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Asking Forgiveness: A Difficult Conversation

The conversation is supposed to begin like this: "Will you forgive me for anything I might have said or done this year that has hurt you?" You are sitting with a friend over coffee, during the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and you ask this question. Not easy.

What if your friend responds, "What did you do or say?" Or what if your friend says, "You know, it did really hurt me when I found out that you shared that story that I had told you in confidence or ... didn't include me when you had that party or ... embarrassed me in front of so and so," etc. Not horrible sins, maybe, but the kind of interpersonal hurts that erode intimacy. Or maybe there are more serious breaches. Could you call the relative to whom you have stopped speaking over some long-ago insult and ask the same question? What kind of conversation would ensue? Or could you sit down with your partner -- or your kids or your parents -- and ask the same question?

Our tradition tells us: "For transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur serves as atonement. For transgressions between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not serve as atonement, until the one offended has been appeased." There are specific instructions. First, you have to acknowledge the hurt you did. Then, if the issue involves money, you have to pay back the money involved. Next, you have to resolve never to do it again. And finally, you have to discuss the issue with the one you have hurt and ask for forgiveness. This is *teshuvah* (repentance); this is the work of this season.

Asking for forgiveness is not easy. But it pales in comparison to how hard it is to forgive. Here Jewish tradition is also very clear: "If the person against whom one had sinned did not want to forgive, then one has to ask him/her for forgiveness in front of three of his/her friends. If s/he still didn't want to forgive, then one asks him/her in front of six, and then in front of nine of his/her friends, and if s/he still didn't want to forgive him/her, one leaves him/her and goes away. Anybody who does not want to forgive is a sinner."

That's pretty harsh. Aren't here some things that are unforgivable? Maybe it depends on what you mean by forgiveness.

Jewish tradition tells us there are three kinds of forgiveness, articulated by David Blumenthal in an article in *Cross Currents* magazine:

The most basic kind of forgiveness is "forgoing the other's indebtedness" (*mechilá*) after the offender has done teshuvah. This is not a reconciliation of heart. The crime remains; only the debt is forgiven. The second kind of forgiveness is "forgiveness" (*selichá*). It is an act of the heart. It is reaching a deeper understanding of the sinner. It is achieving empathy for the troubledness of the other. Selicha, too, is not a reconciliation or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender, too, is human, frail and deserving of sympathy. It is closer to an act of mercy than to an act of grace. The third kind of forgiveness is "atonement" (*kappará*). This is a total wiping away of all sinfulness. It is an existential cleansing. Kappara is the ultimate form of forgiveness, but it is only granted by God...

So forgiveness ought to be given only if the offender has done the work necessary to change. But change is possible; people can learn from their mistakes. Notice that forgiveness doesn't mean everything goes back to the way it once was. It doesn't mean you have to invite the one who hurt you over for dinner. But it does mean that you can give up your victim status and go on with the rest of your life.

Every night, before we go to sleep, there is a prayer that is part of the bedtime *Sh'ma*:

I hereby forgive all who have hurt me, all who have done me wrong, deliberately or by accident, whether by word or by deed. May no one be punished on my account. As I forgive and pardon fully those who have done me wrong, may those whom I have harmed forgive and pardon me, whether I acted deliberately or by accident, whether by word or deed. Wipe away my sins, O Lord, with your great mercy. May I not repeat the wrongs I have committed. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Try saying this prayer before you go to sleep. Let me know how it feels. Some congregations end their Kol Nidre service with these words. Should we?

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