

FORGIVENESS –HIGH HOLY DAYS 5771
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

GOING TO JAPAN

My great-aunt Zelda went to Japan and took
an Abacus, a Bathysphere, a Conundrum,
a Diatribe, an Eggplant. That was a game we used to play.
All you had to do was remember everything in alphabetical order.
Right up to Aunt Zelda

Then I grew up and was actually invited to go to Japan.
Times being what they were, I intended to do my very best
to respect cultural differences, avoid sensitive topics
I might not comprehend, and, in short,
be anything but an ugly American.
I've generally found it helps to be prepared.
So I asked around, and was warned to expect a surprisingly modern place.

My great-aunt Zelda went to Japan and took Appliances,
Battery packs, Cellular technology...That seemed to be the idea.

And so it came to pass that I arrived in Kyoto an utter foreigner,
unprepared. It's true that there are electric streetcars there,
and space-age gas stations with uniformed attendants
who rush to help you from all directions at once.
There are also golden pagodas on shimmering lakes,
and Shinto shrines in the forests.

And finally there are more invisible guidelines for politeness
that I could fathom.

When I stepped on a streetcar,
a full head taller than all the other passengers,
I became an awkward giant. I took up too much space.
I bumped into people. I crossed my arms when I listened,
which turns out to be, in Japanese body language,
the sign for indicating, brazenly, that one is bored.

But I wasn't! I was struggling through my days and nights in
the grip of boredom's opposite – i.e., panic.
I didn't know how to eat noodle soup with chopsticks,
and I did it most picturesquely *wrong*.
I didn't know how to order, so I politely deferred
to my hosts, and more than once was served a cuisine with heads,
including eyeballs. I managed to wrestle these creatures to my lips
with chopsticks, but I was already too late by the time I got the message
that *one does not spit out anything*.

I undertook this trip in high summer,
when it is surprisingly humid and warm in southern Japan.
I never imagined that in such sweltering heat, women would be expected
to wear stockings, but every woman in Kyoto wore nylon stockings.

Coeds in shorts *on the tennis court* wore nylon stockings.
I had packed only skirts and sandals; people averted their eyes.

When I went to Japan, I took my Altitude, my Bare-naked legs,
my Callous foreign ways. I was mortified.

My hosts explained to me that the Japanese language
does not accommodate insults, only infinite degrees of apology.
I quickly memorized an urgent one, "*Sumimasen*,"
and another for especially extreme cases, "*Moshi wake gozaimasen*."
This translates approximately to mean, "If you please,
my transgression is so inexcusable that I wish I were dead."

I needed these words. In the public bath, try as I might,
I couldn't get the hang of showering with a hand-held nozzle
while sitting fourteen inches from a stranger.
I sprayed my elderly neighbor with cold water.
In the face.

"*Moshi wake gozaimasen*," I declared, with feeling.

She merely stared, dismayed by the foreign menace.

I visited a Japanese friend, and in her small, perfect house
I spewed out my misery. "Everything I do is wrong!"
I wailed like a child. "I'm a blight on this country."

"Oh, no," she said calmly. "To forgive, for us,
is the highest satisfaction. To forgive a foreigner, ah!
Even better." She smiled. "You have probably made
many people happy here."

What a rich wisdom, and how bountiful a harvest,
to gain pleasure not from achieving personal perfection
but from understanding the inevitability of imperfection
and pardoning those who also fall short of it.

When I went to Japan, I took my Abject goodwill,
my Baleful excuses, my Cringing remorse.
I couldn't remember everything,
could not even recite the proper alphabet.
So I gave myself away instead, evidently as a kind of public service.
I prepared to return home feeling empty-handed.

At the Osaka Airport I sat in my plane on the runway,
waiting to leave. We waited for an hour, then longer,
with no official word from the cockpit, and then suddenly
our flight was canceled. Air traffic control in Tokyo
had been struck by lightning; no flights possible until the following day.

