

# Yom Kippur

## Forgiveness and Forgiving

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**W**e are in the season of self-reflection and personal examination. We take of ourselves a fearless moral inventory and look to identify the wrongs we have committed, and in the case of wrongdoings to another individual we pursue our victims and seek their forgiveness and mercy. Going into Yom Kippur we take comfort in the hope that those we have wronged have absolved us, forgiven us and shown us mercy.

The reverse is true as well. When we are the victim of an interpersonal transgression and someone else seeks out our forgiveness, we feel good that we have forgiven. While psychology researchers will debate over whether genuine forgiveness is a cognitive experience or an affective experience, there does seem to be consensus that the act of forgiveness provides greater health and emotional benefits for the one doing the forgiving than the one being forgiven.

Psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman point out that people who are likely to forgive have a “lower variety of negative affects, including anger, anxiety, depression, and hostility.” There is also a strong correlation with forgiveness and religious wellbeing and social desirability. In summary, the more forgiving a person you are, the more likely you are to also have character traits that are consistent

with increased existential satisfaction and happiness. Conversely, those who hold on to real or imagined slights tend to be angrier, more depressed, less socially desirable, have higher blood pressure, less emotional regulation and are even at risk for premature death than their more forgiving counterparts.

What does it mean to forgive? It is not just saying the words, “I forgive you” nor is it the one size fits all, “I forgive anyone who has wronged me this year.” While such words may often escape our lips, they rarely address the emotional wounds or cognitive residue that exists as a result of a wrongdoing imposed on us.

Genuine forgiveness comes from examining the wrongdoing, processing it and removing any negative associations from the event or the individual who perpetrated the event. While this is easier said than done, there are some behaviors that help to promote this. In many cases, the grudge that interferes with ability to forgive is the belief that I have done nothing wrong. Thorough and objective examination of an event may result in the individual being able to identify some part in promoting of the wrongdoing and therefore allows for some perspective taking and ultimately empathy for the primary transgressor.

This process requires an internal maturity which

may explain why the “willingness to forgive varies as a function of age.” The research suggests that younger people are less likely to forgive while older people are more likely to forgive. With that said, the character strengths that we exhibit not only affect our personal experience but also impact the experience of those around us. Children in particular are susceptible, and are likely to develop similar responses to interpersonal transgressions as their parents. The way in which we react to life events become their earliest lessons in how to respond to such events and create a solid foundation for their own emotional and behavioral responses.

May the new year bring us the forgiveness, mercy and atonement that we seek but bring us as well the strength, maturity, and empathy to be able to truly forgive others and experience a greater sense of community and wellbeing.

*Eli Shapiro is the Clinical Director of Madraigos. Madraigos is a 501c3 not-for-profit organization committed to positive youth development through a wide array of innovative programs, services and resources. Madraigos' offices and recreation-center are located in Woodmere, NY. For more information visit [www.madraigos.org](http://www.madraigos.org).*



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