



A Jewish Perspective on Forgiveness

By Jean Graubart

"I can forgive you for killing my boys, but I can never forgive you for making our boys kill yours."

Golda Meir, in 1977, addressing Egyptian president Anwar Sadat on his peace mission to Jerusalem.

Forgiveness is always a complicated issue, particularly when it comes to war and atrocity. We all know on some level that war changes moral responsibilities and responses. But once the smoke clears, what should people be held accountable for?

Jewish text teaches us that to save a single life is to save an entire world. The flip side is that killing one person kills an entire world. But when it comes to forgiveness, can we really apply that standard to people who actually murdered what amounts to a whole world's worth of our ancestors?

In "The Power of Forgiveness," Elie Wiesel refers to a Jewish view that in order to be forgiven, one must first admit to wrongful action and apologize. The German government, in response to his request, did indeed issue a formal apology at the Knesset in Israel for its involvement in the Holocaust. At the same time, Wiesel looks at pictures of the lost children and questions whether or not he can, in fact, forgive the acts that took so many lives and destroyed so many families.

The Holocaust destroyed a flourishing Eastern European Jewish community and, in a domino effect, changed the life of all Jewish communities. In grappling with this horrific turning point in our history and its modern implications, we face several essential questions regarding forgiveness, and ultimately return to the idea that to question is the only path toward understanding, the desire to be free of anger the only path toward forgiveness.

- For many modern Jews, their Jewish identities are shaped by knowledge of the Holocaust, an understanding that on some level we stand apart from other people through our suffering and perseverance. But as we progress through the generations, does it make sense to view past injustices as a guide for our life today?
- On one hand, it is possible to extrapolate from the Holocaust that national identification is irrational and can lead to genocide by causing one group to view another as less than human. On the other hand, as Jews, it feels important that we

never forget what happened, and that we maintain solidarity in order to protect ourselves from future harm. How do we find a balance between this group identity and our individual identities?

In Judaism, forgiveness of the individual cannot be separated from the context of community. The only way a Jew can obtain spiritual completeness, "shleimut", is within his or her community.

- Are individuals responsible for their nation's sins? At this point in American history, as many survivors of the Holocaust are dying, the surviving family members, along with the Jewish community as a whole, feel an obligation to keep the stories alive. For how many generations do we continue blaming? From boycotts of German-manufactured products to leaving Germany off the itinerary of their European vacations, many Americans struggle with how to view Germany today and the German people as separate from what happened in the 1940's.
- Are we even obligated to forgive others on behalf of our nation or theirs?
- At what point does blame transfer to the unforgiving? (Many Jewish organizations now organize "reconciliation missions," which send Jews to Germany to meet with Germans who were not yet born or too young to have personally been involved in the holocaust.)

In Judaism, the acts of repentance and forgiveness are inextricably linked, and we must never let our anger toward others cause us to lose sight of self-reflection and cleansing. We set aside the high holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and the days of repentance in between as a time to look at our own behavior over the past year and to come face to face with the Jewish concept of forgiveness, a psychologically demanding and ultimately, spiritually fulfilling obligation.

Jewish sources tell us that forgiveness fulfills two distinct roles, one symbolic and the other personal. The symbolic aspect of forgiveness is that it enables the wrongdoer to achieve atonement for his act. Jewish belief states that G-d doesn't forgive our sins against others until we ask and receive forgiveness directly from the person we wronged. In this sense, we are commanded to accept someone's apology in order to facilitate his or her spiritual development, as exemplified by the Israeli government's acceptance of Germany's formal apology.

For many, the personal act of forgiveness is both more difficult and more pressing than the symbolic one. Its purpose is to enable people to put a hurtful incident behind them and to restore a meaningful and compatible relationship, for the wronged party to wipe the slate clean of negative feelings and let go of any self-righteousness. This concept of healing and repair is central to Judaism, as it is our obligation to practice "Tikkun Olam," the repairing of the world. Jewish tradition asks us always to try to rise above anger and to help dissolve it by believing in the beauty of the world that G-d has created and the people in it as an act of faith, even when it takes all the power of our imagination.

QUESTIONS

Jean Graubart is currently Director of the Leo and Anna Smilow Center for Jewish Living and Learning at the Washington DC Jewish Community Center. In her article here, she raises several questions about forgiveness in light of the Holocaust and reminds us that Elie Wiesel has said, “How can I forgive, really, for everybody? Who authorized me to be the representative of six million men, women, children and say in their name I forgive. Never!”

- In what way do you identify yourself as a member of a group who is owed an apology?
- In what way do you identify yourself as a member of a group who should apologize to another group?
- In either of the cases above, what can you do individually to seek or accept forgiveness?
- What do you think she means when she says, “The personal act of forgiveness is both more difficult and more pressing than the symbolic one”?
- She cites “Tikkun Olam,” – repairing the world – as a Jew’s obligation. How do you see forgiveness in that light?

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