



## What do we Learn from Yosef about Forgiveness?

### Learning to Open our Heart to Truly Forgive

Someone in my family just asked me, “please forgive me!” Of course, I want to forgive more than ever, being so happy that the person is remorseful for having caused me excruciating pain. While it’s easy to say, “I forgive you!” it is far more challenging to truly forgive and let go of any trace of resentment, especially if the hurtful actions may be repeated. So, wanting much more than lip service, I responded, “I surely want to forgive you, but in order for me to truly forgive, I need you to make a plan for how to prevent a repetition of the hurtful behavior.” I was thinking, perhaps, I was wrong to make terms for granting forgiveness? Perhaps, I should offer total unconditional forgiveness? Yet, on the other hand, in the same vain that Hashem prohibits us from bearing a grudge, He commands us to give *tochecha* (rebuke). “You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall surely rebuke your fellow Jew, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take revenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your fellow Jew as yourself: I am Hashem” (*Vayikra* 19:17-18). What I said, was a loving way of giving reproach to help prevent the person from repeating the negative action. Yet, even without an apology, we must forgive. Just as Hashem “pardons iniquity, and forgives our transgression” (*Michah* 7:18), so must we emulate our compassionate G-d and open our heart to truly forgive, regardless of whether the perpetrator is sorry or not. This is not a simple task. When our heart is blocked, we may harbor hidden resentments of which we are unaware. To let go of these resentments, we need to first get in touch with them, and air them out in the sun, at least to ourselves. Wounds can only be healed in the light. They need acknowledgment and awareness to find the healing power, we all have inside ourselves. We can’t make someone apologize or change what they did or might do. While we have no control over other people’s behaviors, we do have control over how we feel and what we do about our own feelings. Forgiveness is about freeing ourselves from our own grip, freeing our own hearts and spirits of the unnecessary burden of believing that what we endured justifies our misery. Hashem has imbued us with Free Choice, to move into forgiveness and allow ourselves to be joyous, loving, people, no matter what circumstances have occurred in our lives.

### Health Benefits of Releasing Grudges and Granting Forgiveness

Spiritual, emotional and physical health go hand in hand. Rambam asserts this important principle in his holistic approach to healing in Chapter 4 of *Hilchot Deot*, *Mishna Torah*. Therefore, in order to keep the Torah indictment (וְנָשְׁמְרֶתֶם מְאֹד לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם (דברים פרק ד פסוק טו) – “You must take very good care of your health” (*Devarim* 4:15), we need to not only stay physically healthy, but also be emotionally healthy and balanced people. Medical studies show a strong correlation between forgiveness and good health. Holding grudges hurts the immune system. People who are more prone to holding grudges tend to be sicker than their peaceful peers. A 2000 study conducted at the University of Tennessee asked volunteers to tell stories about betrayal while measuring their heart rates and blood pressure levels. Researchers found that people who forgave more easily registered lower numbers. They also made less sickness-induced trips to the doctor than the grudge-prone. No wonder that heart attack is so rampant in our time! The Department of Psychology at the Medical College of Georgia published a paper entitled, “Bearing Grudges and Physical Health: Relationship to Smoking, Cardiovascular Health, and Ulcers” in 2009, concluding, “In a population-based survey, bearing grudges is associated with a history of pain disorders, cardiovascular disease, and stomach ulcers.” Clearly, grudges damage not only our relationships, but our health as well. In summary,

granting forgiveness engenders the following Health benefits: Improved mental health ♦ Less anxiety, stress and hostility ♦ Lower blood pressure ♦ Fewer symptoms of depression ♦ A stronger immune system ♦ Improved heart health.

### Accepting that our Hurts are from Hashem for a Higher Purpose

As long as we can't truly forgive another in our heart, we can't get close to G-d. To truly connect to Hashem's Oneness and to our own selves in a much deeper way, we must learn to forgive others as well as ourselves. To the extent that we learn to forgive, we begin to take responsibility for our life and are no longer victims of circumstance. Taking responsibility involves waking up to a higher meaning in our lives, realizing that there is a Masterplan, and that nothing happens by chance. Although blaming is an ingrained instinct, carried over from Adam and Eve in the Garden, the stories in the Torah teach us to trust in Hashem's Master plan. Whatever we have gone through, whatever we have suffered – whether within ourselves or in relation to others – it was meant to teach us something" ([Rabbi Avraham Sutton, If we cannot truly forgive another in our heart, we cannot get close to the Creator.](#)) Gaining this greater perspective, helps us clean out leftover energy patterns from past *gilgulim*. Rather than becoming upset when someone wrongs us, we can practice looking inward and gain valuable lessons from the pain we endured. According to the Talmud, there is no greater atonement than bearing insults. Rebbe Nachman emphasizes (in 12 places) the importance of accepting insults without reacting.

### Releasing Grudges and Freeing Ourselves from Past Negativity

People have asked me; how can I forgive when the person is not sorry about her damaging behavior? How can I forgive her if she continues to hurt me? These are difficult questions, but we must learn to separate forgiveness from condoning the negative behavior. Forgiving and letting go of grudges, does not mean that we agree with the behavior that we are forgiving. As Robert Enright puts it: "Forgiveness means giving up the resentment to which you are entitled; it doesn't require the other person to recognize the harm they've done, nor does it necessarily require reconciliation. Those who refuse to forgive, lose their power to this memory."

