

The other day, in the spiritual community that I lead, I asked, “Why is it so hard to forgive?” to truly release the anger that we're holding.

One of our members said so simply, "I'm not ready."
Those three words conveyed so much.

“I’m not ready....”

I'm still hurting.

I'm still angry.

If I forgive, it feels like I'm betraying myself.

I want justice.

What if I forgive them and then they do it again? That disappointment would be too much to bear.

Judaism has much to say about our obligation to forgive someone who comes to us, asks for forgiveness, and is working on behavioral changes. And of course, we are also obligated to ask for forgiveness when we have missed the mark.

But interestingly, there is way, way less written on forgiving when the other person has not asked to be forgiven. I think of so many examples....My brother will never be able to recognize the impact of what he did, or my best friend died and I’m still really angry, or my step mom has mental struggles and will never ask me for forgiveness.

What then?

It feels so different to have someone truly acknowledge the ways they fell short, the harm they caused. But in cases where that will never happen, what do we do?

The Jewish *middah*, or virtue, of *chassidut* (lovingkindness), encourages forgiving someone who has not asked for it. *Middat chassidut* is a voluntary act of lovingkindness that goes beyond the minimum requirements of Jewish law.

One example is the bedtime *Shema* where we recite the words, "I hereby forgive anyone who has angered me, or sinned against me, either physically or financially... whether accidentally or intentionally, by speech or by deed, by thought or by speculation, in this incarnation or in any other. May no one be punished on my account."

These words are a spiritual cleansing at the end of the day, covering our bases for any grudges we hold.

But how do we say these words and mean them in our *kishkes*, our depths?

I can logically understand why someone acted harmfully, and even feel compassion for their background or history that might have caused them to behave a certain way. But there are times my emotions are not fully there. There is a difference between understanding someone's behavior intellectually, versus truly forgiving. If I say, "I hereby forgive..." I want to feel it fully—without a part of me still holding onto resentment.

Maybe what I'm noticing in the bedtime *Shema* example is the difference between forgiving and letting go. This discernment is subtle. Perhaps forgiveness is the decision to not continue to punish the transgressor. And letting go involves healing and transformation that this is not going to have a hold on my life anymore. Letting go may be more about freeing ourselves more than the other person

These nuances are more of a Venn diagram than distinct categories. There are layers. We can choose to let go without ever forgiving another person. For instance, "What my boss did was not ok, and I don't forgive them, but I have released any bitterness or grudges and my mind and heart feel clear, without malice."

Inversely, we can forgive and still hold onto all our anger, or pain and disappointment.

"I know my grandma acted this way because of her mental health struggles. I forgive the acts she committed, I know she would never intentionally cause me harm. But the impact of her actions penetrate the stories I tell myself, I blame her for my failed relationships, she infiltrates how I see my life."

"I'm not ready."

And yet...I don't want this resentment to weigh on me. I don't want to keep ruminating on the hurt, or for it to loom so large in my story. I see how I am actually punishing myself, because I can't punish the offender.

So...how do we change? How do we let go of old hurts?

For me, there are 2 pieces. The first is grief. Grief for what we didn't receive. Grief for the ways we weren't seen. Grief for what was lost. I don't think that we can get to a place of true forgiveness without allowing ourselves to grieve. We mourn the hope that the past could have been different. We feel the depth of what we didn't receive—what we so needed, or deserved.

I believe lasting forgiveness and letting go asks us to be with ourselves through the grief in a way that we didn't receive when the wrong was committed. There is a lot of healing in actively witnessing our own grief in a way we never felt in the past.

We are giving ourselves what we so desperately wanted someone else to offer. We reclaim our agency. Compassionately, gently.

Deep presence with our own grief softens us. It opens space to accept the other for who and what they actually are. This begins to free us.

The second part, for me, when there's no chance of an apology, or recognition of the violation, is understanding that truly moving forward, truly not holding onto our anger, requires an expansive shift. And as humans, our capacity can be limited. Our perceptions are colored by our history.

Sometimes we need to access something wider.

This might be God for you. Or the spirit of a wise grandmother. Or connecting with a part of yourself that is the purest Love.

We can reach out to Divinity and say,

*"I can't do this alone. Open within me the possibility to shift this.
To grow. To transform. Let me find my way through You."*

For me, Divinity is ultimate unconditional love. So in our humanness, our judgments and conditionality, we need a way to transcend judgement and limitation. Sometimes that comes from asking for Divine support.

"Help me find a way to release the chokehold of this betrayal. I am ready for peace. Help me get there."

Deep forgiveness doesn't happen overnight, although gosh, wouldn't that be nice??! 😊 Truly sitting with our grief and honoring it takes time. And shifting from a place of conditional love to embody Divine forgiveness is Jedi Master level living.

As we honor grief from the past and open to Divine support, we can hold the truth that **we don't have to be in anguish or anger all the time for the pain to have meant**

something. Yes this event changed me, yes it changed my life, and still I choose peace for myself.

In my life right now, I am in the messy middle of this path—stretching toward full forgiveness AND letting go. There's a part of me that is in full acceptance of all that has happened. I can see the gifts that have come from it, the way it has shaped my compassion and sensitivity. I can also see how a part of me still feels so profoundly the loss of what I desperately yearned for and will never receive. Slowly I trod forward. Holding the vision of life-changing forgiveness and letting go.

I imagine many of us are walking this path together.

On this path, with each step, we create a different story. A story of growing into a deeper and fuller capacity for love—for ourselves, for our experiences, for everyone involved. This makes space for peace that was never conceivable before.

I wonder if our path is less about “reaching forgiveness” and more about who we become in the process.

When we feel the possibility of “becoming” that is part of finding our way to forgiveness, and we know the path of letting go is inviting us deeper into love and transformation, then, perhaps, we will be able to say, “I am ready.”