

**This is the time of year to immerse myself in the themes and issues of Yom Kippur, both for my own spiritual growth and to share some thoughts with you. When I look back at the literature and my own writing, I find a great focus on teshuvah – on what we have done wrong. There is a lot about sin, about changing, about meriting God’s acceptance of us. But there is much less about forgiveness.**

**And yet – forgiveness is a major theme of Yom Kippur. Perhaps I am avoiding it because I realize how little I understand it. So this year lets spend a few moments together thinking about forgiveness and what it would mean to forgive.**

Yom Kippur quotes a verse of forgiveness a little out of context. The Torah tells us that if the people bring an offering before God after a communal sin, then the ritual act will bring forgiveness. We take this verse and turn it into a prayer:

*“may forgiveness be granted to the whole congregation of Israel and the stranger in their midst, for all the people have transgressed unwittingly – Numbers 15:26”*

וְנִסְחָא לְכָל עֵדֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכָם פִּי לְכָל הָעָם  
בְּשִׁגְגָה: ט  
(כז)

So this leads us to the question: what would it mean for us to be forgiven? In what way does God’s capacity for forgiveness work? Are we automatically forgiven merely for being here and engaging in this ritual? Or is there some other process taking place?

Well, let’s take a moment to look at our own capacity to forgive. Our human relationships exist in part to teach us about God. So if we can figure out a little of our own forgiving capacity, maybe we can learn something about God. Further before we ask someone else to forgive us, we ought to consider what we would mean in

forgiving another.

*Rabbis teach: Sins between god and people, yk provides forgiveness; between people, a person must first request forgiveness of wronged*

Think for a moment about someone who has really hurt you even in a minor way this past year, maybe once, maybe repeatedly.

Power of YK such that they contact you in some way tonight / today and ask for forgiveness

How do we respond?

They might ask: forgive me for the time I lied to you. Forgive me for the pain I caused you by not being with you when you were ill. Forgive me for the hurt I caused by not making you a priority in my life.

As we think of these real cases, the real situations in our own lives of the people who hurt us, who wronged us, we realize that its not so easy. I like to think of myself as being quick to forgiveness, but the truth is I carry around all kinds of hurts. I remember and am still upset about things that happened a long time ago. If I am asked to forgive, I wonder if I can.

But what am I being asked? If forgiveness means, “free me from being damned to hell for what I did to you,” I have that capacity. To the extent that people bear karmic shmutz as a result of what they have done to me, I release them from that dirt. I forgive.

But real forgiveness is a lot bigger than some imagined fiery end. Its more than releasing people from some kind of existential obligation they owe for having wronged me.

**It means a willingness to continue relationship even though there is pain    To privilege a person over a wrong done**

**We all know people who can't forgive. Who remember their hurts and carry those wounds with them every day of their life. My Nana, my grandmother, could be like this. She was worldly, fascinating, challenging. She had travelled the world, going to places like China and Japan as well as Europe and Israel. She was smart and thoughtful and loved to argue politics. She was also incredibly charitable to both Jewish and non-Jewish causes. When my son Joshua was diagnosed with Gaucher's she immediately started donating to the Gaucher's foundation. She supported the Jewish federation going back decades. She was in many ways a marvelous example. There is a lot her in me. Yet for all her great intelligence, for all the many capabilities she possessed, she wasn't so good at forgiving.**

**She had a hard time letting go of slights, imagined or real. IN her last few years, I saw how awful that failing could be. It narrowed her world. She no longer spoke to her siblings because of greivous and real wrongs from decades ago. Its sad too because there is now a whole part of my family that I have never met. And even though the hurts are now a thing of the past, I never became a part of that side of the family and now its hard to even imagine rebuilding.**

**Similarly, there were friends with whom she no longer spoke, again for real legitimate reasons. But the result was that at the end all she had was her daughters, and me and my sister and one close friend.**

What I began to realize as I matured and appreciated her strengths and the power of her character, is how painful and poignant was this difficulty in forgiving. Because as hard as she could be on others, she was even harder on herself. She never let go of her own failings, never quite lived up to her own expectation of herself. The intelligence, the animation – the cultural knowledge,

it hid a wound in her. Because she remembered every time she had let herself down, didn't live up to her own expectations.

I have learned a lot from my Nana. Yet even though she never fully learned how to forgive others or herself, maybe I can. I can hear her also in my own reluctance to forgive. I, like her, know how to hold on to pain and hurt. But I don't want to anymore. Its too heavy of a burden. So its time to ask: what am I looking for from the person who has wronged me? When we want to forgive, what are we asking of the person seeking forgiveness? And as or more importantly, how do we forgive ourselves?

