

Rabbi Jamie Korngold
RH 2023
5 Steps to Forgiveness

Once again, a year has gone by and we find ourselves back at Camp Granite Lake, pitching our tents in the woods and then gathering at the picnic tables to enjoy Steve's tasty matzah ball soup, kugel, and brisket.

We see friends from last year's retreat with whom we want to catch up and we notice newcomers we will greet and welcome.

We gaze upward toward mountain, hoping to catch a glimpse of golden aspens shimmering in the sunlight. Is this one of those magical years when the peak of fall colors coincides with our Rosh Hashanah in the Rockies retreat?

We scan the woods and lakeside, hoping to spy the moose and the bigger moose, fondly named Morse and Remorse by our clever students.

During the holy days, from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, we not only look out at the beautiful vistas and our community, but we look inward at our actions, our relationships, and our hearts.

During this time we dedicate ourselves to Heshbon Hanefesh – 'an accounting of the soul.' We are taught to scrutinize our actions, attitudes, and relationships. We examine our lives, searching for times we missed the mark, and strategize ways we can improve our behavior in the coming year. We consider the hurt we may have done to others, and the harm we may have put out into the world.

Our ancestors created such a unique opportunity for us with these holy days! What a gift we give ourselves and each other when we engage deeply in this opportunity to mend relationships, release past burdens, and set clear intentions for the year ahead.

Tonight, let's talk first about the process of repentance and then about the challenge of forgiveness.

As you know, in Judaism repentance is called teshuvah. Teshuvah mandates an established series of actions. By going through the series of steps, we are led to reconciliation, which in turn leads to relief, and finally to renewal.

What are the teshuva steps?:

- First, we must acknowledge our wrongdoing or the mistake.
- Then, we must feel sincere regret for our actions.

- Next, we must do something to make up for the wrong in some way. Often, this step is offering a form of compensation. Although it is not always monetary we must do something to make up for the harm we have caused.
- Finally, we must commit to change, and to not repeat the action in the future.

As you can see, this differs profoundly from the “Say you are sorry” formula of kindergarten classrooms.

Our tradition gives us very defined steps for seeking forgiveness, but how guidance on granting forgiveness? How do we know who or what or when to forgive? Not surprisingly, Judaism has a lot to say about this process.

Judaism teaches that there are three categories of wrongs for which we ask forgiveness.

The first are wrongs that must be forgiven. It turns out that this category includes most of the cases.

The second category are those wrongs for which forgiveness is optional.

and the third, those wrongs for which forgiveness is forbidden.

Let’s look at each of these.

Forgiveness is obligatory most of the time. If someone has hurt us and they ask for forgiveness, we are required to forgive them.

Now, Jewish law recognizes that forgiveness is difficult. Therefore, the law explains that if someone comes to you and asks for forgiveness, you may say, “I’m not ready. Come back in a week, or a month.” But it must be a set amount of time and not an extended amount of time such as a year or ten years.

You may send them away twice, so that they are asking for your forgiveness three times. This allows time to ensure they truly have changed, and it provides you the necessary time to work on yourself, to let go of your anger and other charged emotions, so that you are able to forgive them. But the law says, you must forgive them by the third effort. Rabbi Tellushkin teaches that if you don’t have the ability to forgive them by their third time asking, **you** are doing something wrong.

The Mishna put it this way: a person should attempt to obtain forgiveness three times, after which the sin is “on” the person who refuses to grant forgiveness (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:9; Shulchan Arukh, Orach Hayim 606:1*).

Our next category is that in which forgiveness is optional, but highly recommended. And, very Jewishly, again we have three sub-categories.

The first is when the other person doesn’t ask for forgiveness. The second occurs when they don’t go through the teshuvah steps. In these cases, you are not obligated to forgive them, butyou might want to anyway so that you can unburden yourself.

Haven’t we all awoken in the middle of the night, and been unable to fall back to asleep as we obsess about how angry we are with someone or consumed with hurt? It’s better for us if we let it go and forgive them.

The third case in which we are not obligated to forgive is when the damage they inflicted on us is irrevocable. The rabbis explain that this is because the teshuvah steps and forgiveness process cannot undo the damage. The example given in the Jerusalem Talmud is that if someone has slandered you and maligned your good name, you are not obligated to forgive them.

Why? Even if they are sorry, they cannot pull back the lies they have spread. And even if they can reach all the people they have told, how could they possibly reach all people the other people told?

Even 2000 years ago, the rabbis were aware of the power of slander.

