

HELLO AGAIN: THE JOURNEY OF FORGIVENESS
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There's a story about a conversation that Bill Clinton and Nelson Mandela had on forgiveness.

"I wonder what you must have felt towards your jailers when you were walking out of that prison after those 27 years.", Clinton commented, "Weren't you angry at them?"

"Yes, I was angry. And I was a little afraid," answered Mandela. "After all, I've not been free in so long."

"But," he added, "when I felt that anger welling up inside me, I realized that if I continue to hate them after I got outside that gate, then they would still have me...." "I wanted to be free," Mandela said, "so I let it go."¹

Forgiveness is not about being in charge of the situation. It's about letting go of the outcome, it's about letting go of control.

Forgiveness is a spiritual discipline, calling us to be open to transforming our assumptions of how things "should be", and of taking ourselves out of the center of the universe.

Here's a couple spiritual questions for you: In considering forgiveness, do you need to be right or coexist? Do you need to change the other or find a way to be your true self? Is how things should go from here up to you or unknown?

¹ <http://zen-sense.blogspot.com/search/label/forgiveness>

You know as I was writing these questions, I was thinking to myself I need to have this list by my bedside and read it before I get up every morning!!

There are religious traditions, in fact, that observe and ritualize practices of repentance and forgiveness.

Our Jewish friends and neighbors are in the midst of the ten days of Teshuvah, as part of the High Holy Days -- a major faith observance of celebration, repentance, renewal and reverence to usher in the Jewish new year. Rosh ha-shannah (which this year was last Sunday) begins the ten days with a commemoration of the creation of the world, and the tenth day (next Tuesday this year) is Yom Kippur, a day of repentance that ties in the work of reconciliation with self, others and the Eternal One. These High Holy Days occur in Tishrei, the seventh month of the Jewish calendar. The word "tishrei" derives from an Akkadian root meaning "to begin".....Hello Again.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin described the Jewish High Holy Days in this way: "Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur's goal is nothing less than an ethical and religious reassessment of one's life."²

This opportunity to restore a sense of self in community is heralded through the blowing of the shofar, an instrument made out of a ram's horn. It is a sharp and piercing sound that is meant to wake the listeners to their urgent call: "Awake," describes Maimonides, an ancient Jewish scholar, "Awake, O you slumberers, awake from your slumber! Search your deeds and turn in repentance."³

²Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. Jewish Literacy. William Morrow and Company, p.564.

³Jewish Literacy by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin

A voice in Jewish spirituality is the understanding that each of us are participants in the unfolding of the sacred story of creation. Our hands, in a sense, are God's hands, our eyes, God's eyes, our choices, a dialogue with destiny. Who we are determines what we will become and we have all the gifts of being we need to repair ourselves and so the world, should we so choose. So the observance of the days of awe prepares the community for a new year – a strong, fresh start into life's next chapter.

The word “teshuva” means ‘repentance’. It can also be translated as ‘return’. The discipline of the days of teshuvah is the reminder to intentionally take stock of our ways and walking as a beginning of the new year.

By taking time to reflect and remember our relational being, we naturally strengthen our communities. When we embrace the possibility of a new future we see it in others. When we recognize our fears, we recognize them in others. When we understand the impulse to reach for new knowledge, we encourage it in others. When we boldly claim our love, we inspire others to do the same. When we take the risk to truly repent and embrace forgiveness for our stumbling, we find new avenues for our own compassion toward others. When we find our way to forgiving another, we come into a freedom of being we may not have known before.

So two of the most challenging and life-giving relational disciplines are addressed in the Jewish High Holy Days: repentance and forgiveness. On Yom Kippur, the final day, the forgiveness sought is forgiveness from God. There is a wide variety of understandings about what that means, however it does include a reconciliation within oneself and a humility toward a larger interdependent life.

We often make the mistake in our culture when we assume that repentance and forgiveness are about the other person or persons, when in fact both repentance and

forgiveness are about self-transformation and finding our way to our soul's knowing.

And if we receive forgiveness from another, or true repentance, then we are doubly blessed; but the healing occurs in our changed selves, in our wiser walking. Doors of opportunity then open for new and better ways of being.

Seeking and granting forgiveness is an essential part of summoning the sacred knowledge that life is a gift and we are ever emerging into all that we can be.

