

When I was in my 20's, the first sermon I delivered was about forgiveness. Specifically, how to forgive someone who never apologized, and never will.

Then earlier this year, what was the title of the sermon I gave? "Forgiveness and Letting Go: When Receiving an Apology Isn't Possible." 😊

Almost 20 years later, my own inner wrestling is just as present.

There are so many different kinds of forgiveness we each grapple with.

Where I'm drawn tonight, is when forgiveness feels incomplete.

Maybe because reconciliation will never be possible. There are all sorts of situations where we have to let go of the hope that another will ever fully understand how deeply we were affected by them and our hurt remains.

As I've navigated my own journey with forgiveness, I have found it helpful to differentiate between our intellectual knowing in a situation, our emotional truth, and a spiritual perspective. We can often feel resolved in one of these realms but not in another. For instance, we can have the intellectual knowing that the other person did the best they could. If they *could* have done better, they would have. And we can take into account everything about their background that may have led to their behavior.

And yet, alongside this logical knowing, we may still have an emotional experience that feels so strongly that what happened was NOT ok. Some really important needs were not met, or violated.

So here we have these 2 very different experiences. Logic/intellect understands rationally why things happened the way they did. And then there's our emotional experience which may still feel completely unseen and uncared for.

To make things even more layered, we may also have a spiritual perspective that can zoom *way* out and understand how these painful experiences in our lives are here as our greatest teachers.

This is why forgiveness can often take years and years. Getting our intellect, our emotions, and our spirit all on board, each with their different needs and agendas is deep work. And the logical part of us might get impatient with a slower timeline for our emotional selves.

Judaism has a surprisingly nuanced understanding of this. It doesn't offer a model of “do your healing work and never feel hurt.” Our tradition is much more comfortable with the idea that healing can be slow, cyclical, unfinished, and intertwined with creating something new. There are 3 Jewish concepts in particular that I've found potent.

First, Judaism doesn't tell us we have to “let go” of all our pain.

Remembering what shaped us is a mitzvah. The word *zachor*, remember, is etched into almost every major holiday. We each spent time on *Zichronot*, Remembrance, just a few minutes ago in our service. We are not meant to forget Egypt as Jews. But we can **remember Egypt differently**. The generation that leaves Egypt still carries Egypt with them. They cling to the memory of their life there.

And then over time, **our memory of Egypt becomes part of a story we tell, rather than the place we live**.

Egypt, the metaphor for our pain, our trauma, is not something we let go of. But it can be something we change our relationship to.

At first, the past happens to us. Then, we remember it. Then, over time, we grieve it. Then, we tell the story of what happened. And slowly, slowly, we discover what it taught us.

Little by little, the story of Egypt is a part of us, but it's not **all** of us. It is not our defining truth.

Having been slaves in Egypt isn't the only way we see ourselves, it's not the only thing that happened. We have also celebrated and gathered and reflected and renewed.

There's a gentleness to the Jewish rhythm of healing. Judaism doesn't expect that deep emotional experiences go away.

Grief, and talking about pain, and discoveries about its lessons, are all part of the winding path of walking toward the Promised Land.

The second concept comes from Jewish mysticism. One of the names for Divinity is **Shechinah**, meaning the indwelling presence. Spiritual connection isn't only once we feel whole and healed. **The sacred dwells within our struggles.**

The process of forgiveness isn't, *How do I get rid of this pain?*

It's: **Can I discover that I am not alone inside it?**

Something happens to our pain when it's held by the compassionate presence of others, by our own loving presence, by the Infinite presence of something way bigger.

I don't think there is anything more powerful in life than feeling seen.

And the Shechinah offers a way in...*who or what is with me in this tenderness, in this heartache? Might there be something bigger holding this with me?*

There have been many times when I called out to the Universe, "Help me." "Be with me." "Show me the path." "Make this easier."

And in time I would sense the Shechina. A dream would remind me it's all gonna be ok. A friend would show up. I'd have an encounter with a hummingbird that reminded me of Divine presence. We are not meant to navigate this wild ride of human-ing solo. We can create openness for Transformative Presence with ourselves, with Divinity, and with others.

And the third concept on the forgiveness path is a Jewish rhythm that reminds us **we don't wait until we're perfectly healed to participate in life's fullness.**

For instance, on Shabbat, we don't wait until everything is 100% perfect to light the Shabbat candles. The house might be a mess, dinner isn't ready, we're frazzled...but here's Shabbat. And so we light candles and welcome Shabbat in, in the midst of our messy, real lives.

Similarly, we don't wait until we're no longer grieving to be in community. We bring our grief into community.

We don't wait until we've figured out what we believe about God before we pray.

Judaism encourages us to enter into life as we are—to participate, to connect, to create, to celebrate, to encounter something bigger than ourselves. Messiness is baked into all of it.

As we think about the layered, circuitous path of forgiveness, the disparity we may feel between being logically vs. emotionally ready to let go of pain, we can find solace in remembering that **our pain is a part of us, but it's not our only truth.** We can discover new connections to the Shechina—we're **not alone inside our tenderness, and we can bring sacredness to it** - whether through ritual, sharing with trusted friends, or deepening our own relationship with Divinity, Love, the Mystery, whatever gives us a wider perspective. And we can remember that perfect healing isn't required to enjoy life's beauty and fullness.

As we navigate our own paths of forgiveness and healing, may we be gentle with ourselves. The way forward is layered, to put it mildly!

AND it is a core part of our path to meaning—deeper connection with ourselves and each other. May we find our way with authenticity and a sense of the sacred.

Shana Tovah