

One Kol Nidre evening, Rabbi Greenberg is giving a sermon on 'the mitzvah of forgiving your enemies'. He talks at length on the subject for nearly 25 minutes and then asks his congregation, "Please raise your hand if you are willing to forgive your enemies."

About 50% raise their hand. This weak response upsets Rabbi Greenberg so he decides to continue his sermon for another ten minutes. He then repeats his question. "Please raise your hand if you are willing to forgive your enemies."

This time about 80% raise their hand. But the Rabbi is still not satisfied, so he lectures another ten minutes and repeats his question. This time everybody raises their hand, except an old lady at the back of the shul.

Rabbi Greenberg asks, "Mrs. Levy, aren't you willing to forgive your enemies?"

"I don't have any enemies to forgive," she replies.

"That's very unusual Mrs Levy. How old are you?"

"I'm 98 years old, Rabbi. I'll be ninety-nine in a week."

"Please, Mrs. Levy, come to the front and tell us how you have lived almost a century and don't have an enemy in the world." Mrs. Levy hobbles down the aisle, faces the congregation and says, with a smile, "I outlived the bastards, that's how."

I have spoken about forgiveness before, as it is sort of a natural topic on Yom Kippur. I thought that I had pretty much covered the issue, but then I had a conversation with a certain Vlad Perelman.

I met Vlad at the baby naming for Michael and Judy Rothberg's new granddaughter, Anna. Vlad is their mechutan, that is, their son-in-law's father. I had just led a discussion on the topic of forgiveness regarding a Washington, D.C. rabbi who committed some serious crimes.

At the kiddush luncheon afterwards, Vlad comes up to me and asks a very simple question: “What is forgiveness?” He wasn’t asking me what the word meant. Although Vlad is from Odessa, he’s lived here for thirty-seven years and speaks perfect English.

Rather, he wanted to know what I thought forgiveness is in the philosophical sense. And in the most philosophical way possible, I told him that I really have no idea.

Vlad responded with his own interpretation which is good enough and wise enough to quote. He said, “If I forgive you, it means that I am not going to harm you. But it doesn’t mean that I’m inviting you to my daughter’s bat mitzvah.”

Vlad’s well-said explanation got me thinking about forgiveness, and I started to ask *myself* the question, “What is this thing we call forgiveness?” So tonight, we’re going to pop open the hood on forgiveness and take a look at what it is and what makes it work.

We would be wrong to assume that forgiveness is a universal value. In some non-Western cultures like China and Japan, forgiveness is not valued very highly. In these cultures, honor and shame are very important. Cultures based on honor and shame rather than liberty are often not forgiving.

An article by Elisabeth Rosenthal, who was the New York Times correspondent in Beijing, sums up the issue pretty well. She writes, “Apologies are complicated matters in Chinese culture, weighty acts that are rarely offered or accepted, which must be delivered just so, with the proper gravity.

In fact, apologizing is so hard for Chinese people that they pay companies like the Tianjin Apology and Gift Center to do it for them. The company’s motto is, “We Say Sorry For You.”

Nor was forgiveness a popular idea in the ancient Graeco-Roman world, which was also founded on concepts of honor and shame. One strike and you were out. A culture that frequently threw people to the lions while crowds cheered is obviously not one that values forgiveness.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, takes the issue one step further and says that forgiveness is one of many Jewish contributions to Western Civilization.

Rabbi Sacks says that we are the ones who brought the idea of forgiveness to the world through the Bible, especially in the story of Joseph and the forgiveness he granted to the brothers who sold him into slavery.

There are three kinds of forgiveness in the Jewish faith, and I'm going to talk about all three of them. The first is mechila, the second is selicha, and the third is kapparah. You may recognize the three terms from the liturgy, "S'lah lanu, m'hal lanu, kaper lanu."

A good deal of what I'm going to tell you is based on an article by Rabbi David Blumenthal of Emory University. Rabbi Blumenthal was also on the faculty of the Gregorian Pontifical University, and he was Pope John Paul II's man in Rome on matters of Jewish-Christian relations.

Let's start with mechilah. Although mechilah means forgiveness in a general sense, a better translation would be clemency. In American law, clemency is the reduction in sentence that a prisoner gets from the governor.

