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Forgiveness and the Jewish High Holy Days

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During the month preceding the Jewish High Holy Days, Jews spend time examining their behavior of the past year and asking forgiveness of those whom they have wronged. However for some people there is a dilemma. Are they required to forgive acts which may be truly unforgivable? Are there, in fact, acts which are unforgivable? Each fall as we approach the Days of Awe, victims of early childhood sexual abuse, and others who have survived psychological or physical abuse at the hands of those whom they loved and trusted may ask themselves these questions. They may never have reconciled with the perpetrator of the terrible acts against them; the perpetrator may have refused to even acknowledge the abuse or may have died without ever taking any steps to make amends. At the very time when we should be looking inward to examine our actions, and to make atonement to those whom we have wronged, the survivors of abuse may be overwhelmed by anger or resentment for the painful memories that continue to plague them. When memorial prayers in the synagogue encourage us to laud the virtues of parents or spouses who have died, these survivors may feel even more isolated and alienated from the very community to whom they turn for support. Judaism teaches us that a person who has committed an act against another must go to that person to ask forgiveness, to rectify their behavior, to do tshuvah. While we are not required to forgive the wrong doer, we are encouraged to do so. Asher ben Yehiel admonishes us "each night before retiring, forgive whomever offended you." But how does one forgive the perpetrator of early childhood sexual abuse, or violence that has left us with deeply scarred?



When we are struggling with flashbacks and nightmares and a variety of ailments brought on by the abuse, forgiving the offender may be far from our minds, or our ability. While we may not be able to forgive, we cannot continue to live with rage, fear and anger. Perhaps we need to find a word other than forgiveness in order to move forward. Judaism has the concept of shlemut, wholeness, personal integrity and peace. Seeking shlemut may help us find our way toward recovery. During the Holy Days we may use the prayers that speak of forgiveness as a time to draw deep into ourselves to begin to heal the pain.

When we say kaddish, the memorial prayer, we remember that we are not praising the dead, but rather praising God who acts in this world. We can use this season to look at our own actions so that we do not use what was done to us as an excuse for what we have done to others. As we grow in strength and courage we may eventually be able to leave the past behind, and for some forgiveness may be possible.

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