



Seeking and Offering Forgiveness: What Do We Do and How Do We Do It?

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Dr. Diamond is the author of a chapter on the rabbinic period in the *Schocken Guide to Jewish Books*, and entries in the *Reader's Guide to Judaism* and *The Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*. He is the author of *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2003). The book provides a thorough reassessment of the role that asceticism plays in rabbinic Judaism, suggesting that asceticism is more pervasive than is generally thought. Dr. Diamond has written on prayer, asceticism, and issues of environmental law and ethics. He is currently editing a commentary on *Yerushalmi Pesahim* written by the late Professor Louis Ginzberg, as well as a book on prayer. The prayer volume will address the problem of cognitive dissonance for the contemporary worshipper and will offer readings of traditional liturgy that use midrashic methodology to find meaning and relevance in these prayers for the modern Jew. Dr. Diamond has taught in a variety of settings, including Stern College, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the 92nd Street Y, and several Ramah camps. Dr. Diamond was ordained at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University and received his doctorate in Talmud from JTS.

1. Maimonides, Laws of Repentance, Chapter 1 Halakhah 1

<p>All commandments of the Torah, whether they be mandatory or prohibitive, if a man violates any one of them, either presumptuously or erroneously, when he will repent himself and turn away from his sinful way, he is obliged to confess before the Blessed Holy One even as it is said: "When a man or woman shall commit any sin..... Then they shall confess their sin which they have done (Num. 5.6-7), which is a confession of words.</p> <p>Such confession is a mandatory commandment.</p> <p>How is the verbal confession made? The sinner says thus: "I beseech Thee, O Great Name! I have sinned; I have been obstinate; I have committed profanity against Thee, particularly in doing thus and such. Now, behold! I have repented and am ashamed of my actions; forever will I not relapse into this thing again." This is the elementary form of confession; but whosoever elaborates in confessing and extends this subject is, indeed, praise-worthy. Likewise all those who bring sin-offerings or trespass-offerings, when they offer their sacrifices, whether for their errors or for their spitefulness, find no atonement in their sacrifices, unless they repent, and deliver themselves of a verbal confession, even as it is said: "He shall confess that he hath sinned in that thing" (Lev. 5.5) So, too, are the guilty upon whom the tribunal pronounced either a sentence of death or of stripes, who find no atonement either in their death or in being lashed unless they do repent and make verbal confession. Even he, who injures his friend or causes him damages in money matters, although he makes restitution of what he owes him, finds no atonement, unless he makes verbal confession and repents by obligating himself never to repeat this again, even as is said: "Any sin that man commits" (Num. 5.6).</p>	<p>כל מצות שבתורה בין עשה בין לא תעשה אם עבר אדם על אחת מהן בין בזדון בין בשגגה כשיעשה תשובה וישוב מחטאו חייב להתנדות לפני האל ברוך הוא שנאמר "איש או אשה כי יעשו" וגו' (במדבר ה) "והתודו את חטאתם אשר עשו" (במדבר ה) זה ודאי דברים.</p> <p>ודאי זה מצות עשה.</p> <p>כיצד מתודין. אומר אגא השם חטאתי עויתי פשעתי לפניך ועשיתי כך וכך והרי נחמתי ובשתי במעשי ולעולם איני חוזר לדבר זה. וזהו עקרו של ודאי. וכל המרבה להתנדות ומאריך בענין זה הרי זה משבח. וכן בעלי חטאות ואשמות בעת שמביאין קרבנותיהן על שגגתן או על זדון אין מתכפר להן בקרבנם עד שיעשו תשובה ויתודו ודאי דברים שנאמר "והתודה אשר חטא עליה" (ויקרא ה). וכן כל מחיבי מיתות בית דין ומחיבי מלקות אין מתכפר להן במיתתן או בלקייתן עד שיעשו תשובה ויתודו. וכן החובל בחברו והמזיק ממונו אף על פי ששלם לו מה שהוא חייב לו אינו מתכפר עד שיתודה וישוב מלעשות קזה לעולם שנאמר "מכל חטאת האדם" (במדבר ה).</p>
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2. Laws of Repentance, Chapter 2 Halakhah 9

Teshuvah and Yom Kippur only for sins between man and God; for example, a person who ate a forbidden food or engaged in forbidden sexual relations, and the like. However, sins between man and man; for example, someone who injures a colleague, curses a colleague, steals from him, or the like will never be forgiven until he gives his colleague what he owes him and appeases him.

