

## Yom Kippur Afternoon, 5782 Discussion: Windows on Forgiveness

### VE'AL KULAM

Ve'al kulam eloha s'lichot,  
s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu.

### AND TO ALL

God of forgiveness, forgive us,  
wipe the slate clean,  
grant us atonement.

וְעַל כָּלֵם, אֱלֹהֵי סְלִיחוֹת, סְלַח לָנוּ, מַחַל לָנוּ, כַּפֵּר לָנוּ.

“Forgiveness is not a matter of exonerating people who have hurt you. They may not deserve exoneration. Forgiveness means cleansing your soul of the bitterness of ‘what might have been,’ ‘what should have been,’ and ‘what didn’t have to happen.’ Someone has defined forgiveness as ‘giving up all hope of having had a better past.’ What’s past is past and there is little to be gained by dwelling on it. There are perhaps no sadder people than the men and women who have a grievance against the world because of something that happened years ago and have let that memory sour their view of life ever since.”

- Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, *Overcoming Life's Disappointments*

---

*The following summarizes comments by Dr. Robert Enright, founder, International Forgiveness Institute:*

#### **What is Forgiveness?**

- Letting go of resentment and the urge for revenge toward the wrongdoer, no matter how deserving the wrongdoer may be.
- Giving acceptance, compassion, generosity and love, not from pity or from grim obligation, but because you choose to have a merciful heart and the power to free yourself to live a better life.
- Remembering that the pain was unfair and will always be unfair, but keeping it in perspective.
- Realizing that, in granting forgiveness, we ourselves are healed.
- Acknowledging the inherent worth of the offender.

#### **... and what is it not?**

- Forgetting the injustice.
- Condoning or excusing the wrongdoer.
- Forgetting the hurt.
- Condemning, or dealing from a place of moral superiority.
- Demanding justice or compensation.
- Simply calming down or becoming indifferent.
- The same as reconciliation.

#### **How to Forgive:**

- **Uncovering Phase:** The wronged individual becomes aware of the emotional pain resulting from a deep, unjust injury, and often feels anger or even hatred. As the anger and other negative emotions are brought out into the open, healing begins.
- **Decision Phase:** The individual realizes that focusing on the injury and the injurer may cause more unnecessary suffering and understands that change is needed if the wronged individual wants to go ahead in healing. The individual entertains the idea of forgiveness as a healing strategy and commits to forgiving the injurer who has caused such pain. An important step is to surrender thoughts, feelings or intentions of revenge.

- **Work Phase:** The forgiving individual begins the active work of forgiving the injurer. This phase often includes new ways of thinking about the injurer. The injured person may strive to understand the injurer's childhood or put the injurious event in context by understanding the pressures the injurer was under at the time of the offense. Often this new understanding is accompanied by empathy and compassion toward the offender. The work phase also includes the heart of forgiveness, which is the acceptance of the pain that resulted from the actions of the injurer. This must not be confused with any sense of deserving the pain but rather a bearing of pain that has been unjustly given. The individual may now be ready to offer goodwill toward the injurer in the form of merciful restraint, generosity, and moral love. This may or may not include reconciliation.
- **Outcome/Deepening Phase:** The forgiving individual gains emotional relief from the process of forgiving the injurer. The forgiving individual may find meaning in the suffering that he/she has faced. The emotional relief and new found meaning may lead to increased compassion for self and others. The individual may discover a new purpose in life and an active concern for his/her community.

---

***How to Seek Forgiveness*** (taken from an article by Bruce Feiler, Sept. 2015, "The New York Times"):

- **Admit Vulnerability:** Rabbi Shai Held, dean of the Jewish Learning Center "Hadar", says, "The reason forgiveness is so popular as a topic . . . is that we hurt people all the time. We all experience so many relationship breaches, and most of us don't know how to fix them." The most important step, he said, is to understand how your actions affected others. This is especially true in families. "What I've tried to do with my own children," Rabbi Held said, "is to get them to think beyond the mechanized 'I'm sorry' to the act of empathic imagining by asking, 'What is the other person feeling right now?'" Even young children, he said, are capable of appreciating how their misbehavior made others feel, an act of real rawness and growth. "You can't talk about forgiveness without talking about vulnerability," Rabbi Held said. "Vulnerability is acknowledging you owe something to someone by admitting that you hurt them."
- **Apologize. No, really apologize.** All people know an empty apology when they hear one. So what's a genuine one? "A real apology is not, 'I'm sorry you're upset,'" says Dr. Frederic Luskin, head of the Stanford Forgiveness Project. "A true, authentic apology is one in which the speaker says: 'I'm sorry, because my poor choice of action or words directly caused harm to you. . . . And I recognize you feel hurt as a direct [result] of what I did.'" When a person accepts responsibility and promises to make amends, Dr. Luskin continued, it has an almost universally positive effect. And, "when children grow up in a home where they see Mom and Dad genuinely apologizing ('Honey, I apologize for being late. I'm sorry you had to wait. '), then they grow up thinking an apology is not a bad thing. And that's a good thing."
- **If you want to be forgiven, ask.** Don't take for granted that the person you have wronged knows you are sorry and wish to be forgiven. People like to be asked.
- **How do you get forgiveness? Practice!** A mark of the critical need for forgiveness is that theologians, clerics and academics alike share an interest. Forgiveness is ecumenical. It's a skill that can be cultivated. Says Rabbi Held, "According to Judaism, part of what it means to be a human is to strive to become better, kinder, more generous, more forgiving. Rather than let those remain abstractions, I want us to try to make them more real in the relationships that matter most."

***How are Forgiveness and Reconciliation related?***

- Reconciliation is the act of two people, separated by conflict, coming together in agreement to establish or re-establish a relationship.
- Forgiveness is a moral decision to see the other person's worth, let go of anger, and offer compassion, benevolence, and love toward the offender.
- Forgiveness without reconciliation is possible. True reconciliation without forgiveness is not possible.