

Forgiving Without Forgetting

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The question of what makes for just and loving relationship with our selves, with others, and with whatever it is that gives our lives ultimate meaning and purpose, is a deep and thoroughly religious question that has been asked and answered by every religious community.

Those who move within Jewish tradition will begin to observe Yom Kippur this coming Friday at sundown. This is the time the Jewish community comes together to practice forgiveness, to mend the breaks in community that have been caused by past harms and to start over again.

Jews who are bonded together in religious community recognize that the practice of giving and receiving forgiveness is an essentially important task, one that must be done by over and over again to maintain a healthy congregation. Learning to use the tools that will move us through the hurts we do to each other, the hurts that are inevitably done to each of us, moving through these in ways that don't evoke punishment or revenge, but truly allow us to grow towards more peaceful and more loving relationship, ...to "grow into harmony"... is a central task for our religious community, too.

It is my hope that we be intentional in our practice of forgiveness, intentional in setting aside time to practice the steps necessary to give and to seek forgiveness, so that when a breach of harmony occurs we have a way to return to renewed openness and trust with each other.

Part of what it means to be a religious community, is to have a dream, a vision, a goal of leaving behind the seemingly endless cycle of injuries that we human beings cause. All religious communities have this dream, this goal.

It is the liberal religious community's belief that human beings can initiate release from the cycle of wounding that makes us different from those who think this release can only come from an outside authority. We exist within a body of faith that agrees with the Jewish understanding; human beings have the ability to make things right again. We have the power to overcome "fate".

(We just need to practice what we are capable of!)

Jewish tradition clearly teaches that forgiveness is not about forgetting. It is not about forgetting what harm has been done, or what harm has been suffered. It is not about developing some kind of amnesia about what we have suffered. In fact, for Jews, memory, both collective and individual is essential.

For us too, with our challenge to be about the business of confronting the powers and structures of evil, to be ever justice seeking...to transform institutionalized harms such as racism, heterosexism, classism, misogyny, etc, remembering/memory is essential for being transformed by the process of forgiveness.

For it is in remembering, knowing the hurts caused by injustice, that allow us to stand in solidarity with all others who have suffered. Remembering, recognizing the power and structure of injustice is essential for creating transformation.

Forgiveness isn't about forgetting. It is about moving towards wholeness and beloved community...

The ultimate goal of the process of forgiveness is release from the cycle of wounding, moving away from what was towards what can be.

We all know what happens when a person lets the memory of having been wronged destroy their ability to be in present loving relationship with themselves or with others. Rather than allowing the memory of having been harmed to energize one's work to stop an injustice, some get trapped in an endless circle of personal suffering and revenge, and allow no space for the transformative power of love to work...to pull us to the future.

We have a right to feel shock, pain, anger, sadness over harms done to us. Yet, we can become stuck, when we let harms done take over and define our lives. Stuck, we will be unable to live open and free, less able to be mindful of beauty and harmony.

Victims see only wrongs. Victims live in the past, rather than living in the present and looking with hope toward the future. They don't see a person with worth and dignity standing before them. They only see the hurtful act that has been done and themselves as a victim of that act.

Pop psychology says that you should, for your own good, forgive those that have done you harm, (or yourself for harm you've done to your self); forgive so that you can move on. Let go of the power that you are letting others have over your present and future. Stop being the victim of some harm done in the past.

Pop psychology doesn't tell us what to do with the memory of harm done. In fact, the popular assumption is that "forgiving" means letting someone (or ourselves) off the hook for bad behavior, pretending they didn't really cause harm or discounting our feelings of having been wronged. Perhaps what we hear when counseled to forgive is that we are supposed to just tolerate the bad things that have been done to us, or others,... put on a happy face, mask our sensitivity to injustices that have been committed.

The process of forgiveness within the liberal religious community requires feeling the hurt we've suffered. Feeling hurt could turn into an energizing rage. Acknowledging, naming the harm, recognizing the injustice that has been done, may give rise to renewed energy to change what needs to be changed. Rage can be a great motivator for making a real difference in creating a world with less hurts and less wounding.