Clemency does not mean that the offender is exonerated or innocent of the crime. Clemency simply means that the governor or the parole board is being merciful and imposing a lesser sentence than was given originally.

It turns out that mechilah works in much the same way. When you grant mechilah to someone, you are not saying to the person, “You didn’t do it, and I know you’re pure as the wind driven snow, and please marry my daughter.” Rather, your act of mechilah means, “You did it, and I was hurt, and maybe I’m still a little hurt, but I’m going to drop the matter so we can both move on.”

In other words, mechilah is Vlad Perelman’s kind of forgiveness, the kind where you decide not to harm or ostracize the sinner, but neither are you going to invite him to your daughter’s Bat Mitzvah.

When is it appropriate to give mechilah? Ideally, mechilah is meant for the second and third degree people in your life. It should be granted to people who have apologized to you but who, for whatever reason, are not intensely important to you. By granting mechilah, you agree to let the matter pass, but you don’t have to become best of friends.

Moreover, mechilah is appropriate for milder insults. You give mechilah to someone who lost his temper and yelled at you. But if someone besmirched your reputation in a serious way or gave you a lasting injury, mechilah is sort of meaningless.

As Taylor Swift says in her hit song “Bad Blood,” band-aids don’t fix bullet holes. Mechilah is a band-aid for minor offenses between people who are acquaintances or friends but not best friends or family.

Now let’s talk about the second kind of forgiveness which is known as selicha. If you’ve studied any conversational Hebrew, then you know that selicha is the Hebrew word for “Sorry” or “Excuse Me.” In terms of forgiveness, the best translation of selicha would be empathy.

When you grant someone selicha, you are not merely reconciling for the sake of appearances or for the sake of moving on. Instead, your selicha is a gift that you give to people who have offended you but who have stirred within you the feeling of empathy or at least sympathy.

Let's say that someone you love is a drunk and hits rock bottom. Now let's say that this person realizes that it's time to get help and checks himself into rehab. Eventually, you might be inclined to grant him selicha because you feel sorry for him. He has a disease and has taken steps to get the treatment he needs.

If he stays sober and changes his life, then your selicha would enable you both to start over with a clean slate. You give selicha to the people you love in order to give your the relationship a chance to make a full recovery.

Selicha also comes into play when you recognize that you are partly at fault for the conflict, even if only a little bit. If you feel that you share some responsibility for the offense, then selicha is the appropriate form of forgiveness.

Selicha is a meeting of two souls in a bond of peace. In contrast, mechila is just an agreement that two people will stop fighting. It's more of an armistice agreement than a peace treaty.

Obviously, the more grievous the offense, the harder it is to grant selicha. If the offense is adultery or domestic violence or if it's the ninth time he's gone to rehab, then selicha might not be an option for you.

But I imagine it would be very hard to live with someone you couldn't forgive in a full sense. Selicha, the fullest form of forgiveness, is the lifeblood of any close relationship or marriage. Marriages in particular need a lot of love to survive, but they need even more forgiveness. Selicha allows us to feel empathy for the people we love even though they leave much to be desired in some ways.

If the total forgiveness of selicha is off the table, then I hope you know a good divorce lawyer, because that's where you're headed. The incomplete forgiveness of mechilah doesn't work for spouses or anyone with whom you're very close. And in some cases, divorce may very well be the right thing to do. As I said, not every situation is forgivable.

But if you want the relationship to survive, then both of you need to be able to give and receive the full forgiveness of selicha. This is true not only of spouses but also of siblings. Over the years, I have heard many stories of family members not talking to each other, and it's almost never ex-spouses.

Ex-spouses usually do keep talking because they have to for the sake of the children. It's the estranged siblings that sometimes just hang up with each other and never heal the relationship. If you are not talking to a brother or a sister, ask yourself why. Maybe there's a good reason, maybe there's not.

Whatever the case, if you want to heal that relationship, then only selicha will do the job. Only the full, empathetic forgiveness of selicha will give you a chance of getting your brother or sister back.

The third kind of forgiveness is called kappara. Kappara is the word for atonement, and as you can hear, kappara is related to the word kippur, as is Yom Kippur. Kappara is the kind of forgiveness that is only available from God.

