

When I was growing up, my sister and I used to behave like siblings right out of the Torah. Now, she didn't steal my birthright and I didn't sell her into slavery, but we had our share of fights. Whenever our parents would overhear us or catch us, there was a fairly routine procedure we would follow. They would say, "Danny, apologize to your sister." And I would reluctantly and begrudgingly say, "Sorry, Rachel."

My parents must have known that this apology wasn't sincere, but I think they recognized the importance of the action. Just like in Judaism, we are supposed to say blessings over everything, even if at that very moment we aren't focused on thanking God. The act of saying the prayer regularly, gives us the practice and the foundation for when we are truly ready to pray.

So I wasn't really sorry about hitting my sister or teasing her or whatever I did, but having to say I was sorry, gave me the tools to use when I really was sorry. Now that I am a bit more grown up, I have had a great deal of practice apologizing over the years. There are still times when it's really hard to admit that I was wrong, but, for the most part, I express genuine remorse.

Yom Kippur is all about this process. It is about asking forgiveness from God and from those who we have harmed or wronged throughout the year. It is about saying "I'm sorry." And while this can be extremely difficult, I believe that the **hardest** task falls on the other side of the equation: granting forgiveness. It's not hard for God, because if we are truly sorry, God forgives us. But for us, imperfect humans, it can be really hard to forgive someone.

There is a long list of things that come to mind that are "unforgivable" - statements or actions that were so painful, they reside within us still to this day - the tender tissue hiding under the scar. You might even feel like this whole process is unrealistic because sometimes it just seems impossible to forgive. Well, the good news is that you don't always have to forgive people! Yes, that's right, just because it's Yom Kippur, doesn't mean you have to "forgive and forget" all of the wrongs that were done to you. In fact, Judaism lays out a very clear path that someone must follow in order to warrant your forgiveness and none of this process actually includes you **forgetting** about the incident.

There are 4 basic steps outlined by Rambam in *Hilchot Tshuvah*, the "Laws of Repentance." Rambam, also known as Rabbi Moses ben Maimonides, was a rabbi, philosopher and physician in Spain & Egypt in the late 12th century and he shaped much of what we know of Judaism today. He says, for one to truly repent they must undergo these 4 different stages:

- #1 - The person seeking forgiveness must stop doing the destructive or harmful act.
- #2 - The person must feel regret or remorse.
They must actually feel sorry for what they did.
- #3 - The person must verbally ask for forgiveness,
both from the person they harmed and from God.

#4 - Given the same situation again,
this person must not repeat their previously harmful act.

Each one of these steps is crucial to the process of Teshuvah. And if one or more is not followed - for example, if a person does not actually ask you for forgiveness - you do not have to forgive them.

On the other hand, if a person does go through each of these steps, from recognition to remorse, and apology to prevention, you have to forgive them. You are obligated to forgive their actions. We must also remember, however, that we are not obligated to forget what they did. This is not to say that we can still hold it over their heads, but rather this process recognizes that you will not forget, and urges you not to let this action of the past influence your perceptions of the present or the future.

Ultimately and ironically, when we forgive someone it is not actually for them; It is for us. By holding on to the pain of a past encounter, we are letting this person continue to hurt us. By forgiving them, we are allowing this pain to be released, to no longer weigh down our hearts and our thoughts. By forgiving them, we are freeing ourselves.

Another way to look at this, is that by forgiving someone else, we are, in fact, admitting to our own imperfection. We too make mistakes and harm others, and we too want to be forgiven. And for us, the process is the same. If we seek forgiveness, we too must follow the same 4 steps. We must stop hurting the other and we must feel remorse for our actions. We must ask the person we hurt for forgiveness, and we must never do it again. If we manage to accomplish these goals, which can be extremely difficult, the person we harmed must forgive us. And when they do, there is a 5th step we must follow, and this one can be even harder than the first 4 combined: We must forgive ourselves.

Just as harboring a grudge against another fills us with hate and saddens our hearts, it is even more devastating when we harbor this grudge against ourselves. "Why did I do that?" "How could I do something like that?" "What is wrong with me?" We are our own toughest critics. We become our own judge, jury and jailer, and we lock ourselves in our own souls and throw the key out of our reach. Asking forgiveness from another, is the act which brings the key to our spiritual freedom within reach. The hardest part is picking up the key and believing that we deserve to be let out, that we deserve to be forgiven.

If you or someone you know is having a hard time forgiving themselves, I want you to pay very close attention right now. I am going to tell you something that may be a bit shocking, but is important to hear right now. Are you ready? You are only human! You are allowed to make mistakes. In fact, if there is one thing we are famous for, it is making mistakes. It is natural for us to make poor decisions that can cause a great deal of harm or pain to another.

Think about our most honored biblical heroes, the ones we look to for examples of how to live and for what it means to be a good person. They too made mistakes that caused a significant amount of pain.

- Abraham almost slaughtered his son, Isaac, and never apologized to him. He didn't even apologize to his wife, Sarah, and this very act could have led to her death in the next portion.
- Jacob, along with his mother, Rebecca, tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the birthright which rightfully belonged to his brother, Esau.
- And Joseph's brothers, upset by their father's show of favoritism, took Joseph's life away by selling him into slavery.

You'd think our tradition would try to gloss over these stories and focus on the ones in which our ancestors were heroes. But these stories are there to remind us that everyone makes mistakes. Our tradition reminds us that even our heroes are imperfect. All the more so, are we allowed to make mistakes, as well. But, what's even more important than their mistakes, is the fact that they were forgiven, as well. Despite the deep pain that was caused by their actions, the victims were able to forgive the perpetrators.

- Isaac, even though he was almost slaughtered by his father, at the request of his God, continued in his father's footsteps, carrying forth the belief in only one God.
- Esau, even though his entire inheritance was ripped away from him by his younger brother, has a heartfelt reunion with Jacob in which they hug and kiss each other and cry.
- Even Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, had the opportunity to exact his revenge when they came to him in Egypt seeking food. But again, he found the strength to forgive them and precipitated another tearful reunion.

And while I never did anything so horrible to my sister, the process of apologizing, even if I didn't mean it, has led us to be the best of friends today.

This is a difficult season of the year. We try our best to look inside and to become the people we want to be. But it is tough. And the most important thing is to not be too hard on yourself if you are unable to accomplish everything you wanted. After all, we are only human. And not forgiving ourselves for not being able to forgive ourselves, adds too much tzuras to our lives. We can only do what we can do. We can only try as hard as we can. And ultimately, it is this struggle that truly matters.

O God, at this time, please give us the strength to ask for forgiveness and to grant it. Help us to forgive others, and to forgive ourselves. And together we say, Amen.