

## Forgiveness

New York Times best selling author, Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, recalls a story from many years ago when she was invited to hear a well-known rabbi speak at a Yom Kippur service. She assumed the rabbi was going to speak about God's forgiveness.

*But the rabbi did not speak directly about God's forgiveness.*

*Instead, he walked out into the congregation, took his infant daughter from his wife, and, carrying her in his arms, stepped up to the bimah or podium. The little girl was perhaps a year old and she was adorable. From her father's arms she smiled at the congregation. Every heart melted. Turning toward her daddy, she patted him on the cheek with her tiny hands. He smiled fondly at her and with his customary dignity began a rather traditional Yom Kippur sermon, talking about the meaning of the holiday.*

*The baby girl, feeling his attention shift away from her, reached forward and grabbed his nose. Gently he freed himself and continued the sermon. After a few minutes, she took his tie and put it in her mouth. The entire congregation chuckled. The rabbi rescued his tie and smiled at his child. She put her tiny arms around his neck. Looking at us over the top of her head, he said, "Think about it. Is there anything she can do that you could not forgive her for?" Throughout the room people began to nod in recognition, thinking perhaps of their own children and grandchildren. Just then, she reached up and grabbed his eyeglasses. Everyone laughed out loud.*

*Retrieving his eyeglasses and settling them on his nose, the rabbi laughed as well. Still smiling, he waited for silence. When it came, he asked, "And when does that stop? When does it get hard to forgive? At three? At seven? At fourteen? At thirty-five? How old does someone have to be before you forget that everyone is a child of God?"<sup>1</sup>*

I don't know about you, but I can't answer this question with conviction. I think about my own children and can't imagine not being able to forgive them at any stage in their lives, regardless of the transgression. But I know some of us have strained relationships with our children or our parents and haven't forgiven them for past offenses. Perhaps we're the one's who haven't been forgiven no matter how many times we've expressed remorse.

Last year I spoke about the toxicity of holding grudges and a few years ago I encouraged us to start the *teshuvah* process with just apologizing. Tonight, on the holiest night of the year, I'd like to have a conversation about forgiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> Remen, Dr. Rachel Naomi, "All in the Family." *Yom Kippur Readings*, edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins. Jewish Lights, 2005, p. 79

After all, this is what Yom Kippur is all about. Our time is up for seeking forgiveness from others and for the next 24 hours we focus on asking God to forgive us of our sins.

But *will* God forgive us of our wrongdoings? We beat our chests. We refrain from eating and other daily pleasures. We go through the motions and we even read that the day itself will absolve us of our transgressions. Yet, this might not be so. Apparently, we're not let off the hook that easily.

We are taught in the Talmud:

*Raba said... "Whose sin is forgiven? The sin of him who forgives sins (committed against him/herself)."*<sup>2</sup>

In other words, if we show mercy to people when they seek our forgiveness, then God will pardon us for any offenses we committed against God. Or, as Rabbi Joseph Telushkin puts it, "If you are unforgiving to those who have offended you, then you forfeit the right to ask God to treat you with the mercy that you are unwilling to extend to others. Conversely, if you are compassionate, that entitles you to a greater portion of God's compassion."<sup>3</sup>

At first, when I read this text, I was surprised with God's measure for measure approach to absolving our transgressions. You mean, all of my time at services and intention while praying as well as my empty stomach aren't enough? I actually have to engage with others to show God that I am worthy of being pardoned?

And this now makes sense. If I can't seek forgiveness from someone else, then why should God forgive me for whatever sins I may have committed against God.

Forgiveness is serious business in Judaism and especially at this time of year. Our lives hang in the balance all on account of how we approach this difficult task. And this concept of forgiveness, according to our tradition, is also very ancient—it even pre-dates the creation of the universe. Think about it. Forgiveness existed before time began.

The Talmud teaches:

*Seven things were created even before the world was created: Torah and Teshuva (repentance), the Garden of Eden, Gehenom, God's Throne of Honor, the Temple, and the name of the Messiah.*<sup>4</sup>

Now, regardless of how we feel about the literal meaning of this text (I'm right there with you on this one), the rabbis felt strongly about the power of forgiveness. It is so signifi-

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<sup>2</sup> B. Talmud, Megillah 28a

<sup>3</sup> Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. *The Book of Jewish Values*. New York: Bell Tower, 2000

<sup>4</sup> Pesachim 54a & Nedarim 39b

cant that our tradition considers *teshuva* as a necessary component for the creation of the world.

