

How CAN I Forgive?

A Conversation with Solomon Schimmel

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Why is it often so hard for us to forgive someone who has hurt us?

We all want to be treated justly and with dignity, so when someone mistreats us without justification or doesn't take us seriously, our self-dignity is affronted. And it's even more difficult to forgive when the perpetrator doesn't show remorse, doesn't apologize, and doesn't provide restitution. In some cases, too, when the injury is long-term or permanent, such as paralysis or blindness, the injured is constantly reminded of the perpetrator's misdeed. So the question naturally becomes, "why *should* I forgive this person?"

Judaism acknowledges, as well, how difficult it can be to forgive. I recently came across a kabbalistic traditional prayer that's recited before going to sleep at night: "Master of the universe, I hereby forgive anyone who angered or antagonized me or sinned against me, whether against my body, my property, my honor, or against anything of mine, whether he did so accidentally, willfully, carelessly, or purposely, whether through speech, deed, thought, or notion, whether in this transmigration or another transmigration" (*Artscroll Weekday Siddur*). The fact that this prayer was written to remind us of the daily need to be forgiving is a measure of how difficult it is for we humans to forgive.

How does one begin the process of forgiveness?

In approaching forgiveness, it's useful to differentiate between two types. One is where somebody has injured you, but in the interest of peace, harmony, or to give a perpetrator an opportunity to reconstruct his or her life, you forego your legal or moral claim against the perpetrator. For example, a woman might choose to forgive her husband who cheated on her and not sue for divorce because she believes he's basically a good human being, has been a responsible father, and deserves another chance. The second kind of forgiveness has to do with assuaging one's own inner feelings of anger at the offender. This can be very useful to individuals who are stymied from leading a constructive life because they are trapped in a web of hatred and resentment.

Does Jewish tradition offer any biblical or other models of forgiveness?

The most well-known biblical model is Joseph, who forgives his brothers for selling him into slavery when it becomes clear to him that they have changed their ways. Joseph's act of forgiveness is reflected in the talmudic teaching that, in most cases, one should forgive a perpetrator who sincerely admits his or her wrongs.

From a Jewish perspective, is one obligated to forgive someone who hasn't repented?

Maimonides writes that a victim of injury is required to forgive someone who repents through actions such as apologizing and asking the victim for forgiveness. We can infer from Maimonides' position that in the absence of repentance, there is no obligation to forgive. Moreover, to forgive an offender without requiring that he or she repents and/or pays restitution could have an adverse effect on upholding the core Jewish value that people should be held accountable for deeds that cause harm to others. On the other hand, as we have seen in the bedtime prayer, there is a stream in Jewish thought that would encourage forgiveness without repentance.

Why are some people better able to forgive than others?

Empathetic people who are able to discern extenuating circumstances that might have led to the perpetrator's action are more likely to be able to let go of their grievances. Undergoing this process of reflection does not by any means justify the misconduct, but it gives the victim a broader perspective on the perpetrator and therefore facilitates forgiveness.

Is there a danger of being too empathetic and forgiving?

Yes, because a perpetrator who is "let off the hook" too easily might repeat the offense and injure other people. In addition, if forgiveness is granted "cheaply," the perpetrator would feel little obligation to repent. This situation often arises in the context of spousal abuse, where the abuse is likely to recur; therefore, an abused wife should never be pressured into forgiving her husband and not holding him accountable. Our tradition teaches that we are not permitted to put our lives and health at risk, except in exceptional circumstances.

If we have wronged another, how should we seek forgiveness?

According to Maimonides and other great Jewish thinkers, first, we must recognize that we've wronged another human being. One way to foster this awareness is to make a moral accounting of our daily behavior. We can ask ourselves every evening: "Have I hurt or injured anyone today, either by acts of commission or of omission?" Then we can reflect on how to make amends. We can also become more knowledgeable about actions that constitute abuse, such as gossip or

slander. And the more we familiarize ourselves with Jewish ethical teachings, the more we'll be able to assess whether our own behavior is blameless.

