet cleansed his heart of one more bit of turmoil. When we truly forgive, we find our heart filled with G-d’s Presence; filled with Divine Peace, Quiet, Light and Love.

It is a change that can seem almost miraculous. There are many miracles in TaNaCH, but none greater than a heart that has truly forgiven.

Did I say that “purity” means “unmixed,” and then name “four” Divine qualities?

In G-d, they are united as one, and they flower in the heart of the one who forgives.

FORGIVING ACCORDING TO RABBI TWERSKI

(Strangely, although we're often told to "forgive," we're not often told "why" or, even more importantly, "how." It's a crucial part of spiritual education. In the following article, [1] Rabbi Avraham Twerski, who is also a psychiatrist specializing in treating chemical dependency, alcoholism in particular, gives us further insight and guidelines into "forgiving.")

- **Forgiving is not condoning.**

A wrongful act is a wrongful act, and your forgiveness does not change the nature of the act. When the Divine forgives, then depending on the quality of teshuvah (repentance), He may totally erase the act as though it never occurred. "And all the sins of Your nation, cast away to a place where they will neither be remembered, considered, nor brought to mind — ever" (from the *Tashlich* prayer [said on the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah]).

In human forgiveness, it is not essential that the person forget the offense. There can be forgiveness even if one remembers it.

Forgiving is not justifying. The Talmud states that one should always judge another person favorably (Ethics of the Fathers 1:6), and "Do not judge your fellow until you have reached his place" (ibid. 2:5).

But even when one cannot justify another person's behavior, one can still forgive.

- **Forgiveness is not reconciliation.**

Reconciliation is when two parties (individuals or groups) have been separated and decide to rejoin.

One cannot have a true reconciliation without forgiveness, because that would simply be a peaceful coexistence rather than a sincere relationship.

But one can have forgiveness without reconciliation.

- **It is not necessary that the offender ask for forgiveness.**

The people who exploited my patient could not care less or even know whether or not he forgives them.

He knows he must forgive them, i.e., divest himself of his resentment in order to avoid a relapse into drinking.

As stated above, the common understanding of forgiveness is that it is an act of kindness toward an offender. Indeed, this may be one aspect, but acting with kindness to the offender does not necessarily have to be included.

If we focus on this new understanding of forgiveness — ridding oneself of resentment for one's own sake — we are more likely to look for ways to forgive.

When you are offended, you are hurt. You might bite your lip and put on a stoic front, saying (to yourself), "That didn't bother me. I let it roll off me like water off a duck's back." You are deceiving yourself. Whether it is a physical or an emotional injury, you feel the pain. Every injury is a wound. Time is indeed a great healer, but this healing is incomplete. Complete healing occurs when you forgive. By the same token, forgiveness cannot be effective until one has accepted and adjusted to the pain of the offense.

How can you know when you are ready to forgive? When you no longer harbor fantasies of revenge and when you no longer expect the offender to make amends.

My father used to cite the verses in the Torah in which Rebecca told Jacob that his brother Esau had designs to kill him, and instructed Jacob to flee to her brother Laban in Haran. "Remain with him a short while until your brother's wrath subsides. Until your brother's anger at you subsides" (Genesis 27:43-45).

My father pointed out that the second verse is redundant, and suggested that it lends itself to another translation, i.e., "Until your anger at your brother subsides."

Rebecca was saying that feelings are reciprocal, as Solomon says, "As water reflects face to face, so the heart of man to man" (Proverbs 27:19). She was telling Jacob, "How will you know when Esau's wrath has subsided? When you no longer feel anger toward your brother, you will know that he does not feel anger toward you."

When your anger at the person who offended you has mellowed, you can know that his hostility toward you has subsided, and you can then forgive wholeheartedly.

There are resistances to forgiving. One of them is a kind of satisfaction at feeling that one is a victim and feeling sorry for oneself. Feelings of low self-esteem are implicated in most psychological problems, and this is no exception. People with low self-esteem may feel that being a victim or martyr is uplifting. This satisfaction is offset by the pain that one experiences by remaining a victim. Building up self-esteem allows one to relinquish the state of victimhood, which then allows him to lead a much happier life.

Do you have a story to share about forgiving someone?

[1] http://www.jewishworldreview.com/twerski/twerski_forgiveness.php3

(also in Jewish World Review of 7/9); excerpted from: Twerski, Rabbi Avraham; *Forgiveness; Don't Let Resentment Keep You Captive*; Art Scroll Publishers