Forgiveness 1: Let the person abandon his sin...

Let's look at a famous story repentance and forgiveness, the story of Joseph and his brothers. The story is familiar. Joseph's brothers, consumed with jealousy at the favoritism their father shows Joseph, throw him into a pit and sell him into slavery. Years pass and Joseph becomes second to Pharoah in Egypt. As a result of famine, the brothers are forced to Egypt to buy food from none other than their own brother Joseph whom they fail to recognize. As the brothers get ready to leave, Joseph has a silver cup put into Benjamin's, the youngest brothers, bag. The guards then capture the brothers and behold! It appears as though Benjamin has stolen from Pharoah.

Joseph then demands that Benjamin remain behind, incarcerated in prison. So Judah steps forwards and says,

וְעַתָּה כָּבֹאִי אֵלַי עַבְדְּךָ אָבִי וְהִנֵּעַר אִינְנִי אִתָּנוּ  
וְנִפְשׁוֹ קָשׁוּרָה בְּנִפְשׁוֹ :

Now, should I come to your servant my father without the boy, well, their souls are connected.

Judah offers to stay instead lest Benjamin's absence kill Jacob. At

this moment, Joseph bursts into tears and reveals himself to them.

Why does he put them through this?

Maimonides teaches that real Teshuvah, repentance cannot occur until in the same situation and does the opposite thing. There is a certain pathos as Judah admits that Jacob will die without Benjamin, but presumably be fine without Judah. Yet given the chance to throw their other favored brother into the pit, they show that they have changed. And Joseph bursts into tears of forgiveness.

So what is Joseph's forgiveness then? – He sees that his brothers are transformed – and forgives them because they have changed.

Joseph goes even one step further and shows them love.

*Or-Hayim – Joseph wants to protect his brothers from shame*

*So he tells them*

(ה) וְעַתָּה אֵל תִּעָצְבוּ וְאַל יִחַר בְּעֵינַי כִּם כִּי מִכְרַתֶּם אֹתִי  
הִנֵּה כִּי לְמַחְיָה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵל הַיָּם לְפָנַי כִּם:

But don't be sad, for ultimately I was sent here by God that we all might live.

So One type of forgiveness: seeing that someone has changed and allowing for a new beginning

You have hurt me in the past but I see that you have become different – so I am ready to start again

For myself too - I can forgive myself because now I see that I am different. I am not that person anymore. Those bad things are a part of my past and since I am different I can forgive myself for

what I used to do.

This kind of forgiveness is similar to God's judgment: we deserve to be forgiven if we have changed. Especially when that change includes making amends for our past hurt. Yet I believe forgiveness and its power is greater as we imagine a forgiveness based on mercy.

## Forgiveness 2: Mercy

The story of Moses' death includes such a loving moment of forgiveness. Moses stands at the gates of the promised land. He has argued with God to let him enter, and been told that he no. Now, having accepted his impending death, there is a beautiful moment of loving forgiveness:

God tells Moses: the moment of your death has come. Moses then says to the people: My children, forgive me for all the pain I have caused you. They respond: our Rabbi, we forgive you. And then they say to him, Forgive us for all the anger that we caused you, and he says, my children, you are forgiven.

אמרו לו למשה הגיע הרגע שאתה נפטר בו מן העולם,  
אמר להם לישראל בני מחלו לי על כל צער שצערתי  
אתכם, אמרו לו רבינו מחול לך, והם אמרו לו  
רבינו מחול לנו על כל כעס וכעס שכעסנוך, אמר  
להם בני מחול לכם,

The pathos of the moment is greater when we remember why Moses can't enter the promised land, why this is the tragic moment of his death at the gates of Israel. It was at the waters of Marah where the people angered Moses that Moses lost his right to enter Israel. Moses remembers and even though they are still the same people, he forgives out of love.

So there is another kind of forgiveness that means living with the knowledge that this hurt will happen again. Even so, I accept the person that you are – I am willing to let you be you and continue our relationship.

I want to be clear, by the way, that forgiveness is dangerous when there is physical or other abuse. I would never counsel anyone to continue a relationship that regularly led to abuse. And forgiveness never requires us to put ourselves in danger.

I know someone who has a challenging relationship with her father. There are hurts that go back years. Her father was difficult to her in college, always threatening to stop her tuition. He was difficult at her wedding, refusing to commit himself to helping but blocking others from helping in case he should decide to be involved. Later that pattern continued as he would stop talking to her over some imagined slight for months only to resume as if nothing had ever happened. His pattern is one of holding out this promise of a great ideal father – daughter relationship but somehow always leaving it tantalizing out of reach.

