

Rabbi Sarah Tasman
2025 Yom Kippur Alternative Services
A Yom Kippur Reflection on Forgiveness

I want to begin with a poem, *The Weight and the Whisper* by Mike Sansone:

I waited for words that never came,
An “I’m sorry” hung in silent air.
The wound still fresh, the ache still loud,
While they moved on, unaware.

I held the grudge like armor worn,
Thinking pain gave power back.
But it only grew more heavy still,
And kept me tethered to the lack.

Closure seemed like a locked old door,
And I without the key.
Just echoes of what should’ve been,
And all they didn’t see.

But healing whispered something soft —
*“Forgive, not to excuse,
But to free your heart from chains of hurt,
And choose what you won’t lose.”*

So I laid the weight beside the road,
And let the ache unbind.
Not for them, but for the peace
That I deserve to find.

This poem holds something essential about Yom Kippur and forgiveness. The weight. The ache. The silence. And then—the whisper. The invitation to put down what we’ve been carrying, and to move toward peace.

Growing up, I learned, as many of us did, that this is the season of forgiveness. We are supposed to ask for forgiveness, and to offer forgiveness. But if I’m honest, I don’t remember being taught how to do that.

I remember in college, back when every dorm room had a real phone on the wall, I decided to call a friend. I said: “If I did anything to hurt you, I’m sorry.” There was a pause. He laughed—almost a scoff—and said, “You’re really doing this?” I said yes. And then he hung up.

That moment has stayed with me. Why did he react that way? Maybe he thought forgiveness was only symbolic, something we say in synagogue, not something we actually *do*. Or maybe my apology felt too perfunctory, not deep enough for whatever I had done.

And that’s the truth: asking for forgiveness is daunting. Giving forgiveness is daunting. And yet—this is the work of these days.

Judaism actually gives us a whole vocabulary for forgiveness. Each word teaches us something slightly different.

- **Teshuvah** means *return*—to God, to our true selves, to one another. Maimonides, taught that teshuvah involves four steps: regret, stopping the hurtful action, confessing, and resolving to change.
- **Selichah** means *pardon*. In everyday Hebrew, it’s the word we use for “excuse me.” It reminds us that forgiveness can sometimes be as ordinary—and as necessary—as making space for each other.

- **Mechilah** means *wiping away*. It's when a person freely lets go of their anger. It doesn't mean the harm never happened, but it means the relationship can breathe again.
- And finally **Kaparah**—atonement. A cleansing. Yom Kippur—this day—is the deepest invitation to cleansing, to release, to renewal.

Even with these rich teachings, forgiveness can still feel impossible. Which is why I love how the poet David Whyte puts it. He says:

Forgiveness is a heartache and difficult to achieve... To approach forgiveness is to close in on the nature of the hurt itself... Perhaps the wounded part of us can never forgive. But forgiveness may come from a deeper, larger self—an act of compassion that shapes the future we want for ourselves.

Isn't that what today is about? About taping into something bigger than ourselves. Shaping the future we want—for ourselves, for our relationships, for our community, for our world.

In my own training as a pre-marital coach, I learned that forgiveness is not vague, but a practice we can break down into steps. For example, to seek forgiveness we can:

1. Admit what we did wrong.
2. Try to understand the pain we caused.
3. Take responsibility and, if possible, make restitution.
4. Assure the other person we will not do it again.
5. Apologize and ask for forgiveness.
6. And finally—perhaps most importantly—learn to forgive ourselves.

And when we are asked to forgive, we too have steps we can take:

1. Acknowledge our pain.

2. Name what we need going forward.
3. Let go of vengeance.
4. Release blame.
5. Communicate forgiveness.
6. And—when it is safe—work toward reconciliation.

None of this is easy. None of it is quick. But it is holy work.

And so, as we sit here together on this sacred day, I want to invite you into a practice.

