

**For Sins Committed *Bein Adam L'atzmo*: Forgiving Ourselves**

Yom Kippur 5777

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Rabbi Karen Kedar wrote:

Forgiveness is a process, a path without an end,

a bridge that leads to restoration  
of what you have lost.

It is a shift of perspective,  
a way of being.

Forgiveness is what you do to your soul when you choose to live in light  
rather than in darkness<sup>1</sup>

We sit here today, on this Day of Atonement, this Shabbat HaShabbaton,  
this Yom Kippur. We reflect, repent and return. We look to forgive and to be  
forgiven. Forgiveness is a familiar part of Judaism.

Every night, we have the opportunity to recite the words of the bedtime  
Sh'ma, which includes the following declaration, "I hereby forgive anyone who  
has angered or provoked me or sinned against me..." Our old machzor, Gates  
of Repentance, includes a similar statement. We affirm forgiveness of our  
fellow human beings.

Every day, we have the opportunity to ask God's forgiveness in a  
blessing of the Amidah, "*salach lanu ki chatanu, mchal lanu ki fashanu,*" forgive

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<sup>1</sup> *The Bridge to Forgiveness* by Karen Kedar [pg 77]

us for we have sinned, pardon us for we have transgressed. After this sermon, we will recite a litany of wrongs that we take responsibility for as a community, even if we, ourselves, have not committed the sin, asking God for collective forgiveness.

These instances demonstrate two different kinds of forgiveness: forgiveness *bein adam l'makom*, between man and God, and *bein adam l'chavero*, between person and person. But there is one more relationship we often overlook: *bein adam l'atzmo*, between a person and him or her self.

We overlook our relationship with ourselves in part because the idea of forgiving one's self is new. While commandments to apologize to God and to each other are Biblical, the idea that we should forgive ourselves emerged only in the last three hundred years, alongside the modern understanding that each of us is a complex human being.

As I often tell b'nei mitzvah students, the verses you learn last are the ones that naturally get the least practice. Similarly, forgiving one's self is often the least practiced type of forgiveness, and sometimes, it even gets left off our to-do list entirely. Unfortunately, when we do not look inwardly and first forgive ourselves, we hinder our ability to forgive or be forgiven by others.

Let me be clear about definition here: forgiving one's self is different than letting one's self off the hook. Forgiving one's self is accepting responsibility, acknowledging error, and growing from it.

When we truly forgive ourselves, we can work towards forgiving others and seeking forgiveness from others.

The challenge, is that, self-forgiveness is tough.

We constantly compare ourselves to others. This is true in many settings, but it is especially exacerbated on social media. When we look at people's curated portrayals of self on Facebook or Instagram, all we see is what they choose to post. Yet it is easy to forget that we are seeing the "highlight reel" in the cute photos of a new baby or an exciting trip or a delicious meal. We compare what we see to our own experiences and they just don't measure up. Many of us internalize these comparisons in a way that makes us both consciously and subconsciously hypercritical of ourselves.

You may have seen the videos put out a few years ago by the Dove soap company during their Real Beauty campaign. Dove tasked a forensic artist to create sketches of people based solely on descriptions of that person. He drew two sketches of each person, one based on their descriptions of themselves

and another based on a stranger's description of them. When asked for specifics, people described their own facial features as follows:

"My mom told me I had a big jaw."

"[My chin] protrudes a bit, especially when I smile."

"I kind of have a fat, rounder face."

"I would say I have a big forehead."

Now contrast that to people's descriptions of each other.

"She had nice eyes. They lit up when she spoke."

"Cute nose."

"She had blue eyes. Very nice blue eyes."

In the second half of the video, the artist reveals both sketches side by side. Consistently, the image created from people's own descriptions is less attractive than the image drawn from a stranger's perspective.

In beauty and in life, we spend a lot of time dwelling on the negatives: what we don't like about ourselves; what we feel we do wrong. We berate ourselves for a million imperfections, for many of the missteps we take as we move through our day: we're running late so then the whole family is running late and it's entirely our fault. We forget to pack lunch and eat junk after committing to be healthier about the food we're putting into our bodies. We don't prepare fully for a presentation and it becomes clear that we haven't

done our “homework.” We snap at our kids, at our siblings, at our spouses. We forget to phone friends we've promised to call and catch up with.

And then we compound the frustrated reactions from our families, friends, and coworkers by beating ourselves up even more. We're running late because we aren't organized enough. We eat junk because we aren't healthy enough. We snap at our kids because we aren't patient enough.

In her book Daring Greatly, Dr. Brene Brown identifies what she calls a culture of “scarcity: the never-enough problem.” According to Brown's research, we all live in a world of “never enough” - we spend so much time assessing and calculating how much we have - how much time, how much money, how much energy, how much this how much that, that we build an imagined, impossible, idea of what “enough” would look like, and then, we berate ourselves for failing to meet our invented standards.

