

Why would you want to forgive someone who has wronged you? Is there any benefit to forgiving? Is there a “right” time to forgive? And what does religion have to do with it? Come to think of it, does religion have *anything* to do with it?

Thousands of years of Jewish text and wisdom offer us tremendous strategies for, and potential solutions to, the tricky business of forgiveness. In Jewish teaching, people are encouraged to lean toward compassion and forgiveness and to offer opportunities for others to engage in תשובה (*teshuvah*), traditionally defined as repentance. But the teaching is not necessarily easy to implement in real life. So, what is the essence of what Judaism teaches? Is there anything to be gained from forgiving in even the most difficult situations? What can be gleaned from Jewish sources about the value of following that path?

Hanan Harchol (the author and animator of the film) and his father argue about the value of accepting David’s apology, revealing three ways to think about forgiveness. Essentially, according to Hanan’s father, forgiveness is all about choice.

1. Recognizing forgiveness as a free choice that reflects who you want to be: how you choose to behave and how you choose to treat other people (independent of their behavior toward you).
2. Seeing forgiveness as a choice about how to handle your anger and how long to hold onto anger.
3. Choosing to think about the situation from the perspective of the wrongdoer – allowing empathy to help direct your response.

Jewish text offers guidance in these three realms. However, looking at the texts in the light of an actual scenario in which forgiveness may be necessary encourages thoughtful deliberation about what you might do and what ideas influence your opinion.

① **WHO DO YOU WANT TO BE?**

In any argument you probably believe that you are correct. While you may be able to see the other person’s perspective, there is a point at which you draw a line in the sand, deciding who is “right” and who is “wrong.” In the film, Hanan’s father encourages him to recognize that only he can decide whether or not to forgive David. With the apology imminent, Hanan needs to work through the resentment he still feels. His father points out the revenge he is trying to exact and questions its benefit. Imparting a similar message, the Talmud teaches:

A bad tempered person gains nothing but the ill effects of anger; a good tempered person is fed with the fruit of the deeds.
Kiddushin, 40b – 41a

- Does it really matter *why* David is apologizing? Should Hanan care whether or not David has “learned a lesson” or should he be more focused on how the anger has affected him?
- What does it mean to make *active decisions* about the nature of forgiveness and anger?
- In your own life, should your responses be based on someone else’s intent?
- Do you agree with the quote from Kiddushin above or do you believe there is some qualitative use for anger? Was there for Hanan?

Hanan believes that the most important and difficult line in the script is:

“Actions lead to feelings.”

Hanan’s father goes on to say:

“Stopping an action is not the same as taking an action. To free yourself from the resentment, you need to take action.”

- What does “actions lead to feelings” mean? Can a feeling “grow” as a result of an action? Do you agree that there is a difference between stopping an action and taking one? Can you think of times in your life when stopping an action actually was an active choice? Is there something in-between? Do actions lead to feelings or is it the other way around? Which should be the driving force?

The Ba’al Shem Tov (18th century rabbi and the founder of Chasidism) taught:

The world is a mirror; the faults you see in others are your own.

- What are the most difficult behaviors to change in yourself? When have you most keenly seen those behaviors in others? With which parts of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s statement do you agree and with which parts do you disagree?

② HOW LONG TO HOLD ON TO ANGER?

Compared to other emotions and responses, there is a surprising lack of discussion in Jewish sources regarding how to *handle* anger. Some texts advise that you should be slow to anger, but all agree that it is within human nature to be angry, often referring to Moses and his bouts with anger to justify our own modern experiences. There is, however, a leaning toward tempering your frustrations, allowing your **יצר הטוב** - inclination toward good (*yetzer ha tov*) to overpower your **יצר הרע** - inclination toward bad (*yetzer ha ra*). The Talmudic rabbis emphasized this idea in the following teaching:

One who tears up his garments in his fury, or breaks his vessels in anger, or who scatters his money in his rage, let him be in your eyes as like an idolater, for such is the way of the evil inclination: today it says to him, ‘Do this,’ tomorrow it tells him, ‘Do this,’ until it bids him, ‘Go and serve idols,’ and he goes and serves them.

Shabbat 105b

- In the film, David writes to Hanan after two years, during which time Hanan has let his anger grow. How did the amount of time that passed affect Hanan’s response to David’s request to meet? Is there a time limit on forgiveness?
- What has happened to Hanan’s anger in the time since the event occurred? Does it even matter that David took two years to be in touch?
- Is Hanan’s anger a result of what he perceives he lost or what he believes about David’s choice?
- Had David actually *given* the reference, but still been offered the job, what do you think Hanan’s reaction would have been?

A biblical quote goes even further:

Anger dwells in the bosom of fools.

Ecclesiastes 7:9

- In what ways did Hanan’s father prove to him that the extent of his anger was foolish?

③ WHAT ABOUT “THE OTHER GUY”?

In one of the most famous Jewish tales of morality, Rabbi Hillel, a Talmudic scholar (110 BCE-10 CE), encapsulates the entire idea of Judaism in one sentence -encouraging us to give as much thought to others’ perspective as to our own:

On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, ‘Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.’ Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder’s cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, the rest is the commentary; go and learn it.’

Shabbat 31a

- Hillel teaches, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor...” Hanan’s response to David’s act is righteous indignation. However, Hanan later reveals that he wishes he had made some different choices in his life. How difficult is it to monitor your own behavior when your choices affect others?
- Hanan and his father initially disagree about whether or not Hanan should forgive David. Do you think Hanan believes that he could ever have done what David did? What might have encouraged Hanan to be more inclined to accept the apology?

Rabbi Brad Hirschfeld puts this situation into context when he offers the following about forgiveness:

The number of apologies you seek should be proportional to the number you are willing to offer, because the doing of each nurtures the capacity for the other.

<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Judaism/2009/09/How-to-Forgive-and-Receive-Forgiveness.aspx?p=4#ixzz1STO9JlAm>
Brad Hirschfeld

- What are the differences among being able to offer a difficult apology, seeking a difficult apology, and accepting one? Which is most challenging for you?
- What decision in your life do you think had the most consequential result for someone else – for the better or for the worse?

(Be sure to go here to see what Hanan and his father have to say about repair.)