Second, we should try, whenever possible, to apologize to the person whom we've injured. It's not enough to apologize with words, because words can be cheap. >From a Jewish perspective it's very important that the apology also include, where possible, actions of reparation (repairing the hurt) and restitution (restoring the situation to where it was before the misdeed). Thus I might repair the pain I caused by a sarcastic remark to my child not only by telling her, "I am sorry," but by going out of my way to say something kind and caring to her. Obviously, if we have caused someone financial loss, we have to be willing to pay compensation (even if we could avoid payment through a legal maneuver), but ameliorating emotional pain is far more complicated.

The highest form of repentance requires a fundamental transformation of one's value system and behavior patterns. For example, a person who has lived his or her life narcissistically may need to realize there is more to life than just satisfying the self. He or she may then resolve to devote his/her life to helping others. In Judaism, a shift of such magnitude is referred to as *teshuvah*, which is literally "returning" to Jewish values.

What if, after all this, the victim still refuses to forgive?

If you've gone through the process of *teshuvah* and done whatever possible to rectify the injuries and the victim still refuses to forgive, then you have the right to say, "I've done everything I can. I don't have to go on with this guilt. I feel bad that the victim isn't forgiving me, but there's nothing more I can really do. I forgive myself." In such cases the process of self-forgiveness is very therapeutic.

On the other hand, the sinner who holds on to his sin--e.g., does not repent--has no authority to forgive himself.

Do Jews and Christians have different ideas about forgiveness?

Within these two faith communities there exists a variety of views, though in general there are differences between the two faiths. While in Judaism a person who's done something wrong is obliged to repent, make restitution, repair, apologize, and ask forgiveness, in many streams of Christianity repentance is not so much about the relationship between the perpetrator and victim as it is about one's relationship to God--for example, if I accept Christ as my savior and believe that Christ died so my sins and all of humanity's could be forgiven, then God will forgive me. In the Christian model, if a person goes directly to God, he or she may bypass the responsibility to apologize directly to the victim and make reparations.

Is Judaism closer to Christianity or Islam on the question of forgiveness and repentance?

In some ways Judaism is much closer to Islam. The teachings of the medieval Muslim authority al-Ghazzali are very similar to those of Maimonides. For example, al-Ghazzali writes that someone who has injured another must seek expiation by "subtly win[ning] [his victim] over, act[ing] in his interests, and show[ing] love and solicitude such as would take sway over his heart: Let his effort at gladdening the other's heart through tenderness be as great as it was in inflicting it." But of all three religions, I believe Judaism's concern about repentance in the interpersonal sphere is the strongest, insofar as it places this obligation at the core of its value system.

Can the principles of forgiveness and repentance help resolve a political dispute in which both sides view themselves as the victims, as is the case in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict?

Insofar as religious concepts are valued by the antagonists, and particularly by their leaders, I think they can be helpful in supporting political, economic, or diplomatic initiatives in a peace process, but these concepts alone are not likely to resolve ethnic or national conflicts. Until Muslim clerics preach in their mosques that it is a crime against Islam to kill innocent civilians, regardless of whether the Palestinians have legitimate grievances, there isn't much hope that these religious processes will lead to peace. And the same applies to Israel's clergy, though on the Israeli side various rabbis have articulated the importance of repentance for the crimes or sins Israelis have committed against the Arabs. For progress to be made, there has to be a mutuality of accepting responsibility--to use religious traditions to acknowledge these wrongs, to take responsibility for them, and to attempt to pursue a process that hopefully will lead, if not to forgiveness, then at least to reconciliation. At present, however, I think religion is serving more of a destructive than a constructive role in political conflicts.

Can there ever be reconciliation without forgiveness?

Reconciliation doesn't always require forgiveness, and forgiveness doesn't always require reconciliation. You can forgive somebody and not want to be reconciled. For example, if you've been in an abusive marriage, you might have reason to take pity on your abusive partner and be willing to forgive him or her in your heart, but it doesn't necessarily mean that you want to reconcile and continue living with this person. On the global level, hopefully the Israelis and Palestinians will reach a kind of reconciliation which will allow Jews and Arabs to live peaceably together. Such reconciliation might serve pragmatic interests for both sides; it will not necessarily mean that Israelis will forgive Arabs who committed atrocities, or that Arabs will forgive Israelis whom they consider to have been at fault in the conflict.

You've written a great deal about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. How do you view this model for righting historical wrongs?