The key, says Brown, is to shift our paradigm from a culture of scarcity to a culture of wholeheartedness, a culture in which we are each capable of being enough, if only we can see ourselves as such.

We learn the importance of beginning with ourselves from Rabbi Hillel, who so famously taught “*Im ein ani li, mi li?* - If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” It is nearly impossible to do anything authentically if we do not start

within our own story. But Hillel's message does not end with self. It continues:

*"Uk'shani l'atsmi ma ani? And if I am only for myself, what am I?"*

From this we learn that to act in the world, we must begin with ourselves in order to connect with others. So too is this the case with forgiveness. "If I do not forgive myself, who will forgive me?" leads directly to "If I only forgive myself, what am I?" Building capacity to forgive ourselves brings us to a place where we are better able to forgive others.

In fact, building capacity to forgive ourselves may actually cause us to require less forgiveness from others.

We refer back to the opening poem: "[Forgiveness] is a shift of perspective, a way of being."

Have any of us ever become inordinately frustrated with someone only to realize later that the reaction we had to them actually had nothing to do with them? While co-writing this sermon with my chavruta, my study partner, Rabbi Dusty Klass, we reflected on the moments in which we ourselves have been frustrated with each other. After thinking about it, we realized that the things we were frustrated about were most frequently the things we ourselves were working on personally.

We tend to be hardest on others for the challenges we have with ourselves. We interrupt to say that we can't stand people who talk over other

people. We whisper to our friends about the way some people talk about others behind their back.

When we can authentically forgive ourselves for our own shortcomings, we are better able to see how we have wronged those we love. And when we first get in touch with our self-inflicted pains and then seek forgiveness from others, we better see the ways in which those around us may be similarly conflicted, similarly in pain, and are similarly moving through their own forgiveness processes. When we turn down the volume of self-criticism, we make space to hear those around us, and we can open ourselves to the daily joys that life offers.

Not every instance of forgiving one's self necessarily leads to forgiveness of others. Sometimes self-forgiveness is the only step a person can or needs to take. Assault victims often move through a great deal of guilt and shame in processing their experiences of attack. A victim's ability to forgive herself, to acknowledge that she herself is not to blame for the act that was done to her, does not require her to then forgive her attacker.

Forgiving one's self can be enough.

So if forgiving ourselves is both difficult and necessary, how do we do it? How do we move from knowing self-forgiveness is important to doing the work of self-forgiveness?

One way we can become better at forgiving ourselves is to give ourselves fewer opportunities to need forgiveness from ourselves. We do that when we are present with ourselves and our needs in the moment. When we are more present, we are less likely to make decisions that require forgiveness.

I use a mnemonic called HALT. HALT is an acronym: hungry, angry, lonely, tired. The idea of HALTing is to pay attention to our body's cues, honoring those feelings by refraining from decision-making until we have moved through the emotions or gotten some sleep. When we refrain from making decisions while hungry, angry, lonely, or tired, we make better, more reasonable decisions. Those better, more reasonable decisions in turn leave much less room for regret and error and, ultimately, for the need to forgive one's self.

None of us can be present 100% of the time. We all have moments in which, regardless of how self-aware we are, we do not recognize our emotionally charged state and make decisions we are not proud of. In the aftermath of those decisions, we have the opportunity to do something radical. We have the chance to be as kind to ourselves as we are toward others.

We know what it means to be compassionate towards others - we acknowledge that someone is suffering or struggling, we respond to their pain, we offer kindness and understanding. But with ourselves? We try to ignore our struggles. We beat ourselves up for our imperfections. Being kinder to ourselves means naming when something is difficult, acknowledging when we are struggling. Self-compassion requires meeting that struggle or feeling of guilt with kindness and the understanding that we are all human. Being human means being imperfect, and there is beauty and growth in our imperfections.

We can also be more honest with ourselves upfront. When someone asks something of us—a favor, a volunteer opportunity, an extra project at work—the question is not just whether we want to say yes, it is whether we have the capacity to do so: do I have the time, energy, and effort required to fulfill the ask?

No, we do not always have the luxury of this choice; some things are obligations. But when we do have the choice and we take time to decide intentionally and wholeheartedly, we position ourselves to forgive authentically and sincerely.

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May we all choose to live in light as we move through this season of  
return and repentance. May we each find the courage and compassion to  
forgive ourselves and, from that place of compassion, offer the same to others.  
May we be sealed for a year of health, happiness, growth, and peace. *Ken yihe  
ratzon*, may these words be worthy of coming true.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Bridge to Forgiveness* by Karen Kedar [pg 77]