[It must be emphasized that] even if a person restores the money that he owes [the person he wronged], he must appease him and ask him to forgive him.

Even if a person only upset a colleague by saying [certain] things, he must appease him and approach him [repeatedly] until he forgives him.

If his colleague does not desire to forgive him, he should bring a group of three of his friends and approach him with them and request [forgiveness]. If [the wronged party] is not appeased, he should repeat the process a second and third time. If he [still] does not want [to forgive him], he may let him alone and need not pursue [the matter further]. On the contrary, the person who refuses to grant forgiveness is the one considered as the sinner.

אין התשובה ולא יום הכפורים
מכפרין אלא על עברות שביין
אדם למקום כגון מי שאכל דבר
אסור או בעל בעילה אסורה
וכיוצא בהן. אבל עברות שביין
אדם לחברו כגון החובל את
חברו או המקלל חברו או גוזלו
וכיוצא בהן אינו נמחל לו לעולם
עד שיתן לחברו מה שהוא חייב
לו וירצהו. אף על פי שהחזיר לו
ממון שהוא חייב לו צריך לרצותו
ולשאל ממנו שימחל לו. אפלו
לא הקניט את חברו אלא
בדברים צריך לפיסו ולפגע בו
עד שימחל לו. לא רצה חברו
למחל לו מביא לו שורה של
שלשה בני אדם מרעיו ופוגעין
בו ומבקשין ממנו. לא נתרצה
להן מביא לו שניה ושלישית. לא
רצה מניחו והולך לו וזה שלא
מחל הוא החוטא. ואם היה רבו
הולך ובא אפלו אלף פעמים עד
שימחל לו:

3. Bava Mezia 58b

<p>The Gemara relates that the tanna who recited <i>mishnayot</i> and <i>baraitot</i> in the study hall taught a baraita before Rav Naḥman bar Yitzḥak: Anyone who humiliates another in public, it is as though he were spilling blood. Rav Naḥman bar Yitzḥak said to him: You have spoken well, as we see that after the humiliated person blushes, the red leaves his face and pallor comes in its place, which is tantamount to spilling his blood. Abaye said to Rav Dimi: In the West, i.e., Eretz Yisrael, with regard to what mitzva are they particularly vigilant? Rav Dimi said to him: They are vigilant in refraining from humiliating others, as Rabbi Hanina says: Everyone descends to Gehenna except for three.</p>	<p>תני תנא קמיה דרב נחמן בר יצחק כל המלבין פני חבירו ברבים כאילו שופך דמים א"ל שפיר קא אמרת דחזינא ליה דאזיל סומקא ואתי חוורא אמר ליה אביי לרב דימי במערבא במאי זהירי א"ל באחוורי אפי דאמר רבי חנינא הכל יורדין לגיהנם חוץ משלשה</p>
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4. Pirke Avot 4, 18

<p>Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: Do not try to appease your friend during his hour of anger; Nor comfort him at the hour while his dead still lies before him; Nor question him at the hour of his vow; Nor strive to see him in the hour of his disgrace.</p>	<p>רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר, אל תרצה את חברך בשעת כעסו, ואל תנחמונו בשעה שמתו מטל לפניו, ואל תשאל לו בשעת נדרו, ואל תשתדל לראותו בשעת קלקלתו :</p>
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5. C.S. Lewis, "Essay on Forgiveness", 1960