Some of you may have seen the show *The Pitt*. In it, a Jewish doctor teaches a family the Ho'oponopono prayer, an ancient Hawaiian practice of healing. It is simple. Just four lines:

I'm sorry.

Please forgive me.

Thank you.

I love you.

So I invite you, right now, to think of someone. It might be a person you love. It might be someone with whom you are in conflict. It might even be yourself. You don't need to say anything out loud if you don't want to. You can whisper the words. You can just hold them in your heart.

Let's try:

I'm sorry.

Please forgive me.

Thank you.

I love you.

Again.

I'm sorry.
Please forgive me.
Thank you.
I love you.

One more time.

I'm sorry.
Please forgive me.
Thank you.
I love you.

In her 3 steps for forgiveness, Brene Brown describes:

The Reckoning. Recognize and be curious about what your feeling

The Rumble. Be honest about the assumptions we've made and what needs to change

The Revolution. Write a new ending to our story based on what we've learned in the process.

Friends, on this Yom Kippur, may we hear the whisper that invites us to put down the heavy weight. May we find the courage to ask for forgiveness, and the strength to offer it. May we learn something new and start anew. May we turn, return, and keep returning—toward each other, toward God, toward our truest selves.

And may the year ahead be filled with healing, peace, and love.

Growing up, I was taught, like many of us, that during this time of year, we are supposed to ask for forgiveness, and to give forgiveness. I don't really remember being taught how to do this. I have a memory from college, where each room had a real phone attached to the wall. I remember calling up a friend and apologizing for anything I did that hurt or offended him. He let out a laugh that was more of a scoff, and said, "you're really doing this". I couldn't quite tell why he reacted that way. When I said yes, he hung up. This has stuck in my mind. I never found out why exactly he acted that way but I came up with several reasons – he was surprised, he thought we ask for forgiveness symbolically or liturgically at services but not really to another person, or maybe I really had done something to hurt him and a simple apology on Yom Kippur seemed perfunctory or inauthentic or wasn't really going to fix anything.

Asking for forgiveness can be a really daunting task. And it wasn't until I went through training as a pre-marital counselor did I really learn the steps of forgiveness – because there are actually instructions we can learn. And I will share those shortly.

In Judaism, forgiveness is a multifaceted concept that involves several distinct Hebrew words, each representing a different aspect of the process of seeking and granting pardon. It is not a single, monolithic idea but a journey of repentance, reconciliation, and atonement, and purification involving both human beings and God.

One of the concepts which we speak about a lot at this time of year is Teshuvah

- **Meaning:** "Return." More than simple repentance, *teshuvah* is the act of turning back toward God and one's truest self after having strayed. It is a foundational human-driven process for repairing a broken relationship with God or another person or oneself.
- **Process:** According to Maimonides at 13th century Rabbi, *teshuvah* involves four steps:
 1. **Regret (*haratah*):** Feeling sincere remorse for the wrongdoing.
 2. **Cessation (*azivat ha-cheit*):** Immediately stopping the hurtful action.
 3. **Confession (*vidui*):** Acknowledging the sin verbally to God, and to the person if the offense was against them.
 4. **Resolution (*kabbalah le'haba'ah*):** Committing to not repeat the transgression in the future.
- **Context:** For sins between people, one must go through the process of teshuva before asking for forgiveness. God will not forgive a person for harming another until that person has sought and been granted forgiveness from the other person.

Selichah

- **Meaning:** "Pardon" or "forgiveness." In biblical times, this term referred exclusively to divine pardon, often described as God's readiness to show mercy to covenant-breakers. In modern Hebrew, it is the common word for "sorry" or "excuse me". It was one of the most important words I learned when I lived in Israel and one of the first I learned since I felt I was constantly saying, "selicha" to move past someone, to get someone's attention, to apologize if I messed up, and countless other times.
- **Process:** Traditionally, *selichah* is the pardon that is granted by God in response to a person's sincere *teshuvah*. Some texts describe *selichah* as a temporary reprieve of punishment, while *mechilah* offers a more complete erasure of the sin.
- **Context:** Some times selichot, in the plural form, refers to the special penitential prayers recited during the High Holy Days period, where the community collectively asks God for pardon. We did this at TRS on the Saturday night a week before Rosh Hashanah. Some Sephardic communities recite special selichot prayers every morning during the month of Elul to prepare for Rosh Hashanah.

