

Forgiveness

Kol Nidrei

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Congregation B'nai Shalom

Braintree, Massachusetts

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David and Susan suffer deep emotional pain.

They have two married sons, Matt and Josh.

Matt and his wife, Emily, live near David and Susan. They have two kids of their own. David and Susan see that family often. They enjoy a close relationship with their son and daughter-in-law and grandchildren.

Josh and his wife, Belinda, however, cause heartache to Josh's parents. They live 400 miles away. They have three children. David and Susan barely know these grandchildren. Josh and Belinda don't speak with David and Susan for months at a time. Even those rare conversations, often formal and stilted, provide little pleasure. They might see this part of their family once a year or less for brief and awkward visits.

I have changed the names in this family, but the estrangement is real.

David and Susan treated their sons equally in their childhoods. They loved both sons. They imagined their lives together when their sons would marry and have children. They envisioned a future with grandchildren including Sunday brunches, family trips, and holiday celebrations at Pesach and Thanksgiving.

They have that relationship with Matt and Emily. But not with Josh and Belinda. The trouble began from the day David and Susan met Belinda. She was cold to them. Susan sensed that Belinda did not like her. Susan feared she would have a distant relationship with her future daughter-in-law. That has proven all too true.

Josh and Belinda and their children celebrate all holidays with Belinda's family. They have not been at David and Susan's home for Seder since 1999, the year they got married.

Distance and estrangement between parents and their adult sons and daughters happen more often than many of us may imagine.

Other family relationships may also suffer from estrangement. Brothers and sisters may not see each other or speak for decades. A cousin who was once as close as a sibling may become cold and distant for reasons we may not understand or cannot overcome.

These broken or frayed relationships can lead to grudges and hard feelings. They may begin from serious harms that one person has done to another on purpose. They also may begin from minor or unintended slights.

Reflecting today on our own lives, can we think of a time when someone did something that hurt us? Many of us do have such a memory. Often those closest to us, or the ones who should be closest, hurt us the most.

This evening our thoughts may turn to such an event or broken relationship. As we ponder from whom to seek forgiveness and how to forgive, what specific hurts or slights do we recall? Please dwell on that question. Take a moment. Think. Who comes to your mind? What happened?

PAUSE

Do you want to repair that relationship?

PAUSE

We may ask ourselves, “How can I forgive that person? And why should I? That person hurt me. Why shouldn’t I hold on to my anger?”

Those questions arise because forgiveness is hard. It may not come no matter how we try. So why try?

Both our tradition and our understanding of psychology provide the same answer. Our tradition tells us that we should not hold a grudge. Psychology tells us that giving up a grudge can be liberating. The real difficulty lies in figuring out how to do it.

In a moment we’ll talk about some ideas for how to forgive. First let’s consider what both tradition and psychology tell us about giving up grudges and forgiving.

Leviticus chapter 19, verse 17, says, “Lo tisnah et akhikha bil'vavekha” – “You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart.”

In the next verse we read, “Lo tikom v’lo titor” – “You shall not take vengeance and you shall not bear a grudge.”

That same verse goes on to state the mitzvah some consider the most important of them all: “Ahavtah lerei’acha camocha - “You shall love others as you love yourself.”

Three related mitzvot: do not hate your kinsfolk in your heart; do not bear a grudge; love others as you love yourself.

These three mitzvot dictate inner emotions. They command feelings, not actions. Most mitzvot direct us to act a certain way or refrain from doing so. But not these three. They say: don’t hate; don’t bear a grudge; love.

Maimonides, in the 12th century, and Nehama Leibowitz, in the 20th century, agree that these mitzvot are unusual. The Torah here departs from its usual emphasis on actions. Maimonides and Leibowitz explain that harboring a grudge or nursing hatred may lead to transgressions of other mitzvot, such as prohibitions on lying or stealing or even murder. The Torah therefore tells us to avoid these feelings so that we will not take actions that the Torah forbids. The rarity of prohibitions on feelings confirms that the Torah also understands the difficulty of controlling our emotions.

Modern science, like the ancient wisdom of the Torah, wants us to let go of grudges. Listen to this advice from an article in the magazine *Psychology Today* by Angela Pirisi, a leading health writer.

The article's title summarizes her conclusion: "Let Go of that Grudge: The Link Between Forgiveness and Longevity."

The article says:

Still holding grudges? Check your pulse: New research suggests that harboring feelings of betrayal may be linked to high blood pressure that can lead to stroke, kidney or heart failure, or even death.

College students participated in a study described in the article. The study explored the relationship between forgiveness and stress. The students discussed their betrayal experiences involving a parent, a friend or a romantic partner. As they spoke, researchers measured physical signs like blood pressure, heart rate and muscle tension. The study showed that those who forgave had better blood pressure than those who held onto grudges.

Kathleen Lawler, Ph.D., served as head researcher for the study. She found that forgiving transgressions promotes better health. Forgivers reported fewer physician visits. Dr. Lawler explained, "Forgiveness enhances health by reducing the physiological burdens that accompany unresolved stressful experiences, like the hurt and offense we attribute to others."

Our tradition wants us to forgive. Psychological research teaches that forgiving improves relationships and helps preserve physical health.

This leaves one hard question: How do we forgive?

