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שמע בקולה

Forgiving Others,
Forgiving Ourselves
By Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld
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Forgiving Others, Forgiving Ourselves

Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld

Forgiveness is a complicated process. If you have ever been asked by another to forgive a serious offense, you will realize the enormity of what we are really asking from God. What does it mean to forgive? How do we envision this process of forgiveness, which we describe time and again during our prayer services on Yom Kippur?

Our liturgy alludes to the complexity of the forgiveness process. Perhaps the most familiar refrain of the High Holiday liturgy is the threefold request for absolution, found in the *al het* prayer. After cataloguing and confessing all of our many transgressions, we beg our Creator:

ועל כולם, אֵ־לוֹה סְלִיחוֹת –
סְלַח לָנוּ, מַחַל לָנוּ, כַּפֵּר לָנוּ.

For all these, God of forgiveness —
forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

Each one of these three terms tells us something about the nature of the cycle of repentance and forgiveness. *Mehilah* is a technical, legal word, often used in the context of debts and loans. To be granted *mehilah* is to know that no debt is owed; no further consequences or punishment are forthcoming. *Mehilah* means that one may start over with a clean ledger.

Kapparah is most often translated as atonement, which implies something more sweeping and restorative. To have successfully atoned is to have somehow made amends, or at least to have satisfied or appeased the offended party.

Selilah comes closest to the elusive quality of the English “forgiveness.” It is the ultimate plea in a damaged relationship; *selilah* expresses the

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desire to repair what was harmed and be able to pick up where we left off, without the shadow of guilt or resentment.

Maimonides, in the second chapter of his Laws of Repentance, emphasizes that Yom Kippur atones only for sins between people and God.

אין התשובה ולא יום הכפורים מכפרין אלא על עבירות שבין אדם למקום ... אבל עבירות שבין אדם לחבירו כגון החובל את חבירו או המקלל חבירו או גוזלו וכיוצא בהן אינו נמחל לו לעולם עד שיתן לחבירו מה שהוא חייב לו וירצהו, אע"פ שהחזיר לו ממון שהוא חייב לו צריך לרצותו ולשאול ממנו שימחול לו, אפילו לא הקניט את חבירו אלא בדברים צריך לפייסו ולפגע בו עד שימחול לו.

Repentance and the Day of Atonement atone only for sins between humans and God...but sins between people, such as one who injures another, or curses another, or robs him, and similar sins — these can never be completely absolved until one returns to one's friend what one owes, and appeases that person. Even if one returns all the money that is owed, one must still satisfy the other person and ask for pardon, even if one harmed another only through words, one must still appease that person and continue to contact that person until one is forgiven.¹

Even as we pour our hearts out to God and turn toward God's mercy, *Haza"l* impress upon us the need to keep our eyes and ears open for those around us who may be seeking our forgiveness. We must apologize to those whom we have hurt or offended, and we must be ready to respond to those who have hurt us when they seek our pardon.

The process Maimonides describes is as deep and complex between people as it is between people and God. We must first ensure *mehilah* by paying our debts and making any necessary reparations. If the sin was a verbal jibe or emotional injury, we must somehow make amends and appease the person — that is, engage in *kapparah* — so that the offended party will be willing to wipe the slate clean. The intended result is that other person will

¹ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 2:9.

grant forgiveness; that differences will be overcome and rifts mended. Maimonides then adds:

אסור לאדם להיות אכזרי ולא יתפייס אלא יהא
נוח לרצות וקשה לכעוס ובשעה שמבקש ממנו
החוטא למחול מוחל בלב שלם ובנפש חפצה.

It is forbidden for a person to be cruel, and not to be appeased. Rather, one should be easily satisfied, and difficult to anger. When someone requests pardon, one should do so with a whole heart and a willing soul.²

Every individual is a link in the communal chain of atonement; you are required to ask forgiveness, and you are also required to forgive. When a person approaches another with sincere apology and remorse, it is cruel to withhold the pardon that we all seek at this time of year.

Rav Soloveitchik, as quoted in the book *On Repentance*, engages the difficulty of the process of repentance and forgiveness through a discussion of a famous talmudic text. The Talmud in *Yoma* 86b suggests that through complete repentance, sins may be turned into merits. But how is such a thing possible? Rav Soloveitchik explains that when the process of repentance happens through love, the sin is integrated into the person one has become:

Sin is not to be forgotten, blotted out, or cast into the depths of the sea. On the contrary, sin has to be remembered. It is the memory of sin that releases the power within the inner depths of the soul of the penitent to do greater things than ever before.³

I believe this same idea may be applied to forgiveness on an interpersonal level. In most cases, Rabbi Soloveitchik argued, there is no possibility of forgetting what has come before — nor would we want to excise whole portions of ourselves and our experiences. “Forgive and forget” is not a Jewish idea, nor is it generally a realistic expectation. Traumas are not easily forgotten, and memory is often essential to a mature friendship. Remembering can lead to resentment, pain, and distance — or

² Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 2:10.

³ Pinchas H. Peli, *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), p. 254.

it can deepen a relationship. The Talmud is not teaching us that our sins are really “for the best,” but rather, that the process of sinning and repenting has propelled us forward on the road of life. Our experiences have given us a new perspective, and we are ready to move on with life. Forgiveness is an essential process in all relationships. Not only does one not forget — on the contrary, it is important to remember, and memories give life and relationships depth and texture.

There is an additional aspect to this practice of supplication and atonement: the process of forgiving ourselves. How do I know that God has forgiven me? We can never know for certain, but after weeks of prayerful apology, we hope to have achieved a closeness to God that cultivates within us a certain religious confidence. We can never know for certain the effects of our prayers, but we need that religious confidence in order to see ourselves advancing on the path toward spiritual perfection. To make this year better, more fruitful and more elevated, than last year, we need to let go — not of the memories, nor even of the residue of the pain of last year — but of resentment, of anxiety, of “debts.” We need to resolve to change, to do something different when faced with the same situation. Only then can we stand in the presence of true *selihah*, of forgiveness.

May we merit complete *selihah*, *mehilah*, and *kapparah*, from God, from each other, and from ourselves.

Shanah tovah!

שנה טובה

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