JUDAISM AND FORGIVING

1. “One who has sinned against [another] must say to him [or her], ‘I’ve acted wrongly against you’.” (Talmud; Yoma 45c)
2. “Forgive an insult done to you.” (Avot d’Rabbi Natan [ARN], ch. 41)
3. “If you’ve done another a small wrong, let it be great in your eyes...” (ARN; ch. 41)
4. “If another has done you a great wrong, let it be small in your eyes.” (ARN; ch. 41)
5. “One should always be [bending] like a reed, not [rigid] like a cedar...” (Talmud; Ta’anit 20b)
6. “The emotional pain of an insult comes from what you add to it. Don’t add thoughts of your own to someone else’s insulting words [or actions] and you won’t suffer. You’ll suffer if you add to the insult by telling yourself such negative things as, ‘I’m a nobody if people can talk to me like this’ or ‘If people consider me a person with such faults, I might not be able to get married or find a job,’ or ‘It’s awful that someone talks to me like this’. It’s not the insult that causes you emotional pain, but your own thoughts that you’ve added to the insult. Learn not to add [your own negative thoughts] to insults, and you’ll save yourself much unnecessary pain.” [1]
7. “All who overlook what’s owed to them, Heaven overlooks their sins in return.” (Talmud; Rosh HaShanah 17a)
8. “Whoever is compassionate toward others [and forgives wrongs done to him/her], compassion is shown to him/her from Heaven...” (Talmud; Shabbat 151b)
9. “If one has received an injury, then, even if the wrongdoer has not asked for forgiveness, the receiver of the injury must nevertheless ask G-d to show the wrongdoer compassion, even as Avraham prayed to G-d for Avimelech, and Ayov [Job] for his friends. Rabbi Gamliel said, ‘Let this be a sign to you, that whenever you are compassionate, the Compassionate One will have compassion on you.’ (Mishnah; Baba Kamma 9:29-30).
10. “Whoever forgoes retaliation [and forgives wrongs done to him/her], his/her sins are remitted...” (Talmud; Yoma 23a)
11. “When the Chazon Ish lived in Europe, he once walked in a forest with a disciple. Some people walked behind them and mocked them. The disciple insulted them back. ‘You’re not a ben Torah (serious Torah student),’ the Chazon Ish told him. ‘How would a ben Torah reply?’ the student asked. ‘He would not reply at all’ answered the Chazon Ish.” [2]

[1] based on: Rabbi Zelig Pliskin; *Gateway to Happiness*; p. 294

[2] *ibid*, p. 302-3

FORGIVING OURSELVES

by
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In writing and talking about “forgiving,” I’ve often been asked about “forgiving ourselves.”

While Jewish tradition doesn’t necessarily use that particular “psychological” terminology, it’s repeatedly discussed in the context of “guilt,” “remorse,” etc.

Much Jewish teaching speaks about regretting our mistakes, but this is to motivate us to change for the better, not to depress us. Jokes about “Jewish guilt,” however humorous, don’t accurately reflect what Torah teaches.

Again and again, Judaism teaches us to be joyful, even (perhaps especially) when it comes to penitence:

“At times it is well to avoid thoughts of holiness and penitence when they come in a spirit of melancholy...When thoughts of fear and penitence occur to a person in a spirit of melancholy, let him [her] distract his [her] mind from them until his [her] mind becomes more settled...” [1]

Rabbi Morris Lichtenstein likewise doesn’t speak about “forgiving ourselves,” but he does write about needless remorse in his discussion of “grief”:

“...when repentance [i.e. feelings of guilt or remorse] deepens and turns into grief, robbing of all quietude the heart in which it dwells, it ceases to serve its high function and becomes a destructive tool...” [2]

“We do not need to rebuke our past, or punish ourselves for it, we have only to transcend it, to live a better life in the present and aspire to an even better one in the future. When we permit repentance to bite too deeply into our soul, we are simply inviting moroseness and unhappiness in the name of atonement. We are, in reality, making atonement more distant by making ourselves miserable. Man attains the height of his [her] own perfection through joy.” [3]

As we look back on our lives – to the recent or distant past – do we find ourselves feeling regret, even shame? Do we say to ourselves, “If only...” about one or more things that we did or didn't do?

We can’t change what has already happened. But we can use it as the first building block for a positive future:

“Ask yourself, ‘Will my blaming myself help me improve or not?’ To the degree [that] self-blame motivates you to change for the better, it is positive. Self-blame that prevents improvement is counter-productive and should be overcome.” [4]

Of course, this isn’t meant to minimize the seriousness of what we might have done. It certainly shouldn’t be used to make light of our responsibility, as if to shrug it off with a callous declaration of “my bad.” It simply means: Sadness that prevents us from doing better is of little or no use. As Bob Dylan wrote in a different context: “...now ain’t the time for your tears.” [5]

Rav Kook further tells us that in practical terms, too, “penitence” or “repentance” is best focused at first on the future, not the past:

"The basis of everything is the ascent of perception, the intensification of the light of the Torah, and penitence in action is to follow closely, at first with reference to future behavior, then with matters of the past that lend themselves to easy mending." [6]

Of course, it’s impossible in a short blog-post to explore this topic in the depth and breadth that it deserves. The sources cited here can make a more-than-adequate beginning to your investigation of this topic. They can also lead you to further sources.

But the teaching is clear: Personal change comes best out of joy.

Focus on your present and future before working on your past.

[1] Kook, Rabbi Abraham Isaac; *Abraham Isaac Kook*; Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser, trans.; Paulist Press; p. 102 (“The Lights of Penitence/Orot HaTeshuvah)

[2] Lichtenstein, Rabbi Morris; *Jewish Science and Health*; Society of Jewish Science; p. 212

[3] *ibid.*, p. 212-3

[4] Pliskin, Rabbi Zelig; *Gateway to Happiness*; Aish HaTorah Publications (1983); p. 218 [please note: there’s a later edition of this book, in which the pagination might differ]

[5] Dylan, Bob; *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*; © 1964, 1966

[6] Kook, Rabbi Abraham Isaac; *Abraham Isaac Kook*; Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser, trans.; Paulist Press; p. 94 (“The Lights of Penitence/Orot HaTeshuvah)