Dr. Solomon Schimmel, Professor of Education and Psychology at Hebrew College, wrote a book called [Wounds Not Healed by Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness](#). In it he acknowledges feelings we may experience as a result of actions that hurt us. We may feel resentment and rage. These feelings may cause us to feel guilt or shame. We may wish we did not feel resentful or angry. To let go of these feelings and get on with our lives, Dr. Schimmel recommends we find the proper balance of three elements: seeking justice where relevant; hoping for repentance by the party who wronged us; and forgiving that person.

In cases of a crime or other illegal conduct, we should seek justice. Anyone who commits a crime deserves punishment. A person who causes physical injury by wrongful action owes proper compensation.

In cases where there has been no legal wrong, our ideal result would be the repentance of the person who hurt us. We would like that person to apologize and seek our forgiveness for the wrong done to us. But we have little or no control over whether this will occur.

We do not control justice for the perpetrator. We cannot require the perpetrator's repentance. But we can control whether we forgive the perpetrator. It is not easy to do, but Dr. Schimmel assures us we can learn how to do it.

He recommends we follow the advice of Robert D. Enright, Ph. D., a professor in the Educational Psychology Department at the University of Wisconsin.

Dr. Enright wrote a book called [Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope](#). His book helps people who have been hurt and feel trapped in a vortex of anger, depression and resentment. The book shows how forgiveness can reduce

anxiety and depression while increasing self-esteem and hopefulness toward one's future. According to Dr. Enright, forgiveness benefits the forgiver far more than the forgiven.

Dr. Enright reassures readers that forgiveness does not mean accepting continued abuse or reconciling with the offender. Rather, by giving the gift of forgiveness, readers can confront and let go of their pain in order to regain their lives.

Dr. Enright shows us how to abandon our resentment, give up our condemnation, and stop seeking revenge. He understands that the other person may have acted unjustly. Nevertheless, he urges us to develop our ability to feel compassion and generosity towards the offender.

Dr. Schimmel, building on the work of Dr. Enright, describes a four-phase process for forgiving. To forgive, he says, we must uncover, we must decide, we must work, and we must deepen. Each of these requires further explanation.

In the uncovering phase, we acknowledge the hurt done to us by another. We make ourselves aware of the full extent of what the offender has done and how we have been hurt. We do not minimize the hurt, but we also must not exaggerate it.

The second phase, deciding, may be the most difficult. It requires that we realize there has to be a better way, one that will help heal our own psychic pain. Only after we commit ourselves to try to forgive can we make progress toward forgiving.

In the work phase, we work at understanding the situation of the offender. If we can view the offender's actions in the context of that situation, perhaps in time we can feel empathy and compassion toward the offender.

In the final phase we search for meaning for ourselves and others in the suffering and forgiving process. We realize that we need the forgiveness of others for our own conduct. Here we pay close attention to whether our process of forgiveness helps to reduce our negative feelings and increase our positive feelings. We also need to dig deeper to uncover additional reasons for our anger or resentment that may not have been obvious at first glance. Some of these might not even be caused by the action of the offender.

Dr. Schimmel emphasizes that many factors influence the multi-stage process of forgiveness. Forgiving can extend over a long time. We may experience advances, retreats and diversions. We should not think of forgiveness as an all-or-nothing matter in which we forgive or we don't. Rather, forgiveness can occur in degrees. Better to forgive partially when full forgiveness does not yet seem possible.

David and Susan worked at learning to forgive Josh and Belinda for depriving them of the family joys they had hoped to have. They found that the advice of Dr. Schimmel and Dr. Enright helped to some extent, but the process took time and effort. They also found they made more progress when they started letting other people know about their painful sense of loss. They learned about resources to help families like theirs. For example, Dr. Joshua Coleman has published a book titled [When Parents Hurt: Compassionate Strategies When You and Your Grown Child Don't Get Along](#). Dr. Coleman focuses his practice as a psychologist on parents like David and Susan. He hosts webinars on timely topics and guides families to support groups such as one on the Internet at <http://estrangedstories.com/>. This group describes itself as "A place for people experiencing estrangement to find support, hopefully peace, and some understanding." Members

can join and share their stories anonymously, finding comfort from other members and sometimes useful approaches.

David and Susan learned that ending estrangement, like other forms of forgiveness, takes persistent effort that does not always succeed. They did find peace, however, in the knowledge that they were doing their best and they were not bad people.

To summarize, we should not hold on to grudges and should try to forgive for two reasons.

First, our tradition urges us to forgive.

“Lo tisnah et akhikha bil'vavekha” – “You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart.”

“Lo tikom v'lo titor” – “You shall not take vengeance and you shall not bear a grudge.”

“Ahavtah lerei'acha camocha - “You shall love others as you love yourself.”

Second, psychology teaches us we will be healthier if we forgive.

If we agree that we should forgive and we want to learn how, research points the way.

Uncover. Acknowledge how we have been hurt.

Decide. Commit to an effort to forgive.

Work. Understand the offender's reasons and situation.

Deepen. Explore what else may explain our anger and resentment.

As we use the start of a new year to examine our lives, let us consider whether and why we are bearing grudges. Let us embark on a journey of forgiveness, with no illusions that the journey will be easy. But it will be worth the effort.

And let us all say, Amen.