By forgiving the people that have hurt you, you set yourself free from the chains of resentment and other harmful emotions, running rampant through your mind, body and spirit. By forgiving, you remove the control the other person has over you. Forgiveness is vital to our spiritual health and growth. Without forgiveness, our hearts are held hostage, and thus, we willingly perpetuate the pain of the original hurtful story. Learning to forgive "is a gift we give ourselves for our own wellness, to free us from the past, in order to move forward" (Dr. Fred Luskin). Forgiveness helps us gain improved self-esteem and nurture healthier relationships. It can even lead to feelings of understanding, empathy and compassion for the one who has hurt you. When we forgive, even without the person making amends or being sorry, we walk in Hashem's way and activate our *Tzelem Elokim*/Divine Image.

### Yosef – The Perfect Model and Teacher of Forgiveness

Yosef is the perfect model and teacher of forgiveness. His brothers sold him as a slave to the most decadent society. Nevertheless, Yosef didn't have the slightest grudge against them, but forgave his brothers with a complete heart:

**ספר בראשית פרק מה פסוק ה, ז ועתה אל תעצבו ואל יחר בעיניכם כי מכרתם אתי הנה כי למחיה שלחני אלהים לפניכם: ... וישלחני אלהים לפניכם לשום לכם שארית בארץ ולהחיות לכם לפליטה גדולה:**

"Now be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves that you sold me hither; for G-d did send me before you to preserve life...G-d sent me before you to give you a remnant on the earth, and to save you alive for a great deliverance" (*Bereishit* 45:5,7).

Yosef 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. Think about it – Yosef's own brothers first wanted to outright kill him. Then, they threw him into a pit filled with dangerous, life-threatening snakes and scorpions, to do the dirty work for them, before finally selling him into slavery. What could be worse mistreatment? Nevertheless, Yosef found it in his heart to forgive, and therefore, he was chosen to keep his family alive during the famine. It is interesting to note that the word *לִמְחִיָּה/lemichyah*, translated "to preserve life," has the same letters as *מְחִילָה/mechilah* – 'forgiveness.' Perhaps, the reason why Yosef was chosen to preserve the life of the Jewish people was his ability to forgive. When we truly forgive, we preserve our own and the offender's life. Holding on to grudges is holding on to the negative force created by sin – to the *sitra achra* (the other side). Through forgiving, we allow the negative forces to vanish. Then we become a channel for positive influences from the source of life – Hashem. The word *מְחִילָה* can further be unscrambled to *חַי לָהֶם/chai lahem* – 'Life to them.' Through forgiveness, we grant the gift of life. The words *לִמְחִיָּה/לִמְחִילָה* also equals the words *לֶחֶם י"ה/lechem* – 'the bread of Hashem.' (The word *לֶחֶם* additionally has the *gematria* of three times the four-lettered name of G-d ( $78 = 3 \times 26$ ). Through his amazing act of forgiveness, Yosef had the power to revive and gather the holy sparks that were scattered in Egypt. It was for this sake that they went down into Egypt (Tiferet Shlomo).

### Daily Prayer Declaration of Forgiveness

Integrating perpetual forgiveness into our life is so essential in Judaism, that the Torah directs us to not even let one day go by, without first forgiving anyone who may have hurt us. Thus, part of our *Bedtime Shema Prayer* is the declaration of forgiveness, in which we grant forgiveness to any Jew who may have hurt us in any way. Rabbi Nechunya claimed that one reason he lived so long was that, he never went to bed at night without first forgiving anyone who hurt him that day ([Babylonian Talmud Megillah 28a](#)). Based on this, the *Bedtime Shema* includes a paragraph in which we forgive anyone who hurt us:

רְבוּנוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם הָרִינִי מוֹחֵל לְכָל־מִי שֶׁהִכְעִיס וְהִקְנִיט אוֹתִי אוֹ שִׁחֲטָא כְּנֶגְדִּי בֵּין בְּגוֹפִי בֵּין בְּמַמּוֹנִי בֵּין בְּכַבּוֹדִי בֵּין בְּכָל־אֲשֶׁר לִי בֵּין בְּאֹנָס בֵּין בְּרָצוֹן בֵּין בְּשׂוֹגֵג בֵּין בְּמִזִּיד בֵּין בְּדַבּוּר בֵּין בְּמַעֲשֵׂה בֵּין בְּמַחֲשָׁבָה בֵּין בְּהִרְהוּר בֵּין בְּגִלְגּוּל זֶה בֵּין בְּגִלְגּוּל אַחֵר לְכָל־בֶּר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא יֵעָנֵשׁ שׁוֹם אָדָם בְּסִבְתִּי:

Master of the Universe, I hereby forgive anyone who has angered me, or sinned against me, either physically or financially, against my honor or anything that is mine, whether accidentally or intentionally, inadvertently or deliberately, by speech or by deed, by thought or by speculation, in this incarnation or in any other incarnation: any Israelite [is forgiven], may no man be punished on my account.

May we learn from Yosef to develop perpetual forgiveness and grant true life not only to those who have wronged us but also to ourselves!