For those of us who struggle with this Talmudic list, perhaps you'll resonate more with a scientific and biological explanation of the primal nature of forgiveness.

In his book, *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct*, Michael McCullough argues that forgiveness is a natural human trait that is hard-wired into our DNA.

In order to ensure that our bloodline and genetic code continue, we are programmed to forgive those close to us. Now, he also talks about how we have an equally strong desire to avenge injustice, but that will be for another sermon.

McCullough writes, "The human capacity for forgiveness... [has] solved critical evolutionary problems for our ancestors, and it's still solving those problems today. And the capacity for forgiveness, like the capacity for revenge, isn't even a uniquely human characteristic. Many animals—including most primates, dolphins, hyenas, goats and even fish—do some very forgiving-esque things."<sup>5</sup>

We cannot change our human wiring. He adds, "Every neurologically intact person comes into this world outfitted with the capacity to forgive..."<sup>6</sup>

Forgiveness has been a survival technique for billions of years. It has kept our social structure intact. As a species that needs community, forgiveness is crucial to our life here on Earth.

So why are we so terrible at it? If Judaism teaches us that forgiveness existed before the creation of the world and evolutionary scientists prove that it's an innate piece of who we are, then how come it is so hard to actually ask for it and be merciful in return?

We might be hard-wired to forgive but it seems we are also hard-wired to be stubborn. And being stubborn is the roadblock to forgiveness.

Jews are not the only ones guilty of acting obstinate from time to time, but we sure do have a history of it. Several times in the Torah, God and Moses refer to the Israelites as a "stiff-necked" people. Moses has to frequently convince God to remain with us despite our tendency towards stubbornness. What an interesting idiom our text uses too. The Hebrew for "stiff neck" is *keshei oref*. A person who has a stiff neck finds that her body and head must face in the same direction. There is an absence of flexibility.

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<sup>5</sup> McCullough, Michael E. *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008, p. xviii

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p. 88

In fact, Rashi notes that a “stiff-necked” individual is inflexible and therefore unwilling to consider different points of view. “They turn the stiff back of their necks toward those who would rebuke them and refuse to listen.”<sup>7</sup> Sforno adds, “Hence there is no hope that they will repent, but follow the stubbornness of their hearts as before.”<sup>8</sup>

And this is the crux of the matter. The more resistance we put up the harder it will be to allow our ego to diminish in size so that true forgiveness can happen.

How many of us have refused to apologize for something we know we did or said that was out of line? How many of us have refused to seek forgiveness from someone we’ve hurt even though we know we were correct?

Our tradition teaches us that a stubborn person will persist in his evil ways and so long as he has a closed mind, he can never act God-like and be forgiving.

Here we are on Yom Kippur. This is the day when we hold a mirror up to ourselves. It’s not our outward appearances that matter, it’s about looking inside of who we are and committing ourselves to make the necessary changes so that we can be the best versions of ourselves possible. This is called *cheshbon hanefesh*, taking an accounting of our soul.

Ask yourselves, have you been unable to seek and grant forgiveness because of your inflexibility? Are you always so sure of yourself? Have you thought you were wronged and are waiting for an apology, yet haven’t considered what the other person might be going through? How many times have you admitted wrongdoing this year?

Rabbi Telushkin writes, “Certainly, life would be easier if we only had to attend a synagogue service on Yom Kippur, reach deep within our souls, and ask God for forgiveness. But Yom Kippur’s goal is not to make life easy; it is to transform our relationships with others and with God, to enable us to start afresh the only way one truly can, by erasing, to the extent possible, the wrong we have done.”<sup>9</sup> Many times our stubbornness blinds us to actually recognize these wrongs.

I’d like to close with one final teaching from the Talmud:  
*Rabbi Simeon son of Rabbi Eleazar entered the house of study and said, “At all times a man should be pliable as a reed and not hard as a cedar.”*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rashi on Exodus 34:9

<sup>8</sup> Sforno on Exodus 32:9

<sup>9</sup> Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. *The Book of Jewish Values*. New York: Bell Tower, 2000, p. 401

<sup>10</sup> B Talmud, Tan 20a

My friends, let us not be too rigid like the cedar and unwilling to strip away our egos. Rather, let us try to emulate the seemingly flimsy reed. No matter the force against it, the reed bends but does not break. They might seem weak, but in fact, because of their interconnected root system, they are very strong. And they survive winds because they are flexible.

Forgiveness isn't easy. But it is an integral part of who we are, both Jewishly and biologically. May we embrace this in the New Year and in doing so, make peace with our friends, family and ourselves.