Now it seems to me that we often make a mistake both about God's forgiveness of our sins and about the forgiveness we are told to offer to other people's sins. Take it first about God's forgiveness, I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me I am often in reality (unless I watch myself very carefully) asking Him to do something quite different. I am asking him not to forgive me but to excuse me. But there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says, "Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology; I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before." If one was not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites. Of course, in dozens of cases, either between God and man, or between one man and another, there may be a mixture of the two. Part of what at first seemed to be the sins turns out to be really nobody's fault and is excused; the bit that is

left over is forgiven. If you had a perfect excuse, you would not need forgiveness; if the whole of your actions needs forgiveness, then there was no excuse for it. But the trouble is that what we call "asking God's forgiveness" very often really consists in asking God to accept our excuses. What leads us into this mistake is the fact that there usually is some amount of excuse, some "extenuating circumstances." We are so very anxious to point these things out to God (and to ourselves) that we are apt to forget the very important thing; that is, the bit left over, the bit which excuses don't cover, the bit which is inexcusable but not, thank God, unforgivable. And if we forget this, we shall go away imagining that we have repented and been forgiven when all that has really happened is that we have satisfied ourselves with our own excuses. They may be very bad excuses; we are all too easily satisfied about ourselves.

6. Julia Margulies as Alicia Florrick in *The Good Wife*, Season 1 Episode 2

If you want me to forgive you, I need to know what I'm forgiving you for.

7. Laws of Repentance Chapter 2 Halakhah 10

<p>It is forbidden for man to be ill-natured and unforgiving, for he must be easily appeased but slow to anger; and when a sinner implores him for pardon, he should grant him pardon wholeheartedly and soulfully. Even if one persecuted him and sinned against him exceedingly, he should not be vengeful and grudge-bearing...</p>	<p>אָסוּר לְאָדָם לֵהִיּוֹת אַכְזָרִי וְלֹא יִתְפַּיֵּס אֶלָּא יְהֵא נוֹחַ לְרִצּוֹת וְקִשָּׁה לְכַעַס וּבְשִׁעָה שְׂמֵבִקֵּשׁ מִמֶּנּוּ הַחוּטָא לְמַחֵל מוֹחֵל בְּלֵב שְׁלֵם וּבְנִפְּשׁ הַפְּצָה. וְאַפְלוּ הֵצֵר לוֹ וְחִטָּא לוֹ הִרְבֵּה לֹא יִקָּם וְלֹא יִטָּר.</p>
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8. Shabbat 31a

<p>There was another incident involving one gentile who came before Shammai and said to Shammai: Convert me on condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot. Shammai pushed him away with the builder's cubit in his hand. This was a common measuring stick and Shammai was a builder by trade. The same gentile came before Hillel. He converted him and said to him: That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study.</p>	<p>שוב מעשה בגוי אחד שבא לפני שמאי. אמר לו: גיירני על מנת שתלמדני כל התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת! דחפו באמת הבנין שבידו. בא לפני הלל, גייריה. אמר לו: דעלק סני לחברך לא תעביד — זו היא כל התורה כולה, ואידך פירושה הוא, זיל גמור.</p>
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9. Confucius

Those who cannot forgive others break the bridge over which they themselves must pass.

10. Leviticus 19:17-18

<p>¹⁷You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Lord.</p>	<p>(ז) לא-תשנא את-אחיך בלבבך הוכח תוליה את-עמיתך ולא-תשא עליו חטא: (יח) לא-תקם ולא-תטר את-בני עמך ואהבת לרעהו כמוך אני ה':</p>
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11. Mishnah Avot 1, 6

<p>Joshua ben Perahiah and Nittai the Arbelite received [the oral tradition] from them. Joshua ben Perahiah used to say: appoint for thyself a teacher, and acquire for thyself a companion and judge all men with the scale weighted in his favor.</p>	<p>יהושע בן פרחיה ונתאי הארבלים קבלו מהם. יהושע בן פרחיה אומר, עשה לך רב, וקנה לך חבר, והוי דן את כל האדם לכף זכות:</p>
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12. דוד אליקים בשבקיין, ברוגז רחם תזכור עמ' נח

David Bashevkin, *In Your Time of Anger Remember to be Compassionate*

דברים שבלב אינם דברים

כתוב בגליוני הש"ס להג"ר ר' יוסף ענגיל קידושין מט: ד"ה ודברים, וז"ל:
"המבייש את חברו ומחל לו בפיו אע"פ שלא מחל לו בלבו אמרינן
בזה דברים שבלב אינם דברים".

