

A senior monk and a junior monk were traveling together. At one point, they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a young and very beautiful woman also attempting to cross. She asked if they could help her.

The senior monk agreed, and lifted the woman onto his shoulder. He crossed the river and let her down on the other bank. The junior monk was very upset, but remained silent.

They continued walking and the senior monk noticed that his junior was suddenly silent and inquired “Is something the matter? You seem very upset?”

The junior monk replied, “As monks, we are not permitted to touch a woman. How could you carry that woman on your shoulders?”

The senior monk replied, “I left the woman a long time ago at the bank. You however, seem to be carrying her still.”

I have been thinking of this story of the two monks because something happened to me some time ago that I, like the young monk, have been carrying around ever since. I was at a wedding and an incident happened to someone in my family in which the rabbi physically pulled him out of the dancing because he thought that this particular dance should be for the immediate family of the bride and no others. The dancing ended shortly thereafter, and there was no further opportunity for him to dance with the bride. I spoke to the rabbi that night and explained that his actions were very hurtful and that it seemed to me that he had no authority over who dances with whom at the reception. He gave a semi-apology, but insisted that he had the right to direct every aspect of the celebration. Over time, I ignored several invitations to connect with him on social networks because I was so angry at him. I would see his name and the whole incident and all of the feelings it sparked would come alive again. I meant to follow up, but I did nothing but nurture this anger.

Some months ago, I realized that I am the young monk. I have been carrying around a burden of anger and resentment against my senior colleague, and it has adversely affected how I function. This rabbi is wonderfully creative and has shared some terrific ideas, but I have not let myself learn from him any more because I don't want to give him the respect. Who is the loser here? Certainly not him - he didn't know about how I felt, having most likely forgotten the entire incident.

The Shulhan Arukh, the Code of Jewish Law, directs that “the injured party may withhold forgiveness if he/she does so with the intention of benefiting the offender.” (SA OH 606:1) My withholding of forgiveness, without any communication with the other party, benefited no one, and hurt only me.

I am the only loser in this situation - I lost the benefit of acquiring wisdom from a senior colleague. Finally, a few weeks ago I called him and left him a message reminding him of the incident, telling him that it was still bothering me, but that I was going to let go of it, accept his friend requests, and if he wanted to speak with me further, I'd welcome his call. So far we have not talked, but I am now beginning to be able to see his name without feeling my gut clench in anger. I spent so many months being angry that I literally have to retrain the pathways of my brain to react differently.

I'm guessing that I'm not alone when I tell you that extending forgiveness is not always easy, so I want to take a closer look at the role of forgiveness in allowing us to lead healthier lives. Must we think of forgiveness only after the other person has thoroughly repented?

By virtue of living in a community, we are constantly bumping into other people. These touches might be physical or virtual - in person or over the phone or computer. It is unavoidable - we will injure other people and be injured by them. Physical, emotional, real, imagined, at every point at which we come in contact with another person, whether it be a touch, a glance, a conversation, a facebook post, an email, a voicemail, there is potential for misunderstanding, miscommunication, misreading intent, and hurt feelings. Into every interaction, we carry our record of past hurt - one who has been hurt in the past may be wary that in every future contact, the other person has sinister intent. We are burdened by our past injuries, and that inhibits our ability to engage in healthy exchanges.

One of the classic stories of forgiveness from Torah is the interaction between Miriam and Moses in Numbers 12:10. She disparages Moses and God becomes angry and strikes her with a scaly skin disease. Although she does not utter a word of apology, Moses prays on her behalf for her to be healed - five powerful words, *אֵל נָא, רַפֵּא נָא לָהּ*, *Please God, please heal her*. Moses seizes an opportunity to do something good for her to show that he has forgiven her **even though she has not apologized**.

There is a legend told in the Zohar, a book of mystical wisdom, about the power of forgiveness:

Rabbi Abba saw a traveler sit down on a pile of rocks at the edge of a mountain overlooking a cliff. The man was exhausted from his journey and immediately fell asleep. A deadly snake slithered out of the rocks towards the sleeping man. Suddenly a giant lizard jumped out from between the rocks and killed the snake. A short while later, the man woke up and was perplexed to see a beheaded snake lying in front of him. He gathered his possessions and stood up to continue his journey. At that instant the pile of rocks he was sitting on collapsed and fell into the ravine below. Had he not stood up, he would have been killed. Rabbi Abba ran up to him and explained everything he had witnessed, and asked the man, "My friend to what do you attribute all these miracles?"

The traveler responded, "Throughout my life I have never let a person harm me where I did not pacify him. Never have I gone to sleep without forgiving someone for hurting me in any way. I would endeavor, with all my heart, to resolve whatever animosity was between us. And lastly, I would turn the hateful situation into doing acts of kindness for the person involved in the misunderstanding."

When Rabbi Abba heard this he burst into tears, at learning of this man who forgives anyone and everyone who has harmed him. It is no surprise that God performs miracles on a daily basis for this blessed man.<sup>1</sup>

The power of forgiveness is nearly miraculous. Dr. Katherine Piederman, a staff chaplain at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, defines forgiveness as a decision to let go of resentments and thoughts of revenge. Forgiveness is the act of untying yourself from thoughts and feelings that bind you to the offense committed against you. This can reduce the power these feelings otherwise have over you, so that you can live a freer and happier life. Forgiveness can even lead to feelings of understanding, empathy and compassion for the one who hurt you. She goes on to talk about the medical benefits of forgiveness, including:

- Lower blood pressure

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1. *Maasiyot HaZohar Vol. 1 P.169 Miketz P. 201B*

- Lower heart rate
- Lower risk of alcohol or substance abuse
- Fewer depression symptoms
- Fewer anxiety symptoms
- Reduction in chronic pain<sup>2</sup>

If we take the central metaphor of Rosh Hashanah seriously, that this time of year is a time when we choose between life and death, then we are obligated to take forgiveness seriously. Today and in the coming weeks, consider the long ago hurts for which you are still carrying a grudge. Consider that this burden is making you a less happy and healthy person. Relieve yourself of this burden, let go of the grudge. Embrace life. Grant forgiveness. *Dan L'khaf zhut*, give the benefit of the doubt. Chances are that you might remember the injury, but the other person does not. If you think it will be beneficial, make a phone call to the other person, not for the purpose of venting continued anger, but for the purpose of letting go of the anger and inviting the other person to reconnect. Let that be your task this new year. To help you, consider the following meditation, based on the words of 16<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Isaac Luria:

Master of the Universe! I herewith forgive anyone who may have irritated, angered, or injured me, whether acting against my person, my possessions, or my reputation. Let no one be punished on my account, whether the wrong done me was accidental or malicious, unwitting or purposeful, by word or by deed.... May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable before You, Adonai, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.<sup>3</sup>

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2. <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/forgiveness/MH00131>

3. The beginning (until 'by word or by deed') is from a daily meditation ascribed to Isaac Luria. ~Rabbi Rob Scheinberg