This loving daughter has many choices. She sometimes confronted her father – but that only made things worse. She sometimes herself wasn't in touch, but that too only made her feel bad. So instead, amazingly, she found the mercy and love within herself to forgive. To accept him for who he, and to see that there is good and love in her relationship with him. Its far from perfect, and occasionally downright awful, but she realized that his love for her is enough. So she has forgiven, accepted who he is. She has found ways to protect herself from hurt but to continue the relationship.

This is God's mercy – a forgiving quality that accepts us, loves us, for who we are even with all of our failings.

What this loving daughter realized is that the failure to forgive

creates for us a heavy burden. I have felt that in myself, too. I vividly remember the last time I visited my grandfather over a decade ago. I learned then about how painful it is when we can't forgive ourselves. He told me a story that I had only heard before in secret. It was the story we didn't talk about because it was too painful. Yet at the end of his life, this is what he focused on .

When my grandfather was 7 years old, he was left in charge of his 4 year old brother. They lived in a grocery store. My grandfather got distracted as 7 year olds will, and his younger brother got hold of some nuts and began to eat them. His brother choked on a nut and died.

To the end of his life, Never forgave himself for a guilt he didn't deserve. He was only seven years old! I made a special trip to Omaha to see him, knowing that he didn't have a lot of time left. And he told about how wonderful his brother was, and how awful that he had died, and that it should have been him instead. And suddenly I felt like I understood my grandfather a lot better.

I fear a lot of us carry around these kinds of burdens. We have these places in our lives, these hurts, and we don't know how to let them go. We ask in a formulaic way for God's forgiveness but we also need our own. We need the strength to accept ourselves as good people even though we are fallible and imperfect. To have mercy on our own souls.

The process of change, of teshuvah, requires forgiveness.

*Forgiveness is a precondition to teshuvah - only once I am forgiven, only once I forgive myself, can I really change*

Conclusion

How do we do it? What are the spiritual steps that let us begin to

forgive and be forgiven, especially when the person hasn't changed. What needs to change in us so that we can lay down our heavy burden of hurt and loss?

God said, "I have pardoned them as you have asked"

So first, we must be asked or ask ourselves to be forgiven  
It's not enough to expect people somehow to know I didn't mean it. I can't just hope that they will realize I was wrong. I must speak and I must ask.

As we begin to ask others for forgiveness, and watch the effect it has on them and on the world, it inspires us to develop that capacity more fully within ourselves.

So that we can begin to think: what about a person who cannot or will not ask? Can we forgive?

God's great hesed means God's is willing to offer us more than we deserve

As we see the power of forgiveness, can we too show such hesed to others, ourselves, and God?

So first, we ask others for forgiveness. This in turn leads us to forgive, first to those who deserve are forgiveness because of their own growth and change, and then even to others as an act of love.

We can also develop the capacity for forgiveness within ourselves through ritual. There is a custom of reciting each night before going to sleep a prayer of forgiveness. We say: I forgive all those who have hurt me, who have wounded me. May I too be forgiven by them and by God.

The words matter. I want to start doing this. I want to start by saying the words, but in a thoughtful way. For this ritual to meaningful to me, I want to include a pause, to think through the

hurts I am consciously letting go of for that day. Perhaps this will help me become more forgiving.

Close: my whole life my Nana never once told me she loved me. She couldn't – she didn't know how to forgive others or herself.

So she could imagine being worthy of love  
Saying "I love you" was too terrifying, too vulnerable,  
because in her deepest heart she feared she would hear nothing in return

So amazing – her last act to create charitable fund – help KE, Stanford Chaplaincy, Hebrew Free Loan

Her last act – to find some redemption, to prove that she is indeed worthy of being loved. My mother, who was present at her death, told me that my Nana was able at deathbed first time in her life to tell her daughters that she loved them. So maybe at the very end, this bright, charitable woman learned forgiveness. This is what I chose to believe. It allows me to admit publicly that I didn't say to her enough: I love you. And forgive myself.

Our own capacity to forgive others is limited; our capacity to forgive ourselves doubly so.

We turn towards God at yk to grant us the strength to forgive ourselves and to be forgiven by God because God's capacity for forgiveness is unlimited.

Sometimes we forgive because the abuse, the hurt, the wrong, has been removed

Other times we forgive because love compels our hearts. As we become forgiving to others, we also become forgiving to ourselves

I call upon everyone in this community to make this a season not only of change but also of forgiveness.

To begin by forgiving others, though they have hurt us and wronged us

To forgive ourselves, though we have doubly hurt and

wronged ourselves

And finally to forgive God , though there is pain, anguish & loss in all of our lives

Perhaps then we will all merit God's forgiveness.

As the prophet says, Let us return to our God, for God is ever ready to forgive.