How To Forgive Is Just as Important as When to Forgive

The Book of Micah offers a roadmap.

BY JULIE HIRSCHFELD

Right now, somewhere, a toddler is melting down. A teenager slams a door. There are husbands and wives, annoyed and disappointed. There are neighbors and co-workers with grievances large and small. Each situation involves a breach in a relationship that will be repaired. Or it won't be.

The issue of forgiveness will arise at some point in most relationships. We need accountability as well as kindness, so it can be hard to know when forgiveness is right and when it is just "giving in." It's a challenge, especially, to teach children the importance of their own good behavior while helping them develop a flexible, forgiving attitude toward others.

Acknowledging our own wrongdoing can be painful, but Jewish rituals, especially around the High Holidays, provide a helpful framework. There's less explicit guidance about granting forgiveness, even though it's central to the mitzvot of not seeking revenge or bearing grudges (Leviticus 19:17-18). Judaism teaches us to forgive when a sincere apology is offered. But how?

If we look carefully, Judaism does seek to balance justice and mercy in daily life. We can learn a lot from a careful reading of the famous lines from the Book of Micah (6:8) in which God commands: "do justice (*asot mishpat*), love loving-kindness (*ahavat chesed*), and walk humbly with your God (*v'hatzneah lechet im Eloheicha*)."

To "do justice" means to take a specific action, related in the Hebrew to something like a court case. It's necessary, but when it's finished, it's finished. By contrast, "loving loving-kindness" is unbounded by time, situation or relationship.

Embracing loving-kindness means you are not only generous-hearted, but you love being that way. This approach to life can protect you from staying stuck in your hurt and anger, lashing out vengefully and holding grudges. It means that even in the face of strong emotions, you can reserve a part of your mind for caring interest in another person.

When my now-adult children experienced overwhelming teenage anger over parental offenses, real or perceived, I would sometimes say, "Remember: I am a person." Restoring their awareness of the other person helped take the edge off their anger and freed them up to be more forgiving. This wasn't about calming down in order to be loving and thoughtful — it was about the power of love to keep anger in perspective.

The recognition of the other person as human may limit the intense emotions that place your own feelings above anything or anyone else. Indeed, Jewish tradition teaches that overwhelming anger can be akin to idolatry, in this case the narcissistic worship of the self.

"[O]ur sages said: 'whoever gets angry is as if he worships idols' (Zohar Korach daf 179, Rambam Deos 2:3, Shab.105b). This person gets angry at anything that is done against his will. He becomes filled with wrath till … his judgment is lost. … A man

like this would destroy the whole world if he had the ability" (R. Hayim Luzatto, Mesillat Yesharim, 11).

Anger's enormous power is not easily contained by rational thought. But its destructive force can be tempered by love, the mitzvah at the very center of Jewish practice. In fact, while Leviticus doesn't specify a ritual to resolve grudges, it includes "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) in the same passage, directly linking love to forgiveness.

The willingness to temper your own outrage and anger out of respect for the other has another implication: By focusing on the offender as a human being, you create the emotional conditions necessary for that person to take full responsibility and to make appropriate amends. It therefore increases the likelihood of both forgiveness (mercy) and some kind of reparations (justice). This all sounds beautiful. But when we are deeply hurt, how do we maintain that loving perspective?

This brings us to the third item in Micah's list: "walking humbly with your God." For those times it's hardest to conjure loving thoughts on your own, this prescription provides a paradoxical answer. It connects humility and strength. When our resources feel depleted, and we recognize our own limits, we can find support by tapping into something greater than ourselves.

"Walking with God" signifies the placing of values above our personal desires and, perhaps, even a sense of personal connection to the Divine. Living like this promotes inner strength, and we may also receive social support from others who walk a similar path. These factors can make us less vulnerable to the insecurities that arise when we're hurt, and, in turn, they make it easier to forgive.

The word *lechet*, Hebrew for "walk" or "go," is a form of the word used when God told Abraham, *Lech lecha* (go forth). Each of us has a personal journey. It is a great gift to be invited to walk that path with a sense of purpose and to draw strength from love, whether or not someone experiences that purpose, that love as related directly to God.

Focusing strongly on the question of when or whether to forgive makes us judges of the people who have offended us. By contrast, paying more attention to how we live and how we forgive can reinforce our sense of shared humanity and connectedness.

We can't resolve the basic tension between justice and mercy in the world, but we can transform the process of judgment and forgiveness by grounding them firmly in the context of a loving life.

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