

# Judaism and Forgiveness

By Celeste Robins

Tonight, we observe Selichot. What does that mean? **Selichot**, the singular (selicha) of which **means** "forgiveness" in Hebrew, are penitential prayers and poems that are often recited in Jewish communities starting on the Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah all the way through Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. They are prayers for forgiveness and of repentance. Selichot is also said to mean "pardons," and is the name our tradition gives to a set of poems and prayers designed to help our hearts experience *teshuvah*, repentance or return (in the sense of returning-to-G-d or re-turning ourselves in the right direction again.) The focus is on asking G-d for forgiveness.

**Tonight**, I choose to focus on our giving forgiveness to ourselves and to one another; on letting go of resentment and grudges.

Holding onto our resentment, our grudges creates separation from others as well as from our true selves, our highest intents, our godliness. I don't like the feelings I have in my body when I am feeling resentment or holding a grudge. I don't like how my mind perseverates on the situation and how much energy it drains from me.

**What is the opposite of forgiveness? Maybe self-righteousness? I don't know about you, but my righteousness has not served me or my relationships well.**

**Judaism** teaches that because humans have been given free will, we are responsible for our own actions. If we commit an action which is wrong, then we must seek s'liha (forgiveness).

The biblical concept of forgiveness presumes that sin is a malefic force that adheres to the sinner and that forgiveness is the **divine** means for removing it.

There is often an emphasis on our seeking G-d's forgiveness, but what about our being able to forgive ourselves and one another?

Abraham, in Genesis 20:17-18, not only forgave his adversary, Avimelech, but offered prayers on his behalf. Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Avimelech and his wife and his maidservants, so that they could again bear children— for on account of Abraham's wife Sarah, the LORD had completely closed all the wombs in Abimelech's household....

The prophet Micah (7:18) asked: "Who is G-d like You, tolerating iniquity and forgiving transgression?" Upon which, the Talmud comments (Rosh Hashanah 17a): "Whose iniquities does G-d tolerate? A person who forgives the transgressions of another."

In Torah portion, Vayigash, we have another biblical example of forgiveness. Joseph, after putting his brothers through tests and trials, finally could not contain himself. He exclaimed, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into slavery in Egypt." And,

immediately after identifying himself, he unequivocally forgave them: “Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me hither ... it was not you who sent me here, but G-d...”

The Torah recounts a second event, years later, after Jacob had died. The brothers sought a meeting with Joseph fearing that he would now take revenge. They concocted a story, sending word to Joseph, saying, “Your father left these instructions before he died: ‘This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to **forgive** your brothers for the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.’ Now please **forgive** the sins of the servants of the God of your father.” When their message came to him, Joseph wept. [[Gen. 50: 16-18](#)]

What they said was a lie, but Joseph understood why they said it. The brothers used the word “forgive” – this is the first time it appears explicitly in the Torah – because they were still unsure about what Joseph meant. Does someone truly forgive those who sold him into slavery? Joseph wept that his brothers had not fully understood that he had forgiven them long before. He no longer felt ill-will toward them. He had no anger, no lingering resentment, no desire for revenge. He had conquered his emotions and reframed his understanding of events.

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks** says that, “Forgiveness liberates us from the past. *Forgiveness breaks the irreversibility of reaction and revenge*. It is the undoing of what has been done.”

Joseph realized the great secret of this world: that God has created people as they are so that we can learn and grow. They exist for our growth and development just as we exist for theirs, to call forth a greater depth of love from us. That knowledge relieves us of our need to blame others for being who they are.

Rabbi Benjamin Rapaport says that, “Letting go of a hurt can be hard. When feeling wronged it’s natural to want the perpetrator to be punished, or at least to apologize and acknowledge what they did wrong. When no apology is forthcoming, we often bear a grudge and end up being the ones who are suffering.” He continues, saying that, “To help us put down our toxic baggage, the Sages, with their profound understanding of human nature, instituted a special forgiveness prayer to be said nightly before going to bed.”

In this prayer, which can be found in the Siddur, we proclaim:

**“I forgive all those who may have hurt or aggravated me either physically, monetarily, or emotionally, whether unknowingly or willfully, whether accidentally or intentionally, whether in speech or in action, whether in this incarnation or another, and may no person be punished on account of me...”**

Forgiveness does not mean that we condone what has been done, or that we necessarily reconcile with the person who hurt us. Sometimes this is not in our best

interests. What it means is that we let go of being stuck in our own negative emotions and the wishing for whoever hurt us to be punished.”

