

A Fresh Start

A great rabbi and his disciple were walking along a river when they came upon their usual crossing point.

At the crossing was a woman in tears. The rabbi asked her what her problem was, and she told him that she was deathly afraid of the water and could not swim.

The rabbi suggested that she climb upon his back and he would carry her across. Meanwhile his student watched with disdain and great worry.

The student followed the rabbi carrying the woman, shaking his head the whole time. When they reached the other bank, the rabbi put the woman down; and he acknowledged her gratitude with a slight bow.

The rabbi and his student resumed their path while the woman went her own way.

Still the student was clearly agitated, continually shaking his head, muttering under his breath.

After about 2 miles of this, the rabbi finally asked him what was wrong.

The student cried, "We are not allowed to touch any woman other than our own wife, yet you carried that woman across the river on your back. You let her crawl onto you and you held her!"

The rabbi gave a slight smile and responded:

Baruch hashem, thank God, I left her 2 miles back at the crossing.

But tell me, why are *you* still carrying her?

Yom Kippur is about letting go. We have reflected on the mistakes of the past year and now it is time to let them go.

Time to forgive and be forgiven. Time for the slate of our lives to be wiped clean.

Rabbi Harold Schulweis a well-known rabbi in Los Angeles has written a poem about Yom Kippur:

The last word has not been spoken,
The last sentence has not been written,
The *final* verdict is not in.

It is never too late
To change my mind,
My direction,
To say **no** to the past
And **yes** to the future,
To offer remorse,
To ask and give forgiveness.

It is never too late
To start over again,
To feel again
To love again
To hope again...

On Rosh Hashanah our deeds are written into the Book of Life. On Yom Kippur the book is sealed. It is put away. We can forget about it. We can begin again.

But what does it take to make a fresh start? How do we really wipe the slate clean?

Forgiveness is a tricky concept.

Research is demonstrating that the capacity to forgive both others and ourselves literally lengthens our days.

But unfortunately we believe too many myths about what forgiveness is, about what it means to forgive.

We hold onto the notion that some crimes are unforgivable and therefore forgiveness is a sham, a myth, a naïveté of the pious and the new-age.

And we hold onto our grudges and resentments, like the rabbi's student, for far too long. We become cynical about the motivation of others and about the world in general. We slip into depression. Anger wells up within us and explodes intermittently and inappropriately.

We cease to believe that we can ever truly experience security and happiness. We suffer, both emotionally and physically. Stress takes its toll on the body.

The Journal of Behavioral Medicine published a study about a sample of 1500 adults, age 66 and older. The study was the first to test the benefits of forgiveness on the lifespan.

After controlling for religiosity, social class, and health-related behaviors like smoking and drinking, the study revealed that people who withheld forgiveness until their offenders made amends **died before** the people who forgave regardless of the actions of their offenders.

The MayoClinic says the following about forgiveness on its website:

Generally, forgiveness is a decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge.

The acts that hurt or offend us might always remain a part of our lives, but forgiveness can lessen their grip on us and help us focus on other, more positive parts of our lives.

Oscar Wilde once said:

“Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them more.”

Let’s be clear, forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing.

Ryan Howes, a contributor to the journal, Psychology Today, explains:

*...forgiveness is an internal process where you work through the hurt, gain an understanding of what happened, rebuild a sense of safety, and finally **let go** of the grudge.*

The offending party is not necessarily a part of this process.

On the other hand, reconciliation is an interpersonal process where you dialogue with the offender about what happened, exchange stories, express the hurt, listen for the remorse, and begin to reestablish trust.

*Reconciliation is a much more complicated, involved process that includes, **but moves beyond**, forgiveness.*

Forgiveness is solo, reconciliation is a joint venture.

The rabbinic discourse on forgiveness refers to three stages:

The first, and most basic, level of forgiveness is called *méchilah*. It is the letting go.

The rabbis concede that it is helpful if the offender has done *teshuvah*:

acknowledged the offense,
expressed remorse,
made restitution,
taken steps to prevent repeating the behavior,
and is sincere in his or her repentance.

But they note that it is not necessary.

The second stage of forgiveness is *selichah*.

Beyond letting go, it is reaching a deeper understanding of the sinner. It is achieving an empathy for the hurt and pain of the other.

It is reaching the conclusion that the offender, too, is human, frail, and deserving of sympathy. It is an act of mercy and loving-kindness.

The third and final degree of forgiveness is *kapparah*, atonement, a total wiping away of all sinfulness.

It is an existential cleansing, an ultimate form of forgiveness, **and** it is only granted by God.

Kapparah is outside our circle of influence. We do not have the power to clear the conscience of another person. It is, after all, challenging enough to clear our own.

In order to make a fresh start, we have to forgive to some degree.

When we can't let go, when we hold on to our pain and resentment, we remain stuck in the past, unable to move forward.

The playwright Eugene O'Neill said it well in Long Day's Journey into Night:

"The past **is** the present, isn't it? It's the future too."

We are all wounded. And our wounds, left unattended, can determine how we feel about ourselves for an entire lifetime.

In this very room:

Somebody's sister was more beautiful and graceful, and got all the attention.

Someone else's brother was the first-born or perhaps the last-born – the baby, and was the favorite.

Someone here was severely abused in childhood and cannot properly express his or her feelings of anger or sadness or his or her hunger for love.

Someone else's spouse had an affair.

Someone has lived in the household of an alcoholic or drug addict.

We have many reasons to be angry and hurt.

Still, in order to make a fresh start, we have to forgive.

Forgiveness is about letting go of our anger and pain. Forgiveness liberates us from the trap of endless resentment and desire for revenge, so that we can make room for joy and connection.

Forgiveness does more for **us** than any one else because it liberates **us** from negativity and allows **us** move forward.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, while chairing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, said:

...to forgive is indeed the best form of self-interest.

Forgiving does not make anger or pain totally dissolve but it does help us to know we are much more than our anger and our pain.

Lewis Smedes, whose book, Forgive and Forget, said to be the catalyst for modern research in forgiveness, wrote:

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and to discover the prisoner was you.

Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future.

The Talmud teaches that Yom Kippur is a day that results in happiness.

Nothing about our observance of this day seems to reflect happiness or joy. We'd never say, after all, Happy Yom Kippur.

But it is at the end of this day, that the Book of Life is sealed for another year. It is placed on a shelf in the heavenly library to collect dust.

We are free to move forward. The slate is clean. The New Year is a great big do-over.

All we have to do is forgive, let go, and make room for what it is we want in life.