The only way to get kappara is to confess one's sins to God, resolve to improve, and then change the sinful behavior. Unlike what happens in the Catholic Church, there is no human religious authority who can grant you kapparah.

If you confess to me that you eat bacon every Yom Kippur, I won't judge you but I also can't hear your confession and forgive you because your sin is against God, not me. There is no "Forgive me, Rabbi, for I have sinned."

It reminds me of the old joke about the Jew who goes to the local Catholic Church and enters the confessional booth. The Jew tells the priest, “Father, I’m Jewish, but I have to tell you that I’ve been very naughty with large numbers of women.” The priest says to him, “But if you’re Jewish, why are you telling me?” The Jew says “Telling you? I’m telling everybody!”

Jews have never been able to go to a rabbi or cohen and get absolution for our sins, and with good reason. That kind of system gets corrupted very easily. The Catholic Church in the Middle Ages sold absolution in the the form of indulgences. They were essentially selling get out of hell free cards. That’s why nobody had to pay dues.

It would be great for Temple Beth El’s budget if I could sell Make God Happy cards, but it would not be an authentic Jewish experience. Only God can forgive you and only you can ask God for forgiveness.

Kappara also comes into play if you feel the need to forgive yourself or if you need forgiveness from the dead. Let’s say you feel you were not a good son or daughter, and now your parents are dead and you never got around to asking for their forgiveness.

Or let’s say that you feel you took the wrong path in life twenty-five years ago, and now you’re feeling sorry for yourself for the choices you made.

In that case, the best option would be for you to ask God for atonement. The only other choice you have is to live with the guilt, and that’s not a healthy way to live. Kappara is the tradition’s way of saying that you can get the peace you need.

Do you *have* to grant forgiveness? According to Jewish law, you often have the legal right to deny forgiveness. Perhaps you feel the apology was insincere, or maybe you feel that the offense is too grave.

But just because you have the legal right to deny forgiveness does not mean that you *should* deny it. In almost all cases, you really should find it within yourself to forgive. The exceptions would be those who have committed acts of violence against you, those who have done terrible things to you that cannot be fixed. In those few cases, you can deny forgiveness without a second thought.

In all other cases, we have a moral obligation to forgive if not a legal obligation. Now you may reasonably ask why? Why is there a moral need to forgive if Jewish law does not require it?

I learned the answer to that question from my colleague and classmate at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Shai Held. Rabbi Held is the director of Mechon Hadar, a non-Orthodox yeshiva providing advanced Torah learning to men and women in Manhattan.

In a recent lecture, Rabbi Held said that we need to forgive others because we are supposed to imitate God in our actions. The idea of imitating God comes from the Talmud in Tractate Sotah, where we read, “Just as God clothes the naked, so too you also should clothe the naked. Just as God visits the sick, so too you should visit the sick. Just as God buried Moses, you also should bury the dead.”

Rabbi Held notes that there is no Jewish text anywhere that says, “Just as God is a vengeful and spiteful God who smites His enemies, you also should be vengeful and spiteful.” That idea simply doesn’t exist in our culture.

When we fail to forgive, we fail to imitate God in our lives. Rabbi Held went on to say that if you want to receive forgiveness, you have to grant forgiveness. He said it takes a lot of chutzpah, the bad kind of chutzpah, to come to shul on Yom Kippur and ask God for forgiveness while you deny it to others.

If we want mercy from God, we must be merciful to others. If we want leniency, we must be lenient with others. Otherwise, we are nothing but selfish hypocrites.

And what if you don't really believe in God? I recognize that not all Jews believe, and that's fine. I'm not here to make you believe, that has to be your choice. But I do want you to know that forgiveness can help you whether you are a believer or not.

According to the Mayo clinic, being a forgiving person can decrease your levels of anxiety, stress, and hostility. It can lower your blood pressure, improve your cardiac function, strengthen your immune system, and improve the symptoms of depression.

What more do you want? A new car? The new iPad Pro? A set of Ginsu knives?

Tonight, you will be asked to be generous in your donations to Temple Beth El. I also want you to be generous with your forgiveness. Give as much of it as you feel you can.

May we all be signed, sealed, and delivered for a sweet, healthy new year. Shanah tovah. It's now my honor to invite our President, Marc Hilton, to give his Kol Nidre address.