In order to begin to repent, we must find a way to forgive ourselves – not to deny what we've done, but to believe that there is a way to release ourselves from the negativity we created.

Forgiving ourselves so that we can truly make amends also means letting go of who we thought we were. We may not get all of what we had back. Hoping for something that is no longer there is not a noble enterprise. We take our next steps on our own, not with or because of another's judgment. This is not their journey, it is our own. It affects others but is not the responsibility of others. And guidance is available, in sincere friends and spirit's longing.

Repentance is not up to whether the other forgives us, it must be true in our hearts. The change in ourself will then be evident for those who are willing to see. And it can take a long time for others to see the change. In repentance, we must let go of expectation of reward or even acknowledgement, we must carry through our intention because we know it is right, not because we will gain anything from it, except our integrity.

How can you tell when a sin you have committed has been pardoned?” asks the disciples of Rabbi Burnam. “We can tell,” he answered, “by the fact that we no longer commit that sin.”⁴

That’s where the reconciliation begins...releasing the negativity into the ethers..where it no longer affects us or infects others.

Forgiveness of other takes a similar course. In order to begin to forgive, we must find a way to unhook our expectations of the other.

There is a saying that “expectations are simply resentments waiting to happen”.

Forgiveness of another is also not about whether the offender changes. It’s about giving up how the hurt has taken root in our psyche, removing it from how it has imprisoned our hearts, letting go of its rule over our choices. It is not about forgetting the offense, but removing its power over our lives. True forgiveness frees us from the burden of another’s choice to harm. We cannot forgive until we have solidly seen the harmful behavior and get out of its way. Then we can welcome a freedom within to build on a wiser life.

Without forgiveness we simply are not free ...none of us...because we all make mistakes and we have all been offended in some measure or another. If we lock ourselves into the hurt or into the blame, then we will fill our hearts and minds with this preoccupation, eventually crowding out our courage to be.

“Certain twisted monsters always bar the path”, writes poet William Stafford, “but that's when you get going best, glad to be lost, learning how real it is here on earth, again and again.”⁵

⁴Jewish Literacy,p.542

⁵“Cutting Loose” poem by William Stafford

And when we truly turn the corner, change our outlook about ourselves and others, deepening our wonder of the gift of life, our lives are different than they were before that choice. Our lives take on a new shape when we commit to our own health as important to the lives we lead and the people we touch. The changes may be subtle or quite pronounced. We may find ourselves letting go of lifestyles, losing friends, changing jobs. We may feel awkward and empty for awhile, having devoted so much energy to our guilt or blame. We may feel a little afraid because we had anchored ourselves for so long in a way of being that depended on the opinions and actions of others rather than our own sense of self. We may need some time to find balance. And more often than not we will need help – trusted companions -- friends or professionals, who will abide with us in this vulnerable renewal. In this tentative “hello...again.”

Forgiveness and repentance are about the acceptance that life’s wisdom flows through our foolish acts and petty resentments, our deepest hurts and waves of remorse. They point to a larger wholeness that encompasses us all and guides us through. A wholeness that can be recognized when we enter our lives with humility and a commitment to fullness of being.

That wholeness, that guidance, is love. Love is what connects us, one to the other. Now I’m not talking about a sentimental love, a fantasized love, a commercialized love. Love is not a mandate to throw ourselves away. Love is not a magic potion that keeps us from pain. That ain’t love....

Love is an invitation, an invocation, an inner strength that guides us to welcome life in all its complexity as holy in ourselves and others. And with that guidance, with that welcome, we can then see what is not love, what is not life affirming. And we can offer a healthy NO.

Sometimes the wisdom of forgiveness means you can no longer be in close relationship with the other. Sometimes the wisdom of forgiveness means you open your eyes to a different way of seeing each other and you enter into a new, informed beginning. Sometimes the wisdom of forgiveness means you have woken up from your illusions of how you thought things were. Sometimes the wisdom of forgiveness means that you have to grieve.

One grounding quote, of an unknown author, is that “forgiveness is letting of the illusion of having a better past.”

Forgiveness is an incremental art, so let yourself off the hook, unless you are holding a mistake over another to maintain power or staying stuck, after much time has passed, in the drama of victim. Let yourself off the hook as you incrementally find your way, bit by bit, removing layers of resistance (** demonstrate – oh I no longer need that) with the guidance of a healthy love...self-respecting, other-regarding, life affirming love.

So may it be. Amen.