

On Repentance and Repair: Forgiveness

The person doing *t'shuvah* can do all of their *t'shuvah* work, can do-- complete master of *t'shuvah* can get right with themselves, can get right with God, can go to do all of the things that they need to do and be ready to go apologize to God at Yom Kippur and all of that stuff, even if they are never forgiven. So this notion that the victim has to forgive them so that they can finish their repentance work is false.

There are all of these cultural factors that are in play. And we live in a culture that really, really loves forgiveness and really loves to pressure the victim into forgiving and that assumes that at the moment the victim has forgiven, then everything is fine and back to how it was. And nobody is holding the harm-doer accountable.

If the person coming to you isn't really doing the repentance work, if it seems like they're checking off the boxes, if they're like apologizing but they really haven't owned what they're doing, if somebody's saying you should forgive but they haven't even begun the repentance work, none of that, then there's definitely no obligation to forgive. That's also part of it.

And if someone is doing the real, honest, thoughtful clear work of repentance, if they are owning fully what they did, if they are trying to change really meaningfully, if they are attempting to do real amends, if they are coming to you and doing everything they can to appease you, right, to pacify, you to care for you in a loving apology and if the apology doesn't land, they're coming back and bringing an accountability team, as Maimonides suggests, so that they can make sure that apology is landing or so that they can have some help making sure that you're cared for in that negotiation or whatever, right, if somebody is really, really, really coming to you with an open-hearted way and you're still having trouble forgiving them, maybe you need to check yourself.

Are you stuck in a victim mode? Is it benefiting you to lord this over them? Are you being unnecessarily petty? What's going-- like, um check yourself to see what's going on that you can't find a way to, again, not find that warm, fuzzy place but to just close the accounts.

You've raised this caution around never pressuring the victim to forgive, which I think points to a potential problem, which is that we don't always have between the perpetrator and the victim a balance of power. Can you speak to potential power differentials in this work of *t'shuvah* and, in particular, forgiveness.

So often what happens is that harm is caused with an imbalance of power. Someone who has more power in a situation causes harm, and then there is pressure on the victim to forgive, which is often read in our culture as a way of, kind of, allowing the situation to end, right.

Then we're done. The victim is forgiven. No more accountability work is needed. We don't need to have any more systemic change, or we don't need the perpetrator to do any more inner work or come to a situation and make different choices, right. And it becomes a way of very often trying to reinscribe the original power situation.

As we approach the Days of Awe, I find hope in the path of repair that you illuminate and in the approach that you teach, which is the path is not insurmountable. The work is not infinite. Our job is to start where we can, go as far as we can, and do our best in this work of *t'shuvah*, do our best in all the areas we have power to bring repair. Thank you for your teachings.

Thank you.

Thank you.

L'shanah tovah.

Shanah tovah.