Yet, feeling the hurt doesn't mean turning your hurt into a lifestyle of revenge. Badges of honor shouldn't be given out for those who have suffered from harm, or to those who have survived harm. Rather what we should value is movement through the process of forgiveness, movement towards peace.

Liberal religious communities the world over, recognize that entrapment in the cycle of violence never allows for right relationship with self, with others, with whatever it is that has the potential to give life ultimate meaning and purpose.

The point is to keep moving....processing...There is a way out, if we would learn to practice it.

The Jewish community knows that space and time for the communal practice of forgiveness, of putting bygones aside and moving on, need to be regular, calendared events. Beginning again with those with whom one chooses to be in loving relationship includes attention to the art and practice of forgiveness...

The process of forgiveness begins with acknowledging the harm that has been done, calling it what it is, and letting yourself have your natural reaction to it. You have to identify and name what has been done that caused harm. You have to name it and feel your outrage. And you have to move through it. Not around it, through it.

The process of acknowledging that a wrong has happened and that you hate that that wrong has happened can then be followed by releasing the energy of the harm done, the kind of energy that stops loving relationship with yourself, with others, and with the sacred. You are in charge of this release. You can claim the power of release. It is by your choice that you move on, that you process the injustice that has been done to you and move towards forgiveness.

You will know that you are progressing through the process of forgiveness when you are able to wish the person well who committed you harm.

Forgiveness is a gift to yourself and your well being. It is like taking the video-tape that has played over and over in your head and caused pain every time, finally taking it out of the tape player, so that there is room for something new. It is about choosing to move toward your own future. You are essentially doing this for you. In the bonded community the whole congregation will benefit from forgiveness that begins in your heart and extends to those you have chosen to be in close relationship with.

You can wish the other well at the end of the process of forgiveness and choose not to be in a close relationship with them. Wishing them well is the step that releases you from the power that the harm done had over you.

After the forgiveness has occurred you might chose to reconcile with the other person and rebuild a relationship that seeks to be a loving one. There are many reasons you might choose not to be in close relationship with someone who has caused you harm. You can forgive the harmful act, and wish the other well, be aware of your interconnectness, but stay out of close relationship with them. Forgiveness requires only that you change your perception; separating the hurtful act from a judgment about the essential personhood of the other.

Perhaps you are the one who caused harm to another and you wish to make amends.

First, your motivation for reconciliation must be sincere. You must want to now be in good relationship with the other person.

Second, you must be ready to share what you have changed about yourself or your behavior that will lessen your participation in causing any more harm.

Third, be prepared to LISTEN to the other person's feelings about the harm they feel was done. No excuses, no defenses, no explanations from you. This is about listening to the other person expressing their feelings. Making amends is

not about you, or for you. Making amends is for the purpose of healing the relationship with the other person. Give the other person space to express themselves. Receive that expression by listening.

Finally, expect to be forgiven and move on.

Forgiveness is about being able to look at injury, at harm, acknowledging it, naming it, hating it, and moving beyond seeing the person who has caused harm as evil, focusing instead on loving yourself and loving those with whom you are in relationship.

We all need to learn to make amends for the harms we have caused, being sorry for what we have done, so sorry we demonstrate our acknowledgement by changing what needs to be changed in our behavior, being vulnerable again to caring relationship by practicing deep listening to the hurt we have caused, moving on to renewed relationship with our selves and others.

This is the work of transformation, of change, of "growing into harmony". It isn't achievable in an instant. It takes practice and discipline, and willingness to change.

The practice of forgiveness fits our liberal faith... focuses on the passion we have for acknowledging, naming and eradicating the harm we suffer and the harm we cause, while at the same time finding worth and dignity in every other person...forgiving without forgetting...holding in tandem acute sensitivity for injustice *and* a vision of the beloved community.