But, although forgiveness is not mandatory in these cases, I’ll say again that we might want to do it anyway because of the damage we do to ourselves by not forgiving. We all know that carrying round the rage, anger, resentment, and grudges can destroy us.

As Nelson Mandela said so poetically, Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies."

Finally, there are certain hurts that our tradition teaches are unforgiveable. The first is when the damage is done to someone else. We are not empowered to forgive on another’s behalf. This is where the Jewish and Christian views on forgiveness part ways. For example, it is not for us to forgive someone who murdered or something that occurred before we were born. Forgiving them is not our jurisdiction.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that the second category of hurts that we forbidden to forgive are those that are still happening. He writes: “You cannot forgive while evil is ongoing... Forgiveness is always something that accompanies a cease, a pause... There has to be an end, a truce, let us say, in the hostilities before forgiveness can begin.”

But these instances are not common. The bottom line is that most of the time, let's say 97% of the time, we should forgive. Not only because or when the person has repented, but also because it is healthier for ourselves!

So if we agree that it is healthier to forgive and also spiritually encouraged, let's turn our attention to the question— how do we forgive?? How are we meant to forgive someone who has harmed us?

Rabbi Sandra Lawson writes: "Forgiveness can be challenging because it requires a decision to release oneself from the chains of resentment, anger, or vengeance against those who have hurt us."

First and foremost, let me say that forgiveness is a conscious choice. It is not something that simply happens. We must intentionally choose to forgive, and we must keep working toward it.

Forgiveness may not happen quickly or easily. The wounds we afflict on each other often require time to fully heal. Forgiveness is not singular event. Forgiveness is a journey, with twists and turns.

While it is true that forgiveness requires work, attention, focus and dedication, the process releases us from the burden of anger and resentment, bringing about a sense of peace and liberation, and sometimes even reconciliation.

Jewish forgiveness is not the same as the well-known adage "forgive and forget." Forgiving and forgetting do not need to go together. One can forgive, releasing the emotional burdens of anger and resentment, while still remembering with clarity what happened. In fact, remembering may be crucial to set boundaries to prevent future harm. We can let go of the past while still protecting ourselves from a recurring injury.

So how do we walk this journey? Here are 5 tools that can help.

#1 Embrace your Emotions: Forgiveness requires working through our feelings and because of that, first we must embrace them. Acknowledging what we feel is an important step in moving past those feelings. Allow your feelings to surface and recognize them as a part of the healing process. Sit with your emotions. Name them. Anger, Hurt, Disappointment. Rage.

It can be painful to sit with our emotions and so sometimes I give an emotion a deadline. I tell myself that I will feel x (whatever the intense emotion is) for 10 minutes and then I will move on." It's not that the emotion is gone, it's just that I allow myself to shove it back down after 10 minutes, committing to come back to it later.

This works for me. Knowing that the full onslaught of the emotion is time limited, allows me to go deeply into the emotion. And each time I stay in the space, the pain lessens a little bit, until eventually I can live alongside the emotion without it derailing me. The goal is to learn to walk beside an intense emotion, without it stopping your forward movement.

It doesn't stop hurting. But it hurts less often.

#2 Seek Support: we all need to confide in friends, family, or counselors. When we talk about our feelings, we create space between us and the emotion. This lightens the sting and enables us to process the emotion with a little distance, and then we can move toward releasing it. Allowing someone else to share the burden of our pain, lessens the load and enables us to continue walking with it. None of us should have to carry the heartbreaks of our lives alone. Ultimately, aren't the relationships in which we share deeply and vulnerably what makes life meaningful?

#3 Self-forgiveness: We need to own our part of the situation. We need to make our own teshuvah. But we cannot take on what is not ours. Remember, sometimes people fall out, and relationships end, not because you did anything, but just because. Sometimes it has nothing to do with you.

Or maybe it does have to do with you, but you have exhausted all the possibilities that might help the situation and there is nothing more you can do. In both cases, it is time to forgive yourself and treat yourself with kindness. Self-blame will not bring healing.

#4 Focus on Positivity: I hope that whatever pain you are experiencing in your life, there is something else in your life that is joyful! What part of your life makes you smile? What makes you bubble with joy? Engage in activities that make you feel good! Maybe you want to seek out activities that connect you with other people. Or perhaps for you it's the opposite and you want to find alone time. Either way the goal here is to turn your focus away from the pain and onto the joy.

You know how they say social media is a curated view of life? You only see people's best lives? Well, do that for yourself! Curate your life! Figure out a way to focus your attention on the great parts of your life rather than the sad ones.

