

# **The Meaning of Forgiveness**

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Why are we here today? Well, there are a lot of possible reasons for you to take off work for Yom Kippur. Some of you come because you are Jewish and this is what Jews do. You are not, shall we say, “close to the faith” but you do identify with the hopes, dreams and aspirations of our people. This is your annual “check in” and way to be a part of something larger.

Some come to remember loved ones. Today is Yizkor (Memorial Services) and it is a family commitment. This is what your grandparents did, this is what your parents did, this is what you do and what your children will hopefully want to do. You are here to “remember”.

Some come out of simple “cultural” inertia. This is what you’ve done for years. You have no real strong religious or emotional reason for coming but it is what you’ve always done.

And possibly, some of you come as an annual attempt to discover your spirituality. You realize the importance of a world centered with a sense of the Holy and so you come on this, our holiest day, seeking the spiritual reach.

Here is the reason I come: forgiveness.

How many of us come on Yom Kippur to seek forgiveness for our sins? Maybe a lot of Jews are reluctant to speak so openly of forgiveness (it seems to be, dare I say it, a Christian concept!) But I think the idea of coming on Yom Kippur to attain forgiveness for our sins is a powerful concept. Forgiveness is the main reason why we have this day. As we begin another year, we need forgiveness not to be saved, nor for salvation in the

world to come, but to simply move forward. In my humble opinion, we cannot live life fully without forgiveness. We need to be able to forgive ourselves, to forgive others and we even need to be able to find it in our hearts to forgive G-d. Let me tell you why I am here on this day.

People that know anything about Judaism and this holiday will tell you that on Yom Kippur, one can only be forgiven for sins committed against G-d; for sins against others, one must go directly to the aggrieved party. Indeed, the 40 days leading up to Yom Kippur (especially the last ones known as the “Ten Days of Penitence”) are days we are enjoined to go up to others, ask for forgiveness and perform acts of contrition. But Yom Kippur offers us something more: a chance to grant forgiveness to ourselves for the sins we have committed. I believe we come today to receive G-d’s forgiveness so that we can then, in turn, learn to forgive ourselves.

We need that.

Listen, I've made a lot of mistakes in my life, and early on in my career I failed miserably; I wasn't there for a family who lost a loved one. It wasn't the first time I did wrong nor sadly, will it be the last, but this one still haunts me to this day. I wasn't in Charleston very long and a family in our community lost a loved one who was not a member of our faith. I don't know, maybe because I was more provincial back then, maybe because I was straight out of a yeshiva environment, or maybe because I held too strongly that traditional Jewish mourning practices extended only to members of our faith, but I didn't do anything to help that family in their hour of need. I didn't visit them nor even call to offer my condolences. Not once.

They never said anything to me about it, but as the years marched on and I began to grow as a rabbi, I remembered how I wasn't there for them in their time of need. I began to hate myself for what I didn't do. I finally worked up the courage one year to apologize to them. I came to the family and

expressed my sadness at how I wasn't there for them. I asked them for forgiveness which they not only generously gave me but with an embrace and a full heart. Ever since them, I have tried to be there for them (and hopefully, others) and we now have a very close relationship. But I am still haunted by my sin. I still have trouble forgiving myself for not being there and to be honest, I still hate myself for it. I guess what I am trying to say is that finding forgiveness in our hearts for others is easy. Sometimes, the hardest thing is learning to forgive yourself. This day is about learning to do just that: I am here to learn to forgive myself.

You know, in my life and I suspect your own, you have done things you wish you hadn't. You have hurt, pained, injured or harmed people in your life, some who were extremely close to you. And perhaps, Yom Kippur is a time to be allowed to reflect on the power of gaining forgiveness, not just from G-d but also from ourselves. Maybe, we should be here to remind ourselves again that we are all very human, that we all sin and we all fall

short. And we can beat ourselves up for all eternity, but today we are told that G-d doesn't and we shouldn't either. We ask for forgiveness this day to remind ourselves that we are forgivable and that our sins can be removed not from the historical record but from the fabric of our souls.

The rabbis have a beautiful way of looking at sin and forgiveness. They say that a "Ba'al Tshuva" (a repentant person) is someone who has done so much to himself, from repairing the damage of his sin to the process of seeking atonement, that the soul that occupies his body is no longer the same soul that committed that sin. That soul has grown so much and has undergone such profound evolutionary changes that it is no longer the same soul. The person is, literally, a new soul and when that happens, there is no longer any further need for forgiveness for the person that needed forgiveness is no longer there.

I like that! Hearing that helps for I am no longer the same rabbi that wasn't there for that family. It

has taken time and many Yom Kippurim to get me to accept that reality. Yom Kippur is a day to come, ask forgiveness, and remind ourselves that life can only move forward with the forgiveness of the self.