A lesser known word is Mechilah

- **Meaning:** "Wiping away" or "annulment." This is the act of a wronged person letting go of a grievance and forgiving the one who wronged them. It is an act of freely given forgiveness that restores a relationship to its previous state.
- **Process:** Unlike *selichah*, which is asked for, *mechilah* is given freely and is not necessarily connected to the perpetrator's actions. It is a choice by the offended person to release their justified anger and let go of the harm.

Context: For interpersonal transgressions, *mechilah* is the ultimate goal, signifying that the victim has wiped the slate clean and is ready to fully mend the relationship.

Kaparah

- **Meaning:** "Atonement," from a root meaning "to cover" or "to cleanse." This is the highest level of reconciliation, a complete and total cleansing of sinfulness.
- **Process:** While historically involving Temple sacrifices, atonement today is primarily achieved through sincere *teshuvah*, prayer, and charity. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the pinnacle of this process, providing a powerful opportunity for *kaparah* with God.

The training I did on Conflict Resolution has a section explaining Forgiveness and 6 steps for giving and receiving it.

“Forgiveness is the decision or choice to give up the right for vengeance, retribution, and negative thoughts toward an offender in order to be free from anger and resentment.” “This process promotes healing and restoration of inner peace, and it can allow reconciliation to take place in the relationship. It is also important to be clear about what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not forgetting, condoning, or perpetuating injustice. Since it is sometimes unsafe or impossible, forgiveness does not always involve reconciliation. Forgiveness is not always quick; it is a process that can take time to unfold. Don’t rush your partner (or friend, family member, colleague, others) if they need to spend days or weeks working through the process of granting forgiveness.

SIX STEPS FOR SEEKING FORGIVENESS

1. Admit what you did was wrong or hurtful.
2. Try to understand/empathize with the pain you have caused.
3. Take responsibility for your actions and make restitution if necessary.
4. Assure your partner you will not do it again.
5. Apologize and ask for forgiveness.
6. Forgive yourself.

SIX STEPS FOR GRANTING FORGIVENESS

1. Acknowledge your pain and anger. Allow yourself to feel disrespected.
2. Be specific about your future expectations and limits.
3. Give up your right to “get even,” but insist on being treated better in the future.
4. Let go of blame, resentment, and negativity toward your partner.
5. Communicate your act of forgiveness to your partner.
6. Work toward reconciliation (when safe).

The only thing I might add to this list is step #7 – a ritual of transition – perhaps a water ritual that can help to refresh or start fresh after an experience like this. Perhaps a simple

handwashing, or an immersion in the waters of the mikvah, or watering new seeds that will need to grow in time.

I feel as though sometimes the components of forgiveness in Jewish tradition make it seem simple, but don't always address the fears... what if it doesn't work, what if the other person isn't ready to forgive me, what if I try this and they get MORE upset or made, what if I feel MORE hurt or upset, what if I am not ready forgive.

And so the poet David Whyte describes forgiveness like this:

FORGIVENESS

is a heartache and difficult to achieve because strangely, the act of forgiveness not only refuses to eliminate the original wound, but actually draws us closer to its source. To approach forgiveness is to close in on the nature of the hurt itself, the only remedy being, as we approach its raw center, to reimagine our relation to it.

It may be that the part of us that was struck and hurt can never forgive, and that forgiveness itself never arises from the part of us that was actually wounded. The wounded self may be the part of us incapable of forgetting, and perhaps, not meant to forget...

Stranger still, it is that wounded, branded, un-forgetting part of us that eventually makes forgiveness an act of compassion rather than one of simple forgetting...

