

## Be Careful of Incomplete Forgiveness

Forgiveness is far easier in theory than in practice. The humorist Kin Hubbard wrote that no one ever forgets where he buried the hatchet. We sometimes believe we forgive, but the original insult rankles; we are incomplete in our mercy. We nurture the grudge as we exalt the absolution.

In the Bible, Absalom, the son of King David, is estranged from his father. David is angry with Absalom and is persuaded to forgive him only by the entreaties of Joab, David's chief of staff. We read (2 Samuel 14:33): "Joab went to the king and reported to him, whereupon he summoned Absalom. He came to the king and flung himself down to the ground before the king. And the king kissed Absalom."

The Bible is careful with words, so we are entitled to notice how David is designated throughout the story. He is always called "king," never "David," never "father." Knowing as we do that Absalom later rebelled, perhaps here is a subtle biblical lesson. Absalom was estranged from his father. At this last opportunity for healing, David acted not as a father but as a king. It was the king who kissed Absalom, not the loving father, not the David whom we know from other stories as a sensitive and caring soul. Later, when David grieves for the loss of his son, he might be recalling this moment when pride and position destroyed what remained of a relationship. David forgave, but not fully. His heart still held back. As a result, he lost his son forever.

## Develop Practices of Forgiveness

Lifting ourselves out of the here-and-now can give us a truer perspective on our predicament. Will this insult matter in thirty years, or even in thirty days? Is what happened as grievous as it seems?

Judaism teaches those who have done wrong to seek forgiveness. It mandates that the offenders must sincerely ask pardon and seek to correct the wrongs they have done. But it also teaches that after a certain point - three sincere apologies, an attempt at restitution, and a clear indication that the person has changed - it becomes the obligation of the wronged party to forgive.



## Take Heart. Take Time. Begin the Journey.

Forgiveness takes time. Forgiving is a process we go through to attain the state of forgiveness. There will be anger and backsliding. But like all true journeys, we cannot now exactly imagine where we will end up once we have taken the journey. To forgive another is to open up a new pathway in your spirit.



# Finding a Way to Forgive

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## Why Should We Forgive?

A Hasidic parable tells of a king who quarreled with his son. In a fit of rage, the king exiled his son from the kingdom. In time, the king's heart softened, so he sent his ministers to find his son and ask him to return. When they located the young man, he said that he could not return to the kingdom. He had been too hurt, and his heart still harbored bitterness. The ministers brought back the sad news to the king. The king sent the following message: "Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way."

This story is about hardness of heart, faith, forgiveness, and love. Whether we identify with the king or the child, we all understand what it is to fight against forgiveness. At times, we feel as if, to use the imagery of the Talmud, clay rises in our hearts, and we feel stony instead of soft. We tell ourselves that forgiveness is not deserved and that our anger is just.

The triumph of the king was that he overcame the rage that had mastered his feelings and led to the exile of someone he loved. Forgiveness is the lightening of our own hearts. The darkness of hatred, rage, and contempt that we harbor rarely injures the unforgiven as much as it does the one who will

not forgive. We imagine that our continued anger is so powerful that it will bring sorrow and ruin on those against whom we hold a grudge. But its influence is far more dangerous to our own hearts.

The human heart carries hurt throughout life. We are all scarred, burdened, and broken in different ways. Many of these injuries are unavoidable. We cannot escape the losses that life brings. But we can control whether our souls are tied in knots, angry and gnarled. We cannot control the world, but each of us is the captain of our own souls.

## Forgiveness Is Necessary to Creation

According to Jewish tradition, the sixth day of Creation is when Adam and Eve were placed in the garden, ate the fruit, were ejected from the garden, and were forgiven by God. This tradition teaches that the world begins with forgiveness. Yes, there was also sin, but the emphasis is on forgiveness for the world cannot survive without mercy. In the Bible, the human journey begins with sin and forgiveness. One is natural, the other is necessary. We will sin, each and every one of us. But will we forgive?



## We Need Forgiveness

We forgive, in part, because we need forgiveness. Every one of us has bruised another, betrayed and ill-treated even those whom we love. There is no one so righteous,

*Qohelet* (the narrator of the Book of Ecclesiastes) teaches us, that he or she does only good and never sins (Ecclesiastes 7:20). By forgiving, we enhance the presence of compassion in the world. Can any marriage or any friendship endure without constant forgiveness? We cannot have what we will not give. By pardoning another person we bring something precious into the world. All of us need forgiveness.

Judaism teaches that God models forgiveness for human beings. When we fall short, we ask God to forgive us. Our task is to grant others what we hope for from God.

## Forgiveness Is about Letting Go

Often our anger melts away when we truly understand the circumstances of the other, but that is not identical with forgiveness. Forgiveness is a generosity of the heart, not an example of clear thinking. *True forgiveness occurs when conduct has been inexcusable, not when it has been understandable.* To forgive someone is to believe them to have been wrong and to let go of the moral leverage that our righteousness grants us over another. It is a leveling born of letting go.

Forgiveness does not always mean a renewal of the relationship as it was before. Sometimes a sin destroys and the connection cannot be rebuilt. Forgiveness is not building something new, but letting the old wash away - the old anger.

Sometimes we cling to anger not because we have to, but because it gives us something: the feeling of our own righteousness, a reason not to deal with another, a clean line to draw between good and bad. But our tradition asks us to rise above pettiness, anger, divisiveness - all that sullies the purity and beauty of God's world.