

## Forgiving Ourselves

A story by Desmond Tutu:<sup>1</sup>

My father said he wanted to talk.

I was exhausted.

We were halfway home on the pilgrimage we made six times each year.

We had driven 10 hrs that day

to drop the children at their boarding school in Swaziland.

Sleep beckoned.

We would rest for a few hours before continuing the next day

for another 15 hour drive back to our home.

I told my father I was tired and had a headache.

“We’ll talk tomorrow, in the morning,” I said.

We headed to a relative’s home half an hour away.

The next morning my niece came to wake us with the news:

my father was dead.

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, 196.

I was grief stricken.

I loved my father very much, and while his temper pained me greatly,  
there was so much about him that was loving, wise, and witty.

And then there was the guilt.

With his sudden death I would never be able to hear what he had wanted to say.

Was there some great stone on his heart that he had wanted to remove?

Might he have wanted to apologize

for the abuse he inflicted on my mother when I was a boy?

I will never know.

It has taken me many many years to forgive myself for my insensitivity,  
for not honoring my father one last time with a few moments he wanted to share with me.

Honestly, the guilt still stings.

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We are called to forgive each other time and time again;

it is the nature of being in relationship.

It can be hard to forgive others,

but often it is harder still to forgive ourselves.

Yet, the reasons to forgive ourselves are the same as for forgiving others.

It is how we become free of the past.

It is how we move on, heal, and grow.

It is how we make meaning out of our suffering.

Forgiving ourselves frees our energies to tell a new story of who we are. //

Over the high holidays we seek two types of *teshuva*, forgiveness:

*teshuva* with other people,

and *teshuva* within ourselves, between us and the Divine.

*Teshuvah* invites peace.

If forgiving others leads to external peace,

forgiving ourselves brings internal peace.

Internal peace grows from practicing self-forgiveness as a form of *rachamim*,  
self-compassion—

honoring our own sacred soul instead of damaging it with ongoing self-judgment.

After legitimately facing the wrongs we have committed and making amends,  
how do we truly forgive ourselves and move on?

Again and again over the High Holidays we recite:

יְהִי חַסְדְּךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְחַנּוּן

The Eternal is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, and forgiving.”<sup>2</sup>

As humans created in God’s image, we are required to ask ourselves, “If the Divine exercises ultimate compassion, how can we aspire to less?”

We are led to consider what we will gain by clinging to self-punishment, or, alternatively, what we will gain by truly forgiving ourselves and moving on?

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The High Holidays call us to honestly search ourselves, our actions, & the consequences of our actions.

People who genuinely seek to forgive themselves want to change, but internal change is not easy.

Many of you know me well.

You know that self-compassion is a core value for me.

I speak about it. I encourage it.

And I thought that my own commitment to self-care meant that I had aced self-forgiveness.

But this past year has shown me ways I had not even considered—

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 34:6.

ways I hold onto negative thoughts about myself  
or compare myself to others in ways that only hurt.

I replay incidents in my own life—  
a time I was unwelcoming and uncaring to a family member,  
a time I shirked responsibility because I was scared of having to do more work.  
I have trouble letting these errors go,  
even though I have apologized to everyone involved.  
They still gnaw at me.

When we hold onto self-blame, we stay stuck in the unhappy story of what we have done.  
When we construct an identity out of our past errors,  
we imprison ourselves in the past, denying ourselves the gift of transformation.  
As Desmond Tutu teaches, we can learn from the past  
without holding ourselves hostage by what we have done.<sup>3</sup>  
At some point, we must let go of the past and begin again.

None among us should be defined as the sum total of our worst actions.

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<sup>3</sup> Tutu, 200.

We are all fragile and flawed humans who may lie to others or ourselves, steal or betray.

We commit offenses against others.

We become separated from our own goodness.

None of us is constantly our best self. None of us can be perfect.

What does perfectionism cost us?

Forgiving ourselves is not an excuse for our actions

or a way to gloss over the harm we have caused others.

In fact, it is an honest remembering of what we have done and how we have hurt others.

Self-forgiveness is not a loophole to avoid admitting wrongs or making restitution.

Self-forgiveness is true self-acceptance.<sup>4</sup>

Let us honestly consider our wrongs *vis a vis* our personal values.

Do we value truth?

Do we value integrity?

Do we need to apologize?

Do we need to own up to our actions to the person we harmed

and witness the anguish we've caused?

Self-forgiveness requires absolute truth before we can reconcile with others

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 204.

and before we can reconcile with ourselves.

If we haven't admitted our wrongs and asked for forgiveness, then we must do so.

Some people may never forgive us, and we cannot force them; that is their journey.

