



WHY FORGIVE OTHERS?

According to the American Psychological Association's *Dictionary of Psychology*, forgiveness is defined as "willfully putting aside feelings of resentment toward an individual who has committed a wrong or harmed one in some way... It involves a voluntary transformation of one's feelings, attitudes, and behavior toward the individual, so that one is no longer dominated by resentment."

While Rambam's description of the steps of teshuva are well known and readily studied, the process of seeking and receiving forgiveness from others garners less attention. People are generally aware of the "ask for forgiveness three times" rule described by Rambam (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 2:9*), but are less familiar with Rambam's general description about the importance of forgiving (*Hilchot Teshuva 2:10*):

אסור לאדם להיות אכזרי ולא יתפייס, אלא יהא נוח לרצות וקשה לכעוס. ובשעה שמבקש ממנו החוטא למחול, מוחל בלב שלם ובנפש חפיעה, ואפילו הצר לו וחטא לו הרבה, לא יקום ולא ישור וזהו דרכם של זרע ישראל ולבם הנכון.
It is forbidden for man to be ill-natured

and unforgiving; rather he must be easily appeased but strong to avoid anger; and when a sinner implores him for pardon, he should grant him pardon wholeheartedly and soulfully. Even if one persecuted him and sinned against him exceedingly, he should not be vengeful and grudge-bearing, for such is the way of the Children of Israel and of their upright heart.

Although closely related, repentance and human forgiveness are not interdependent. We can seek atonement and apologize to someone we have wronged, but the wounded party may or may not forgive us. In a similar vein, we are capable of forgiving others, even when they do not seek or deserve our forgiveness. The one who harmed us still is responsible for their behavior and needs to find their own atonement.

Although Rambam clearly speaks of the imperative to forgive others, the question remains, why should I forgive?

Walk in the Ways of Hashem

The Midrash (*Sifre Devarim 49*) explains *vehalachta bidrachav* — walk in His ways (*Devarim 28:9*) — to mean "Just as He is compassionate, so should you be compassionate. Just as He is righteous, so should you be righteous. Just as He is holy, so should you be holy."

A similar thought is expressed by the Tanna Abba Shaul (*Shabbat 133b*) on the pasuk *zeh Keli v'anvehu* — this is my God and I will glorify Him (*Shmot 15:2*) — as follows:

אבא שאול אומר ואנוהו הוי דומה לו מה הוא חנון ורחום אף אתה היה חנון ורחום.
Abba Shaul says: V'anvehu — be similar to Him. Just as he is merciful and gracious, so too you, should be merciful and gracious.

Rashi explains that the word "*ve'anvehu*" is a contraction of "*ani vehu*," "I and He." Just as He is merciful and gracious, so too, I should be merciful and gracious.

The pasuk in *Tehillim (78:38)* establishes that when we speak of

Hashem being *rachum* (merciful), we are referring to His forgiving disposition:

וְהוּא רַחוּם יְכַפֵּר עוֹן וְלֹא יִשְׁחִית
He, the merciful one, is forgiving of iniquity and does not destroy."

Emulating Hashem is codified by Rambam in *Sefer Hamitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh 8* "to emulate God in His beneficent and righteous ways to the best of one's ability" and by *Sefer HaChinukh*, in *Mitzvah 74*, where he writes:

וְאִין הַבְּרַכָּה מִצְוִיָּה וְחֹלָה אֵלֶּיָּהּ בְּמַתְדָּמִים אֵלָיו
בְּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם, לְהִיּוֹתֵם אִמְתִּיִּים כְּמוֹ שֶׁהוּא א-ל-
אִמְתָּ, וְלִהְיוֹתֵם מְרַחֲמִים כְּמוֹ שִׁדּוּעַ שֶׁהוּא
רַחוּם, וְלִהְיוֹתֵם גּוֹמְלֵי חֲסָדִים כְּמוֹ שֶׁהוּא רַב
הַחֶסֶד.

And blessing is only found and resting upon those that make themselves similar to Him in their deeds: to be truthful, like He is truthful; to be merciful, like He is merciful; and to be purveyors of kindness, like He is of great kindness.

Translation, R. Francis Nataf

From these sources, we see clearly that emulating Hashem by forgiving others is a mitzvah and a distinguishable Jewish trait.

Arouse Heavenly Mercy

תְּנִינָא, רַבִּי גְּמִלְיָאֵל בְּרַבִּי אֹמֵר: "וְנָתַן לָךְ רַחֲמִים
וְרַחֲמֶךָ וְהִרְבֶּךָ", כָּל הַמְּרַחֵם עַל הַבְּרִיּוֹת —
מְרַחֲמִין עָלָיו מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְכֹל שֶׁאֵינוֹ מְרַחֵם עַל
הַבְּרִיּוֹת — אֵין מְרַחֲמִין עָלָיו מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם.