I have both great respect and reservations about what took place in South Africa. The Mandela government did achieve a democratic transformation of power without a devastating civil war. However, in the process of avoiding revenge, they sacrificed elements of justice. They allowed

vicious criminals to get off scot-free--not only from criminal liability, but also from civil liability--in exchange for agreeing to testify before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission about the atrocities they committed. The government argued that, had they not allowed for this process, the country would have degenerated into civil war. In South Africa's approach to reconciliation the emphasis was placed more on forgiveness than on justice, reflecting the country's Christian ethos. I don't believe a Muslim-Jewish Truth and Reconciliation Commission would have followed the South African model. They would have prioritized issues of justice, been less inclined to grant amnesty to a perpetrator of horrific crimes, and placed greater emphasis on the feelings of the victims' families and their need for justice to be served.

You write that people need to be schooled in the art of forgiveness. How do we teach forgiveness?

The two core values that facilitate forgiving--empathy, the ability to put oneself in another's place and try to feel what he/she feels; and humility, an awareness of our own flaws and weaknesses--are best nurtured in our children, and from a very young age. Three-year-olds are capable of empathy, and once that capacity has emerged, it becomes possible to nurture it toward moral ends. The best way to teach your children is to model the behavior you wish to impart. So, for example, when your children see you demonstrating concern for other people's feelings, tempering justice with mercy when judging others, acknowledging your faults, and apologizing when you have done wrong, they will likely internalize these values. Another good way is to talk about values at the Shabbat or dinner table. In our home we often discussed events in which resentment, justice, moral responsibility, and reconciliation were relevant, whether in our personal lives or in the social and political sphere. Our children learned at a young age to reflect upon and take seriously these ideas and values which are so deeply embedded in our tradition. And in teaching our children, we also remind ourselves of our own humanness. In truth, we all bear grudges and aggressive feelings. So when a disagreement arises, it's important to consider that perhaps not all the blame lies with the other, to contemplate how we might have possibly contributed to it. In most conflicts, each of the partners is at fault to some degree. So if we ourselves learn how to inculcate humility and a capacity for empathy, we will nurture people who are more capable of thinking along the lines of taking responsibility, which is the goal of repentance.

What is the value of having an institutionalized period for repentance, such as the ten penitential days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?

Although we have prescribed days of penitence, in Judaism one is, in fact, supposed to be engaged in the process of *teshuvah* every day, every minute. You're always supposed to be thinking, "can I improve myself?" As one rabbinic aphorism teaches, "One should always repent the day before one dies"--and since we never know when we might die, we should repent every day. Yet, just because our tradition says we should always be trying to rectify injuries we've caused doesn't mean that we always find the time in our often hectic lives to do so. It's useful, therefore, to have a ritualized and time-bound set of practices. Public rituals also encourage individuals to engage in acts of repentance which they would be unlikely to do in private and on

their own initiative. Because everybody else is acknowledging his or her faults in public, you don't have to be ashamed of doing what is expected of you.

What thoughts will you personally take into the High Holy Day season?

I'll mostly think about how I might have failed as a husband, as a father, as a son--and how I should change my ways. I'd like to change the angry way I often come across in family settings, even though I'm not angry. The perception stems from the fact that I grew up in Brooklyn and was educated in a yeshiva culture where loud, aggressive talk was the norm; we argued over interpretations of Talmud and shouted at each other, out of excitement, not out of hostility or anger. So this Yom Kippur I plan to think about how I might modify my ways so I don't come across as hurtful to others. But repentance is a difficult process. Thinking or talking about changing myself doesn't mean I will succeed all at once.

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*Professor Schimmel's most recent book, **Wounds Not Healed By Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness** (Oxford University Press, 2002), is the recipient of the prestigious Association of American Publishers 2002 Award for Excellence in Psychology. The book has been praised by academics, psychologists, and readers across the spectrum, with words such as "tough and intellectually cogent" (Alan Dershowitz), "intelligent and engaging" (Sylvia Barack Fishman), "nuanced and intellectually rich" (Rabbi David Rosenn), "thorough and thoughtful" (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks). **Wounds Not Healed By Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness** will be published in a paperback version in September 2004*