"We are so sorry," the pilot told us.
"You will be taken to a hotel, fed, and brought back here
for your flight tomorrow."

As we passengers rose slowly and disembarked,
we were met by an airline official who had been posted in the exit port
for the sole purpose of saying to each and every one of us,

“Terrible, terrible. *Suminasen.*” Other travelers nodded indifferently. But not me. I took the startled gentleman by the hands and practically kissed him.

“You have no idea,” I told him, “how thoroughly I forgive you.”¹

Barbara Kingsolver’s story illustrates some of the benefits of forgiveness for the person who forgives.

And what she describes in terms of cultural gaps and misunderstandings can just as easily be applied to how we view one another in a more familiar context.

How often do we assume we know someone else’s motivation and respond in kind? Your friend didn’t call as she said she would.

Your husband didn’t respond to your story as sensitively as you had expected. Your teenager is moody and won’t talk to you in a civil tone.

Because we tend to personalize so much, we assume that the other person’s behavior is aimed at us, and we tend to be judgmental and criticize according to standards we have set for ourselves.

It then becomes very difficult to forgive.

But what if we could find a middle way, as Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön suggests?

What if, instead of making others wrong and ourselves right, we let go of the need to be so sure of right and wrong?

Could our hearts and minds be big enough to live in that space?

When we walk into a room, could we see, hear, feel and accept other people as they really are?...

The medieval Spanish rabbi, Moses Maimonides, tells us that as we enter a room, the mezuzah on the doorpost should remind us of the respectful way we should treat our fellow. Could we remember to do this?

Could we follow the Chassidic Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav’s advice to judge everyone generously. He tells us that, “even if you have reason to think that a person is completely wicked, it’s your job to look hard and seek out some bit of goodness. And by judging the person that way, you may really raise them up to goodness.”

Buddhist Chödrön explains that, if we begin to let go of our need for strict justice and harsh judgment, we will probably find that things are never completely right or

¹ Abridged version of “Going to Japan” in *Small Wonders Small Wonders* by Barbara Kingsolver.

completely wrong. In fact, things are a lot more slippery. Life is ambiguous; things are always shifting and changing, and there are as many takes on any given situation as there are people involved.²

If we could put ourselves in the other's shoes, if we could view the other's situation with compassion rather than feeling anger and judgment, we would find that forgiveness is a lot easier.

And forgiveness, a major theme of this holiday, goes a long way toward healing our world, our relationships, and ourselves.

Indeed, forgiveness is important for our health.

The Torah warns us not to hold a grudge against our fellow.

Anger, bitterness and resentment are natural human emotions, of course.

But holding a grudge against your sister

for not sympathizing with your problems or

hanging onto jealousy of a coworker for snagging

your well-deserved promotion, may be detrimental to your health.

Forgiveness – in the sense of giving up resentment or anger toward another –

can greatly reduce your body's anger and stress responses,

which adversely affect your mental and physical welfare.

Research conducted by the University of Michigan's

Institute for Social Research,

reports that people who forgive themselves and others

experience reduced feelings of restlessness, nervousness and hopelessness.

Other research, including a University of Tennessee study,

has found that forgiveness can also lower blood pressure and heart rates.

Dr. Fred Luskin runs the Stanford Forgiveness Project and

is the author of *Forgive for Good* and *Forgive for Love*.

He tells us that:

Stress exacerbates pain, tightens muscles and

interferes with the smooth running of the immune system.

The practice of forgiveness has been shown to reduce anger,

hurt, depression, and stress and leads to greater feelings of hope,

peace, compassion and self confidence.

Practicing forgiveness leads to healthy relationships

as well as physical health.

It also influences our attitude which opens the heart to kindness,

beauty, and love.

He suggests nine steps we can take to move beyond feeling like a victim to achieve greater health and happiness.

² Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart*, p. 83.