"Rebbe Gamliel, son of Rebbe said: All who act mercifully (i.e. forgivingly) toward their fellow creatures will be treated mercifully by Heaven, and all who do not act mercifully toward their fellow creatures will not be treated mercifully by Heaven."
Shabbat 151b

רָבָא אָמַר: כָּל הַמְּעִבִיר עַל מְדוּתָיו — מְעִבְרִין
לֹא עַל כָּל פְּשָׁעָיו, שְׁנַאֲמַר: "נוֹשֵׂא עוֹן וְעוֹבֵר עַל
פְּשָׁע." לָמִי נוֹשֵׂא עוֹן — לָמִי שְׁעוֹבֵר עַל פְּשָׁע.
Rava taught: With regard to whoever forgives his reckonings with others for injustices done to him, the heavenly court in turn forgives punishment for all his sins, as it is stated: "He bears sin and forgives transgression" (Micah 7:18). Whose sins does He bear? The sins of one who forgives his reckonings with others for injustices committed against him.

Rosh HaShanah 17a

The Gemara goes on to tell the story of Rav Huna, son of Rav Yehoshua, who was miraculously healed after being close to death. Following this event, he described that as he was hanging between life and death, he heard Hashem say to the Heavenly court: "Since he does not stand on his rights, i.e. he is ready to waive what is due him, you too should not be exacting with him in his judgment." Hashem granted Rav Huna additional life because of his forgiving nature toward others.

The Healing Power of Forgiveness

Forgiveness has cognitive, emotional, and behavioral benefits for the one who is forgiving. When we find ourselves enveloped in clouds of stress, resentment, and anger, we benefit from finding a way to move toward forgiveness. Forgiving does not magically make the pain go away, but it allows one to move past the hurt and begin healing. Even after being forgiven, the individual who harmed you is still culpable for their behavior and needs to take responsibility for their misdeeds. Withholding forgiveness amplifies the consequences of a misdeed and perpetuates its negative effects. Better to forgive and move on to a brighter future than hold on to an "unforgivable" offense and be stuck in a dark past, without the emotional capacity to move forward.

The psychological benefits of forgiving are described in depth in the book, *Forgiveness and Health* (Toussaint, Worthington, and Williams, 2015). The authors explain that stress relief is probably the chief factor connecting forgiveness and well-being. Forgiveness allows us to let go of the chronic interpersonal stressors that cause us an undue burden. Others understand the benefit of forgiveness as ridding ourselves of "toxic" anger, deep and



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long-lasting anger that negatively impacts those who carry it. When we rid ourselves of this anger, our muscles relax, we become less anxious, and we can have a more positive outlook on life.

In a 2009 lecture, “Forgiveness and the Jewish Tradition,” (available on Youtube) Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said, “Although forgiving benefits the forgiven, it benefits the forgiver still more.” Rabbi Sacks explained that in life, we can face forward, toward a future orientation or we can face backward, toward a past orientation. If we cling to the past, we can’t forgive. As such, we must be able to move from a past orientation to a future oriented mindset. Rabbi Sacks explained that “Forgiving does not mean forgetting. It means living with the past, but not living in the past.”

A similar theme is described in *The Time Paradox: The New Psychology of Time That Will Change your Life*, written by Philip Zimbardo and John Boyd (2009). The authors describe how our attitudes toward time shape our behaviors and decisions. We continually

think about the past, present and future, but at different times with different emphases. In deciding which car to buy, we consider previous cars we owned, how the new car will impact daily life, and the expected future satisfaction with the car and its resale value. In this example, the more energy we exert considering each of the past, present and future time frames will determine which aspects of the car-buying decision are most prominent.

The authors explain that each of us needs a healthy balance of past, present and future “orientations.” Living entirely in one “time zone” can harm our health, relationships, and finances. This is especially true if we are trapped in the darker aspects of a particular past time orientation. If we overly focus on how we were harmed or mistreated by others, we are more likely to experience higher degrees of anger, stress and a more negative outlook on life. The authors of *The Time Paradox* came to the same conclusion as Rabbi Sacks, that people can change their time orientation and choose to forgive past offenses.

Forgiveness does not mean forgetting, condoning, or excusing past offenses; instead, forgiveness brings the forgiver peace of mind and frees us from corrosive anger. In the words of Rabbi Sacks, “Harboring a grudge or resentment is a horrible weight to carry around with you and you have to travel light in this world.” Forgiveness empowers us to recognize the pain we suffered without letting that pain define us, enabling us to heal and move on with our lives.

Think of the anger and hurt you are experiencing from interactions with someone who has wronged you. Regardless of whether they deserve it, consider whether you can forgive them. Forgiving does not absolve them for their behavior and if they are not repentant, the misdeed is still on them. However, forgiving them may remove the anger and hurt from your heart. By forgiving another, you are “walking in the ways of Hashem” and at the same time, opening yourself to a greater degree of Hashem’s mercy and kindness.



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