However, we can seek self-forgiveness and allow it to strengthen us.

\* \* \* \*

Our Rosh Hashana Torah reading begins after Sarah grossly mistreats her maidservant Hagar, and Hagar runs away into the wilderness.

Our matriarch is far from a model of *teshuvah*.

Instead of asking Hagar for forgiveness,

Sarah banishes Hagar and Hagar's son Ismael into the wilderness a second time!

Sarah misses the opportunity to teach her son Isaac about reconciliation,

and propels the conflict with Hagar to the next generation.<sup>5</sup>

She exercises power by hurting another woman, by risking Hagar's life and Ishmael's.

Might Sarah have been able to transform her experience

if she exercised self-compassion?

Tamara R. Cohen wonders if Sarah could have both understood the reasons for her bad behavior *and* made amends?

Could she acknowledge her motives to protect Isaac from perceived harm

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<sup>5</sup> Tamara R. Cohen "Returning to Sarah," in *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days*, Gail Twersky Reimer and Judith Kates, eds. Simon and Schuster: New York, 1997, pg. 74.

and her marriage from potential threats  
while *also* begging forgiveness from Hagar?

Imagine Sarah nearing her death and calling out for a friend to hold her hand.

Imagine Hagar hearing the voice,  
across desert miles and many years of silence.

Does Hagar come?

Does Sarah embrace her?

What do these two tired mothers say to each other?

Do they learn to see each other's differences,  
and their own beauty in each other's gaze?<sup>6</sup>

Sarah's self-compassion might enable her to be a woman  
whose laughter *and* crying could be heard by God.<sup>7</sup>

The Divine repeatedly forgives our biblical ancestors their varied and stormy emotions.

So why are we so achingly critical of ourselves?

I share a poem by Rabbi Naomi Levy on this theme of self-forgiveness for our deeds.

*I've been blaming myself, God, for the tragedy that has been following me.*

*The thoughts keep running through my mind:*

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 73.



*I could have done more. I should have done more.*

*But none of this self-doubt can erase the past.*

*Teach me, God, to believe that I don't deserve to be punished forever.*

*Help me to forgive and to love myself despite my weakness.*

*Show me Your love, this day and always.<sup>8</sup>*

\* \* \*

Sometimes the failures for which we must forgive ourselves are not willful failures.

We did the best we knew how to do at the time.

Fatigue made Tutu turn away from his father.

He was doing the best he could do.

He was in no fit state for a meaningful conversation.

He did not know that there would be no other opportunity.

He has come to accept this.

We all have to accept the past in order to create a new future.

If we could have done things better, we would have.

None of us is perfect, but we can perfect the art of self-forgiveness.

This is how we grow and change and, ultimately, begin anew.

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<sup>8</sup> Naomi Levy, *Talking to God*, Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2002, 154.

Our own inability to forgive ourselves,  
is not always as momentous as expelling a family member  
or refusing to talk to our father who then passes away unexpectedly.

There are small ways we demean ourselves  
and we can start to heal by noticing them.

When we mentally berate ourselves for not getting over grief faster,  
for saying something ignorant,  
or for negative self-talk about our bodies,  
these self-judgments require self-forgiveness.

Critical self-judgment reduces us to only our worst actions.  
Let us forgive ourselves, and let go of that limiting identity.

The High Holidays and the process of *teshuvah*

can transform a painful past into a more hopeful future.

Self-compassion invites us to start anew, to tell a new story of ourselves  
consistent with our own values.

The new story admits that yes, I have caused pain and suffering.

The new story also recognizes that a harm I caused in the past  
is not who I must remain.

True change is infinitely more powerful and lasting when it comes from a place of love  
and not one of degradation.

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Like any discipline, becoming aware of, and changing our thoughts  
takes constant, mindful practice.

I invite each of us to take a moment...to close our eyes...  
to choose one way we might try to practice self-compassion in the new year,  
one self-judgement we could soften with *rachamim*.

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Rabbi Naomi Levy offers a prayer for “When We Are Too Hard on Ourselves”  
in her book, “Talking to God,  
Personal Prayers For Times of Joy, Sadness, Struggle, and Celebration”:

*“Teach me how to love myself, God.*

*I am so critical of myself.*

*I accept shortcomings in others, but I am so unforgiving of myself.*

*Show me how to embrace the person that I am.*

*Soften my heart.*

*Fill me with the capacity to treasure my life.*

*Thank you, God, for creating me as I am.”*

P A U S E...

On this Rosh Hashana, let us step forward with self-compassion  
so we can enter the New Year

grounded in acceptance, and love, and much hope.

*Shanah Tovah.*