1. Step number one: Know exactly how you feel about what happened and articulate what is not OK about the situation.
Then, tell a couple of trusted people about your experience.
2. Step number two. Make a commitment to yourself to do what you need to do to feel better.
Forgiveness is primarily for you.
3. Step number three. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciling with the person who hurt you, or condoning their action.
What you are after is finding peace.
Forgiveness can be defined as the “peace and understanding that come from blaming less, taking the experience less personally, and changing your grievance story.” It is about not being the victim.
4. Step number four. Get the right perspective on what is happening.
Recognize that your primary distress is coming from the hurt feelings that you are suffering now, not from what offended you two minutes – or ten years – ago.
5. Step number five. At the moment you feel upset, practice a simple stress management technique to soothe your body’s flight or fight response.
6. Step number six. Give up expecting things from other people that they do not choose to give you.
Recognize the “unenforceable rules” you have for how you or other people must behave. Remind yourself that you can work for health, love, peace and prosperity – others are not responsible for providing these for you.
7. Step number seven. Put your energy into looking for another way to get your positive goals met.
Instead of mentally replaying your hurt, seek out new ways to get what you want.
8. Step number 8. Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge.
Don’t focus on your wounded feelings, because this gives the person who caused you pain power over you.
Instead, learn to look for the love, beauty and kindness around you.
Forgiveness is about personal power.
9. Step number nine. Amend your grievance story – you are not the victim – instead, remind yourself that you made the heroic choice to forgive.

As important as it is to forgive others,
it is also important to forgive ourselves.
Rabbi Nachman, who asks us to see the good in others,
also asks us to see the good in ourselves.
"Take great care: be happy always!" he advises.
"I know what happens when you start examining yourself.
'No good at all,' you find. 'Just full of sin.'
Watch out for Old Man Gloom, my friend.
The one who wants to push you down.
You must have done something good for someone sometime.
Now go look for it!
Somewhere in there is a little bit of good.
It's that first little dot of goodness
that's the hardest one to find.
The next ones will come a little easier."

In the end, our decision to forgive should come down to
a few fundamental questions we should ask ourselves:
How much of my life do I want to surrender to bitterness and resentment?
How much am I willing to grow, and reach beyond my limitations
in order to achieve inner and outer peace?
Whom do I want to be in this world?
What is the quality of the relationships I am looking for?
What kind of future can I envision for myself?

The first step is to let go of the judgment and criticism
that emerges the minute we encounter a situation that is frustrating.
Because the story we have built up in our head may not resemble
the other person's perspective, as this cookie thief discovers.

The Cookie Thief

(Valerie Cox)

A woman was waiting at an airport one night,
With several long hours before her flight.
She hunted for a book in the airport shops.
Bought a bag of cookies and found a place to drop.

She was engrossed in her book but happened to see,
That the man sitting beside her, as bold as could be,
Grabbed a cookie or two from the bag in between,
Which she tried to ignore to avoid a scene.

So she munched the cookies and watched the clock,
As the gutsy cookie thief diminished her stock.
She was getting more irritated as the minutes ticked by,
Thinking, "If I wasn't so nice, I would blacken his eye."

With each cookie she took, he took one too,
When only one was left, she wondered what he would do.
With a smile on his face, and a nervous laugh,
He took the last cookie and broke it in half.

He offered her half, as he ate the other,
She snatched it from him and thought... oooh, brother.
This guy has some nerve and he's also rude,
Why he didn't even show any gratitude!

She had never known when she had been so galled,
And sighed with relief when her flight was called.
She gathered her belongings and headed to the gate,
Refusing to look back at the thieving ingrate.

She boarded the plane, and sank in her seat,
Then she sought her book, which was almost complete.
As she reached in her baggage, she gasped with surprise,
There was her bag of cookies, in front of her eyes.

If mine are here, she moaned in despair,
The others were his, and he tried to share.
Too late to apologize, she realized with grief,
That she was the rude one, the ingrate, the thief.

Cited in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen (Health Communications, Inc.) 1996.