Yom Kippur is also the day for forgiving others. It is a day to grant complete m'chillah (forgiveness) to those who have wronged us. You may be here for many different reasons, but today is a day not just to receive forgiveness but also to grant it to others in our lives. We hear the words on Yom Kippur and find not just forgiveness for ourselves but the capacity to forgive others unconditionally.

We seem to have erroneously adopted the incorrect notion that only Christianity is the religion of forgiveness and we are the religion that “forgives, but never forgets”. Not true. Of course, when it comes to atrocities committed by others and offenses against humanity, we are commanded never to forget and to honor the memory of the innocent who perish. And of course, we cannot forgive for sins committed against others because it

is not our right to forgive; that forgiveness can only come from the victim.

But forgiveness for the insults and injuries we receive on a daily basis? We say this every single day in the amidah (the devotional prayer): “To those who curse me, let my soul be silent. Let my soul be like dust to everyone”. We are commanded to ignore the barbs and insults hurled at us every day. We are to forgive everyone we meet.

Yom Kippur is a reminder that we not only forgive ourselves by coming here, but we come to forgive others, to recognize that we are all sinners and that we all make mistakes.

There is a prayer we said last night that is hard to understand if not for what I just said. As the service began, our cantor sang: “We declare it permissible to pray with sinners”.



Why did he have say that? Because almost everyone that enters our doors on this day has had a grudge against someone, most likely in this congregation. (I don't envy the job of our seating committee! I know that on several occasions, they have had to be "creative" because this person won't sit next to that person, and that person won't attend if they are in the same section as that family!) "We declare it permissible to pray with sinners" says that we are all sinners and it is permitted to sit next to sinners.

The Cantor starts by reminding us that it is a time to forgive others.

If I wasn't leading services, place me next to someone I have had issues with this past year. At worst, because he or she probably wouldn't talk to me so I could concentrate on my prayers, but more importantly to be reminded that we are all sinners,

that we are all here to be forgiven and we all have the capacity to forgive.

Why am I here? I am here to learn to forgive myself and I am here to learn to forgive others.

I am also here to learn to begin to forgive G-d.

I don't know about you, but my understanding of G-d is constantly changing, evolving, and hopefully growing. There are so many ways people understand G-d but the question that virtually every one of us grapples with at one time or another is theodicy, the existence of evil in G-d's world. Specifically: why do bad things happen to good people?

Every monotheistic religion has to confront the dilemma of how an All Powerful, All Knowing and All Good G-d allows bad things to happen, allows people to suffer. And no matter how well we "G-d

handlers” do, to paraphrase this political season: G-d has a record of evil committed in His name and on His watch that He cannot run from!

I remember an old story of someone who prayed to

G-d one Yom Kippur and said: Listen, G-d, you should talk to me about sinning? How many people have died in wars this year, wars you could have stopped? How many parents have lost children while you, “the Rofeh Holeh Amo Yisrael” (“The Healer of Your People”), watched them die? How many have been injured, how many have starved all because You, the Master of the Universe, did nothing. I need to ask forgiveness? What did I do that was so bad? Lost my temper a little? Failed to put on tefillin a couple of times? Fought with my friend, Shlomo? C’mon! Tell you what. I’ll forgive You if You forgive me. Deal?”

Today, is our day to “deal” with G-d and begin our relationship anew, to grant G-d forgiveness and to say we are willing to give Him another chance. G-d doesn't need our forgiveness for how the world operates but I do think we need to forgive G-d. Because in G-d, there is meaning, in a G-d centered world, there is hope and in a G-d centered existence, there is a chance to find our purpose. By forgiving G-d, we can continue the spiritual path.

I need a relationship with G-d not because I expect good things happen to me if I do; I need a relationship with G-d not because bad things will happen to me if I don't. I need a relationship with G-d because I need the gift of the upward reach, the understanding that there is something beyond me, that there is a power greater than myself, that there is a Life Force in the universe that is the reason for my very existence. G-d gives me purpose and comfort, reminding us that we are not just organisms that live, eat, grow, reproduce and die, but that we have the spark of the infinite.

On Yom Kippur, I get the chance to reject the day-to-day “fist in the air” railing against G-d and move on to the larger picture of what life is all about. On this day, I learn to forgive Him for creating a flawed existence and I learn to accept that despite His sins and His imperfections, I want and need a relationship with Him.

So, if you are here just to punch your religious time clock, welcome! If you are here to fulfill a promise to a parent or ancestor long ago, I am glad you are here. If you came out of obligation to our people or just to fulfill your minimum yearly requirement of Jewish identity, we have more than enough seats. But I hope you will spend time today to be here for something more: forgiveness. I invite you to find within yourself the ability to forgive yourself, to forgive others and to forgive G-d. By doing so, may it provide the cleansing your soul may be seeking and create for all of us a more fulfilling and promising new year.

AMEN