Forgiveness is a skill, a way of preserving clarity, sanity and generosity in an individual life, a beautiful question and a way of shaping the mind to a future we want for ourselves; an admittance that if forgiveness comes through understanding, and if understanding is just a matter of time and application then we might as well begin forgiving right at the beginning of any drama, rather than put ourselves through the full cycle of festering, incapacitation, reluctant healing and eventual blessing.

...at the end of life, the wish to be forgiven is ultimately the chief desire of almost every human being. In refusing to wait; in extending forgiveness to others now, we begin the long journey of becoming the person who will be large enough, able enough and generous enough to receive, at our very end, that necessary absolution ourselves.

FORGIVENESS

From CONSOLATIONS: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words.

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As I have been speaking, you may be thinking about relationships in your life that need healing or repair. You may be thinking about how to go about granting or asking for forgiveness to that person.

So I am going to invite us to try something. Recently I watched the television show “The Pitt” in which Noah Wyle plays a Jewish doctor named Dr Michael “Robby” Rabinovitch. The moments in the show about his Jewish identity, beliefs and practices could be a whole other sermon. But I actually want to describe something else. As a pair of adult siblings are preparing to say goodbye to their elderly father who is dying, they don’t know what to do. Dr Robby teaches them The Ho’oponopono prayer, rooted in Hawaiian tradition, which is a simple yet powerful practice for healing and forgiveness.

It centers around repeating the phrases:

"I'm sorry,

Please forgive me,

Thank you,

I love you."

These phrases are used to cleanse negative energy, release emotional blockages, and foster self-compassion and healing. Core Principles: **100% Responsibility** Ho'oponopono emphasizes taking responsibility for all aspects of one's life, including experiences and interactions with others. **Forgiveness:** The prayer facilitates forgiveness, both of oneself and others, by addressing past hurts and resentments. **Cleansing:** The repeated phrases are believed to cleanse negative energies, emotional charges, and blockages stored in the subconscious. **Gratitude and Love:** The final phrases express gratitude and unconditional love, promoting positive energy and healing.

So let’s try it for a moment.

"I'm sorry,

Please forgive me,

Thank you,

I love you."

You might picture someone in your mind – someone in your life right now, or even someone who is no longer alive. It might even be yourself.

You may choose to say the words silently, whisper them, or say them aloud along with me.

"I'm sorry,
Please forgive me,
Thank you,
I love you."

"I'm sorry,
Please forgive me,
Thank you,
I love you."

"I'm sorry,
Please forgive me,
Thank you,
I love you."

Ne'ilah
by Marge Piercy

The hinge of the year
the great gates opening
and then slowly slowly
closing on us.

I always imagine those gates
hanging over the ocean
fiery over the stone grey
waters of evening.

We cast what we must
change about ourselves
onto the waters flowing
to the sea. The sins,

errors, bad habits, whatever
you call them, dissolve.

When I was little I cried
out !!! I want, I want.

Older, I feel less important,
a worker bee in the hive
of history, miles of hard
labor to make my sweetness.

The gates are closing
The light is failing
I kneel before what I love
imploing that it may live.

So much breaks, wears
down, fails in us. We must
forgive our broken promises—
their sharp shards in our hands.

To My Mother

by Wendell Berry

I was your rebellious son,
do you remember? Sometimes
I wonder if you do remember,
so complete has your forgiveness been.

So complete has your forgiveness been
I wonder sometimes if it did not
precede my wrong, and I erred,
safe found, within your love,

prepared ahead of me, the way home,
or my bed at night, so that almost
I should forgive you, who perhaps
foresaw the worst that I might do,

and forgave before I could act,
causing me to smile now, looking back,
to see how paltry was my worst,
compared to your forgiveness of it

already given. And this, then,
is the vision of that Heaven of which
we have heard, where those who love
each other have forgiven each other,

where, for that, the leaves are green,
the light a music in the air,
and all is unentangled,
and all is undismayed.

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