Focusing on the positive is a powerful, powerful tool The Rabbis knew that shining light on things makes them grow. They understood that the more attentive we are to our joy, the more it will multiply. We all know that the more we think about something, the more power it has in our life. This is why the rabbis gave us rituals and prayers to pause, recognize and appreciate the good in our lives, and to share our joys with others.

Like a flower seeking the sun, turn yourself toward the positive!

#5 Practice Patience: This may be the hardest, but truly, time does heal. We must understand that forgiveness is a process that requires time and grace. Forgiveness is not sudden, and healing is not quick. It is a journey, and during it, our emotions will ebb and flow. Sometimes, we may feel that we have moved on. At other times we may be overwhelmed with sorrow. Be patient with yourself. We can remind ourselves that as difficult as the journey is, the fruits of your labor will be, if not reconciliation, then at least freeing yourself from the weight of bitterness.

So there we have five tools that can assist on the journey toward forgiveness

- Embrace your Emotions.
- Seek Support.
- Forgive yourself.
- Focus on Positivity.
- Practice Patience.

Rosh Hashanah invites us to open the doors of our hearts, delving deeply into the essence of forgiveness. Whether granting it, seeking it, or both, this sacred time provides the structure and support for this poignant human endeavor. Embracing forgiveness is not just about redressing the past; it's a promise of a brighter, unburdened future. May we walk there together.

Cain yeh ratzon.

An Unetaneh Tokef Essay – Who by Fire and Who by Water
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I lace on my hiking boots and walk out my back door to go on a hike. I turn right in front of my garage, and then head to the trail that begins in the trees. My neighbor David stands, staring down the trail. “The bobcat is hanging out there,” he says. “You might want to go the other way.”

I have no desire to disturb the bobcat. We have been watching it chase its prey, and even though I’m sure it prefers rabbits to me, I could be wrong. I circle in front of my house and enter the trail system from the other side. I walk ten paces down the trail and spot the rattlesnake, lazily sprawled across the trail, soaking in the sun. It is not coiled but I do not want to go any closer. I turn quickly around and backtrack.

I decide to take the long route, past our swimming pool, through the neighborhood, and eventually, I enter the trail at its widest, wide enough for me to see any snakes or bobcats on the trail. I see none, as I safely complete the loop and eventually arrive back home.

Later, I decide to take my road bike out. I have not been on my road bike this summer. I am scared of cars and because of that, I have switched to trail rides. But, from my house, access to quality mountain biking requires driving, and I am tired of driving. So- I take my road bike out.

I opt for my favorite route, up Flagstaff Mountain. It’s mostly bike paths, followed by a beautiful road with very few cars. (Admittedly the cars there are, tend to go too fast.)

I’ve cleared the steepest section and made my way up several switchbacks when I hear a siren. I pull over for an ambulance. I start to ride again, and then I hear another siren, and I pull over for a fire truck. That is followed by a search and rescue vehicle and then by a convoy of rangers’ trucks.

This is- unfortunately- not an unusual situation on this road. Cars drive too fast. Bikers bike too fast. Cars fly off the road. Bikers fly off their bikes. Bikers stray into the car lanes, cars stray into the shoulder, and cars and bikes collide. It is seldom good for the biker.

But when any of these happen, the road gets closed and no one has come by instructing a turn-around, so I keep going up, up, and up.

I hope no one is hurt. I hope no one drove off the road. I hope no one flew off their bike. I hope it is just a drill. They do drills. It could be a drill. I pass a hiker and stop to ask if she knows what is going on. “There is an older man who fell off his bike. He’s ok,” she tells me. “I saw him fall and I gave him some water and they are checking him out. He just got overheated and a bit scratched. He’ll be OK.”

Thank goodness she was there and thank goodness he is OK.

The bobcat, the snake, the ambulance, the fire truck. Today, none of them were coming for me but I heard the call of the High Holiday prayer Unetaneh Tokef (modern adaption by Leonard Cohen): “Who shall perish by water, and who by fire, who by the sword, and who by a wild beast?”

Who by snake and who by bobcat? Who by road bike and who by car?

Maybe it’s the approach of the High Holidays or maybe I’ve been listening to too much James Taylor, with his sage advice “Since we’re only here for a short time, we might as well enjoy the ride.”

But whatever it is, I’m feeling the change of the season. I’m acutely aware that two of my high school classmates passed away recently, Neil Gluckman in 2021 and Andrew Bohm last week.

So, what am I doing?

I am loving deeply. I am holding on tightly. I am reaching out. I am letting in.

I am – to the very best of my ability- letting go of anger, of hurt, of resentment. I am forgiving.

And, I’ve bought a new touring bike, which fits in a suitcase. It’s time to see the world.