It seems that, “It was clear to Joseph that G-d made his brothers the way they were for the higher purpose of saving the vast multitude of the Egyptian nation, as well as for their own salvation. Joseph was also able to live out of the reality which Isaiah taught, that G-d is the Judge [Is. 33:22]. We are not meant to exact punishment against each other for supposed crimes, but to bring the Divine Presence into the world through our forgiveness and kindness. The classic teaching in Judaism, based on the “Bedtime Shema,” is that as we forgive, so are we forgiven.”

**Rabbi Jill Hausman** has said that, “Our task is to bring compassion and caring to each other. We function as spiritual sandpaper for each other. By rubbing up against others we shine up our souls. Just as there is unconditional love, in this portion Joseph teaches us unconditional forgiveness. Joseph does not require perfection from his brothers. He accepts them just as they are, rather than as he might like them to be. Joseph knows that it is his mitzvah to pardon them.... In order to live in a peaceful world, we have to forgive each other. To do so takes commitment, effort and acceptance. Joseph teaches us that this deeper level of forgiveness is possible. The rest is up to us.”

In the words of Buddhist monk and author **Thich Nhat Hanh**, to truly practice **forgiveness** we must first **forgive** ourselves for not being perfect.

In the mindfulness tradition, forgiveness of others is the ongoing practice of freeing yourself and others from suffering through the practice of compassion. It is recognizing that the pain brought upon you by someone else stems from his or her own deep suffering. As described by [Thich Nhat Hanh](#), it is the understanding that while we are the victims of others who cause us suffering, they themselves are also victims of suffering. Though it never justifies abuse or violence, understanding that suffering stems from suffering can help ease the forgiving process and gradually offer spiritual and emotional freedom to the forgiver.

[In recent research](#), forgiveness has been found to support psychological relief such as reduced anxiety, anger, and depression. In science publications, forgiveness is usually defined as the process of giving up revenge, resentment, and harsh judgment against a person who caused hurt and instead responding with kindness, compassion, and generosity. It may occur with or without direct reconciliation between the offender and the offended.

This is the first part of a poem by Desmond and Mpho Tutu:

*I want to be willing to forgive  
But I dare not ask for the will to forgive  
In case you give it to me  
And I am not yet ready*

*I am not yet ready for my heart to soften  
I am not yet ready to be vulnerable again  
Not yet ready to see that there is humanity in my tormentor's eyes  
Or that the one who hurt me may also have cried  
I am not yet ready for the journey  
I am not yet interested in the path  
I am at the prayer before the prayer of forgiveness  
Grant me the will to want to forgive  
Grant it to me not yet but soon*

*The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path of Healing Ourselves and Our World*

Desmond Tutu speaks of *Ubuntu*: the interconnectedness that is the essence of our humanity.

"If I choose not to forgive, I will always pay a price for it. When we are uncaring, when we lack compassion, when we are unforgiving, we don't just suffer alone for that choice. Our family suffers, our community suffers, and ultimately our entire world suffers. We are made to exist in a delicate network of interdependence.

Anger and bitterness do not just poison you, they poison all your relationships, including those with your children. I invite you to bring forgiveness into your own family. But the invitation to forgive is not an invitation to forget. Nor is it an invitation to claim that an injury is less hurtful than it really was. Nor is it a request to paper over the fissure in a relationship, to say it's okay when it's not. It's not okay to be injured. It's not okay to be abused. It's not okay to be violated. It's not okay to be betrayed.

The invitation to forgive is an invitation to find healing and peace. In Tutu's native language, one asks forgiveness by saying, "I ask for peace".

Jews place great emphasis on teshuva, or repentance, which is translated as "returning". The idea of repentance in Jewish thought is a return to the path of virtue. The process of repentance, as laid out by Maimonides, includes three stages: confession, regret and a vow not to repeat the misdeed. The true penitent, Maimonides says, is the one who finds himself with the opportunity to commit the same sin again yet declines to do so.

Forgiveness opens the door to peace between people and opens the space for peace within each person. The victim cannot have peace without forgiving. The perpetrator will not have genuine peace while unforgiven. "

**May we all experience Shalom.... hello to our true selves; goodbye to feelings of separation, alienation, resentment; peace within; wholeness; and a restoration of our connection with our Neshamah, our Soul/Spirit/Higher Power, our hearts.**