...If someone humiliates someone else and he says that he forgives him, even though he has not forgiven him in his heart we say that what is in the heart is of no consequence [I.e. it does not nullify the act of forgiveness]

13. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Chapter 3: Forgiveness

It is laid down in the Christian rule, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' Because in Christian morals 'thy neighbor' includes 'thy enemy,' and so we come up against this terrible duty of forgiving our enemies.

Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.

14. Exodus 23, 5

When you see the ass of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with him.	כִּי־תִרְאֶה חֲמֹר שֶׁנֶּאֱדָר רֵבִיךָ תַּחַת מְשָׁלוֹ וְחִדַּלְתָּ מֵעֲזֹב לוֹ עֲזֹב תֵּעָזֵב עִמּוֹ:
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15. Lewis B. Smedes (Christian author, ethicist, and theologian in the Reformed tradition)

Forgiving does not erase the bitter past. A healed memory is not a deleted memory. Instead, forgiving what we cannot forget creates a new way to remember. We change the memory of our past into a hope for our future.

You can forgive someone almost anything. But you cannot tolerate everything...We don't have to tolerate what people do just because we forgive them for doing it. Forgiving heals us personally. To tolerate everything only hurts us all in the long run.

Forgiving is love's toughest work, and love's biggest risk. If you twist it into something it was never meant to be, it can make you a doormat or an insufferable manipulator. Forgiving seems almost unnatural. Our sense of fairness tells us people should pay for the wrong they do. But forgiving is love's power to break nature's rule.

16. Corrie Ten Boom (a Dutch Christian watchmaker and later a writer who worked with her father, Casper ten Boom, her sister Betsie ten Boom and other family members to help many Jews escape the Nazis from the Holocaust during World War II by hiding them in her home)

Forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of resentment and the handcuffs of hatred. It is a power that breaks the chains of bitterness and the shackles of selfishness.

17. C.S. Lewis, Christian theologian and author

I think that if God forgives us, we must forgive ourselves. Otherwise, it is almost like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than Him.

18. Laws of Repentance 7, 6

<p>Great, indeed, is repentance for it brings man nigh to the Shekinah, even as it is said: "Return, O Israel, unto the Lord thy God" (Hosea, 14. 2); and it is further said: "Yet have ye not returned unto Me, saith the Lord" (Amos, 4.6); and it is yet again said: "If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the Lord, yea, return unto Me" (Jer. 4.1), as if saying: "If thou wilt turn in repentance ye will cleave unto Me". Repentance brings near the far apart. But yesterday this sinner was hateful to the presence of God, scorned, ostracized and abominate, and to-day he is beloved, desirable, companionable and a friend.</p>	<p>גְּדוּלָהּ תְּשׁוּבָה שֶׁמְקַרְבֶּת אֶת הָאָדָם לְשִׁכְיָנָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ה' אֵלֶיךָ" (הושע יד ב). וְנֶאֱמַר עמוס דו "וְלֹא שָׁבַתֶם עָדִי נְאֻם ה'". וְנֶאֱמַר "אִם תָּשׁוּב יִשְׂרָאֵל נְאֻם ה' אֵלַי תָּשׁוּב" (ירמיה ד א). כְּלוּמַר אִם תִּחְזַר בְּתְשׁוּבָה בִּי תִדְבֹק. הַתְּשׁוּבָה מְקַרְבֶּת אֶת הַרְחוּקִים. אֲמַשׁ הִיָּה זֶה שְׂנֹאֵי לִפְנֵי הַמִּקּוֹם מְשֻׁקָץ וּמְרֻחָק וְתוֹעֵבָה. וְהַיּוֹם הוּא אֲהוּב וְנִחְמָד קְרוֹב וְיָדִיד.</p>
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