

## Facing Up: Asking and Granting Forgiveness

BASED ON RABBI YAACOV HABER AND THE OU PARDES PROJECT & THE MORASHA SYLLABUS

The High Holiday period is also known as the Aseret Y'mei Teshuva – Ten Days of Repentance. As we look back at the past year, we recognize we may have done things to hurt others and/or made mistakes that will be held accountable to God. It is during the Ten Days of Repentance that we strive for reconciliation. We face up to our misdeeds, we seek forgiveness from our friends and family, and we ask God to forgive us. And others may call upon us to forgive them.

### How Would You Respond?

#### Scenario One

*Your older brother, whom you always admired, goes into business with your widowed mother and is found stealing funds. Ashamed and full of contrition, he leaves the business, and eventually your mother forgives him. You don't. Years later, he loses his job and asks you for a position at your company. What do you do?*

#### Scenario Two

*You made a disparaging remark in public, behind the back of a close friend. Upon reflection you feel terrible that you have not acted loyally and have perhaps caused your friend damage. You want to do what's correct and apologize to your friend but you fear that by telling him what you said, you will sever the relationship completely and cause him pain. Should you apologize?*

### Sources for discussion:

Is it enough just to ask God for forgiveness, or must we also set things straight and get forgiveness from those we wronged?

#### 1. Rambam (Maimonides), Hilchot Teshuva (Laws of Repentance) 2:9

Teshuva and Yom Kippur can only atone for sins that man commits against God, such as eating non-kosher, etc. However, when man sins against his fellow man by injuring him, cursing him or robbing him, he is not forgiven until he pays his debt and appeases the injured party. Even after he compensates for the damage done, he must appease him and ask him for forgiveness. Even if his offense was only verbal he must persevere until the offended party forgives him. If the injured party refuses

to forgive him, he should appear before him with three of his close friends and ask for forgiveness. If he still refuses, he should repeat this process a second and third time. If he still refuses to forgive, you should leave him, and he who refuses to forgive is the sinner. If the injured or offended party is his teacher, one must return even one thousand times until forgiveness is granted.

## 2. Rabbi Yosef Karo, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 606:1

For wrongdoings against one's fellow man, one must ask forgiveness from the offended party. Without this, Yom Kippur will not atone for the transgression. Even if one offended the person with words alone [without financial or physical harm], one must still ask forgiveness.

If the offended party does not forgive him the first time, the offender must repeat his plea a second and third time accompanied by three other people. [Each reconciliation should be attempted in a different manner – Mishnah Berurah.] If the offended party still refuses to grant forgiveness, one is no longer required to persist.

## 3. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, Mishnah Berurah 606:1

If one stole or overcharged, one must pay back the money or items...Even if the other person does not know that he has a legal claim to the money you are holding, you must inform him. At the very least, put the matter straight according to the truth, with the advice of a competent Halachic authority. The general principle is [use a third party and] do not rely on your own judgment when it comes to monetary disputes, since a person's bias (yetzer hara) will convince him that everything is permissible.

## I don't care if he's sorry or not. I don't want to forgive him – so what should I do?

Judaism teaches us not to bear a grudge. One reason for this is related to the importance of attaining forgiveness from others for the harm we cause them.

## 4. Rambam, Hilchot Deot 6:6

When one person sins against another, the offended person should not begrudge him and stay quiet; rather, he is obligated to protest and say, "Why did you do this to me?"

## 5. Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva 2:10

It is forbidden for a person to be merciless and not grant forgiveness. One should rather be easy to calm and slow to anger. When someone is asked for forgiveness,

he should grant it with a full and sincere heart. Even if the sinner has caused great injury, he should forgive him, for it is forbidden to take revenge. This is the way of the Jewish people and the characteristic which makes them special.

#### **6. Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, Ohr Yisroel 58**

Once one forgives his fellowman, it is forbidden to bear a grudge. If he finds himself still feeling angry towards the person who offended him, it would be as if he has given a gift or forgiven a debt and is now demanding it back.

#### **7. Rabbi Yaacov Haber, Reachings pg. 76**

Rabbi Yosef Baer Soleveitchik, the rabbi of Slutzk, once made a legal decision against a butcher in a case involving Kashruth. The next day, the butcher entered the study house where R' Yosef Baer was learning with his students, brandishing his knife, clearly in a distraught state, and accused R' Yosef Baer of giving a dishonest judgment. Eventually, after pouring out his distress, he left.

R' Yosef Baer ran after him shouting, "I forgive you! I forgive you!" A few days later he heard that the butcher had been killed by the bull which he had bought. R' Yosef Baer blamed himself bitterly for the butcher's fate. "What do you mean?" his son asked, "I was present, and I saw you run after him and forgive him!" "Yes," he replied, "I told him I forgave him, but I did not mean it in my heart." So he blamed himself for not acting against his nature.

R' Yosef Baer went to the funeral of the butcher, and acted as a chief mourner, tearing his clothes. Also, because the butcher had no sons, he said kaddish for him for eleven months. The yahrzeit of this butcher is observed in the Brisk Yeshiva to this day.

#### **8. Rabbi Avraham Danzig, Prayer for Yom Kippur Eve (Tefillah Zakkah)**

But since I know that there is hardly a righteous person in the world who never sins between man and his fellow, either monetarily or physically, in deeds or in speech. Therefore, my heart aches within me, because for a sin between man and his neighbor, Yom Kippur does not atone until one appeases his neighbor...

Therefore, I extend complete forgiveness to everyone who has sinned against me, whether physically or monetarily, or who has gossiped about me or even slandered me. So, too, to anyone who has injured me, either physically or financially, regarding any interpersonal law... And just as I forgive everyone, so may You grant me favor in every person's eyes, so that he will grant me complete forgiveness.

## What if it would be embarrassing to ask for forgiveness?

### 10. R' Yaacov Ibn Habib, quoted in Kaf Hachayim 606:11

When one person harms another, the custom in our society is to appoint a third party to mediate between them. This is incorrect. The offender must approach the friend directly and beg forgiveness.

### 11. Mateh Efraim 606:2

When one seeks forgiveness from his friend he must specify the nature of his wrongdoing. If he feels that specifying the sin will embarrass his friend, he should ask for general forgiveness.

## What if the person didn't hurt me physically or financially but damaged my reputation?

### 12. Jerusalem Talmud Bava Kama 8

Reb Yosi said, "The obligation to grant forgiveness does not apply to someone who has damaged one's reputation. One who destroys the reputation of another is never forgiven."

### 13. Rabbi Shlomo Luria, Maharshal, in Yam shel Shlomo Bava Kama 8:63, and Mishnah Berurah O.C 606

It is impossible to undo the damage that was done. People will hear the rumor but not the apology, and the victim will still suffer. Nevertheless, it is a trait of the modest and the pious to overcome one's nature and grant complete forgiveness, even if it is difficult.