

The Journey of Forgiveness

By Rabbi Shefa Gold
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The spiritual work of these awesome days is the work of forgiveness. If we want to know what forgiveness is, we might first say what it's not.

Forgiving doesn't mean ignoring an injustice or letting someone treat you badly. Forgiveness is not about glossing over wrongs. Forgiveness does not equal forgetting. It is about healing the memory of the harm, not erasing it. Forgiveness is not pardoning, condoning, or excusing bad behavior: forgiveness does not remove consequences.

Also we can't expect to control anyone through our forgiveness. We can't use it to force an apology, to shame them or to make them sorry.

There have been times in my life when I felt betrayed, wronged, victimized and furious. I knew that I had to find a way to forgive because carrying around anger was a burden, an energy drain ... and it was painful. Carrying resentment is like holding on to a red-hot rock. If you don't get rid of it, you'll be burned, scarred, and embittered. I knew that I had to find a way to forgive but I had no idea how.

I made a decision to forgive and then began work on cultivating the ground that might grow that rare and precious flower of the heart. When, after a long time of spiritual effort, I finally reached inside and found forgiveness there, I was profoundly surprised and humbled. After all my will and work, it still felt like Grace.

Forgiveness still felt like a Mystery, for which I was deeply grateful.

Finally relieved of the burden I had carried, I looked back on the work I had done to prepare myself for this gift. My work in tilling the garden of the heart had sprouted a delicate yet resilient flower of incomparable beauty. As I reach in to my heart to breathe in the fragrance of this flower of forgiveness, I feel it would be valuable to reflect on the journey that led me to this moment of Grace.

The very first challenge on my journey to forgiveness is suspending a very noisy shout that fills me with NO. Whenever something is happening that I really don't like, there is an inner revulsion, a pushing away. All of my energy is gathered into a force that says NO. This isn't right. It's not fair. NO. I don't want this to be happening. As the storm of this NO gathers in me, a story begins to form. And the story is repeated again and again in my mind. It is the story of my victimization. It is the story about how it isn't my fault. Or it is the story about how wrong this other person is, how he hurt me, how thoughtless she was, how I was betrayed. At first the story is interesting and compelling. But after a time I notice that my story is exhausting me, boring me, filling up the entire space of my awareness. My health is suffering. My relationships are fading into the background. All my energy is pouring into this story and I am left drained, exhausted. My complaint is so large, there is room for nothing else. My anger is burning me up from the inside. Bitterness is creeping into my heart. And I know that it will destroy me if I let it.

So I let go of the NO and I just say YES.

The four letter unpronounceable name of God - Yud, Hay, Vav, Hay **יהוה** is the verb "to be," without any tense. It might be translated as "Isness" or just "What IS." When I say YES and just accept What IS, I am surrendering to God in THIS. And something amazing happens. All that energy that I've been pouring into NO, is returned to me. And I have the freedom to decide what I will do with all this energy. When the NO disappears, so does my old story that was once so compelling. Without that story, there is a feeling of spacious potential. Being the artist that I am, I begin to create a new story. My imagination comes alive. In my new story, I am the hero, and everything that happens to me opens my heart to Wisdom. In my new story, the worst suffering only makes me strong, compassionate and beautiful. My life becomes a daring adventure. My misfortune becomes noble. My hunger becomes a purifying fast. My loneliness becomes a journey into the vastness of SELF. My efforts and even my defeat has built character.

The Prophet Jeremiah expresses the delight of this new story:
"You have found grace in the very same wilderness where you

experienced such suffering, And through it all I have loved you.”

YES, my world is the very same wilderness, and yet I am transformed. I have become receptive to God’s love in all its myriad forms- in the form of suffering, in the form of my friends who have supported me through this harrowing journey.

When I say YES, when I surrender to What IS, I also open my heart to Love. I begin my practice of loving by having compassion for myself and for the life I have lived, for the suffering I have endured...

vahavta l’re’echa kamocho

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֲךָ כָּמוֹךָ

Love your neighbor as your Self. (Leviticus 19:18)

I begin my practice close to home and decide to love my Self. I make a commitment to surround myself with beauty. Then I begin to notice something amazing. The whole world is conspiring to bless me. There is love pouring in from all directions. When I become receptive... every breeze becomes a caress; the rain is a gift to make me juicy, the blue sky becomes my Tzitzit- my personal reminder of the great expanse that is beckoning. When I become receptive, I suspect every stranger just might be a messenger from Beyond. The bus driver has generously brought me to my destination. The woman at the post office blesses my package as it moves through her hands. My luggage magically appears at the very same airport where I have arrived. And literally millions of functions are functioning fairly smoothly inside my miraculous body.

And from this place of heightened awareness and of blessed receptivity, I reach down into the recesses of my heart and I am amazed to find that flower of forgiveness. Its colors are soothing. Its fragrance invites a deeper breath. I sigh and relax and know that I am healing at last.