

Parshat Vayigash

How can I Forgive My Sisters?



Dear Rebbetzin,

I need your help. I have been so greatly mistreated by my sisters that I don't know how I could ever trust them again. I loved and honored my parents in a very deep and personal way. In their later years, they both developed dementia and I brought them to live with us. I took care of them for two and a half years. I organized all kinds of activities for them. My mother especially enjoyed the Yoga classes. They were doing so well with us, since we didn't have children. They became like my babies. I dedicated my entire life to giving them the very best care. The way that they were taken away was both shortsighted and cruel. One day, one of my sisters, who had the power of attorney, came with a letter from the lawyer forcing me to let her take my parents away since having them live with me was too expensive, and was depleting their inheritance. My sisters placed my parents in a home. There, they were not treated well and they both died soon afterwards. Since then, my relationship with my sisters has been strained, to say the least. How could I ever forgive them?

Yosefah Aharonson (name changed)

Dearest Yosefah,

My heart truly goes out for you. Your situation is indeed extremely painful. In my experience, it can be a great challenge to keep holy and healthy family relationships when our parents age and decline, although this is the time when sisters need each other most. I believe situations such as yours are the most difficult to truly forgive from the deepest part of our heart. Especially if your sisters act as though they did nothing wrong, and can't even understand why you 'allowed yourself' to feel hurt. People often ask me, "Do I really have to forgive when the person who hurt me so much never apologized?" "What if the person continues to hurt me repeatedly, how can I find it in my heart to forgive her?" Yosef is a model for forgiveness, especially in relation to siblings.

Undergoing the Harshest Treatment Ever by Blood Siblings

Can you imagine a more painful situation than Yosef's? He was a tender youth of just 17 when his 10 brothers ganged up against him and planned to kill him, just because he received a special cloak from their father and told over his dreams. In the end, his brothers decided not to murder him in cold-blood with their own hands. Instead, they threw him into a dangerous pit, filled with snakes and scorpions (Rashi, *Bereishit* 37:24), and ignored his cries for help. Finally, one of his brothers, Yehuda, had 'mercy' on him. He convinced the others to pull him out of the pit and sell him as a slave to a convoy of Yishmaelites going down to Egypt. Still a mere teenager, Yosef now found himself in a lewd, perverse, idol-worshiping, necrophilic society surrounded by evil, insidious taskmasters who tried to take advantage of him in every way. Before he grew to greatness, he worked as a slave, was sexually assaulted and spent 12 years in prison (*Da'at Zekeinim M'ba'alei Tosfot, Bereishit* 39:5). For all this, he could thank his brothers. Even more so, can you imagine Yosef's agony over the pain that his brothers caused his dear father all these years?

Why did Yosef Forget His Father's House?

"The deeds of the fathers are a sign for their children." I believe that Hashem allowed Yosef to go through the worst possible ordeal with his brothers, because he had the capability of truly forgiving them. By doing so, he paved the way for each of us to be able to forgive our siblings, even for the most extremely hurtful behavior. Yosef testifies that he was able to forgive and forget by the naming of his first son, "Menashe – Hashem has made me forget all my hardships and all my father's house" (*Bereishit* 41:51). Why would he want to forget his father's house? That doesn't seem very respectful. We would have expected the verse to mention only forgetting the pain inflicted by his brothers. Why include forgetting also his honorable father? Moreover, why didn't Yosef spare his father further pain by sending him a note to tell him that he was still alive? Even if that wasn't possible when he was a slave or prisoner, surely after he had risen to greatness and convoys from the entire Middle East came to receive grain from him, it would have been easy to send back a note to his dear father. It also seems as if Yosef was taking revenge on his brothers, by accusing them of being spies and thieves, putting them in prison, and causing them and his father additional pain by making them bring Binyamin.

Accepting Hashem's Decree Overrides Everything

Rabbi Ya'acov Tzvi Mecklenburg explains that it was extremely painful for Yosef, the righteous, to overcome his great desire to soothe his dear aching father by letting him know that he was still alive. Yet, he knew that his dreams were prophetic and it was Hashem's decree that they be fulfilled. It was decreed according to his dreams that also his father was to bow down to him. Thus, Yosef knew that Heaven was preventing him from fulfilling the mitzvah of honoring his father by revealing his identity. In order to fulfill Hashem's will, he was obligated to forget even his father's house for the time being. Moreover, Yosef did everything he could to spare his brothers from the embarrassment of bowing down to him knowing that he was Yosef. Therefore, all his actions towards his brothers were in order to fulfill the Divine decree in the least painful way for them (*Ketav V'kabbalah, Bereishit* 41:51).

Forgiveness doesn't Preclude Causing Repentance

From Yosef we learn to accept Hashem's decree even in the case where it may cause our parents great pain. Whatever our siblings did against our parents and us was meant to be, otherwise Hashem would not have allowed it to happen. Therefore, it is counterproductive to harbor negative feelings over it. Yosef teaches us, that there is nothing anyone could do against his brother or sister that cannot be forgiven. The clue to granting this forgiveness is *emunah* that whatever your sisters did against you was fulfilling Hashem's ultimate will, even if we don't understand why. Yet Yosef did provide a test for his brothers to enable them to repent completely for their jealousy. Although the brothers hated Yosef because their father favored him, Yosef was able to help them overcome their jealousy by giving them the opportunity to accept that Binyamin was dearer to their father than each of them. Perhaps we can learn from Yosef, that after we have completely forgiven our siblings in the very depths of our heart, we must strive to help them rectify their wrong. However, we can only accomplish this through the greatest love without a trace of revengeful notion such as, "You see I was right!"

Forgiveness Saves Lives

Not only must we strive to feel forgiveness in our heart, moreover, if possible we must express it to our sisters at the right time as Yosef did:

וְעַתָּה אֵל תִּעַצְבוּ וְאַל יַחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי הֲנֵה כִּי לְמַחְיָה שָׁלַחֵנִי אֱלֹהִים לְפָנֵיכֶם לְשׂוּם לָכֶם שְׂאֵרֵי־יִתְּ וּלְהַחְיֹת לָכֶם לְפָלִיטָה גְדֹלָה: (ספר בראשית פרק מה, פסוק ה, ופסוק ז)
 “Now be not distressed, or angry with yourselves because you sold me hither; for G-d did send me ahead of you to save life...G*d has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival on earth, and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance” (*Bereishit* 45:5,7).

Yosef's clearly realized how all the pain he had suffered through his brothers was part of Hashem's master plan for a higher purpose. Therefore, within this greater perspective, he was able to totally forgive regardless of how much he had been wronged. It is interesting to note that the word לְמַחְיָה translated “to save life” has the same letters as מחילה/forgiveness. Perhaps the reason why Yosef was chosen to save the lives of the Jewish people was his ability to forgive. When we truly forgive we preserve our own and the offenders life.