

## FORGIVING OURSELVES

by Deb Elkin, LPC

Forgiveness is something that doesn't come easily to many of us. That is generally even more true when it comes to forgiving ourselves. We are very hard on ourselves and don't easily let go of what we consider to be our wrongdoings and our mistakes.

In the Jewish tradition, Yom Kippur, celebrated each fall, is a holiday dedicated to reflecting back on the year that has passed, looking at our "transgressions," praying and meditating on them, and asking for forgiveness. Rabbi Ron Segal of Atlanta gave a sermon this year that was filled with wisdom and insight about what forgiveness is truly all about. I share portions of it with you here hoping it might help you along your path. It carries lessons for us all, no matter what our religious or spiritual beliefs.

In his sermon Rabbi Segal ponders these questions:

\* Why it is so difficult to experience a renewal that feels complete?

\*Why, after a day filled with cleansing, letting go and forgiveness, do we so often return to our normal routine and our old, habitual ways?

\*Why don't we ever seem to really internalize the message and value of the day?

He says: " I suggest that if we truly want to transform ourselves, then we must further consider the power of forgiveness. Not only the forgiveness we seek from others and from God, but the forgiveness we have yet to ask for ourselves. I believe that the reason that I - like so many of us - often fail to experience the full blessing of renewal at Yom Kippur is because I have not forgiven myself for my past mistakes and accepted the reality of my imperfection.

"I genuinely think most of us are kind-hearted and forgiving individuals, willing to excuse unintentional mistakes that are followed by an appropriate apology. We certainly understand that it is human nature to make mistakes and that expectations of perfection in others are unrealistic and unfair. When we forgive others, we communicate our willingness to see the whole person and to remember the kindnesses they have done, rather than focus solely on a negative experience or bad incident.

"And yet, as forgiving as we might be of others, when it comes to ourselves and our own mistakes, our rules of the game change. Generosity of spirit is not something that we readily direct inward and patience with our own errors tends to go out the window. Few of us are willing or able to tolerate anything less than perfection in ourselves.

"Regardless of where and when we learned to be so self-critical, our drive for self-perfection and intolerance has such power in our lives that personal mistakes have the potential to take on monumental significance, even consuming us at times with feelings of shame and disappointment. If you are anything like me, the good things you do eventually become a warm blur in your memory, but the things we've done wrong continue to stand out sharply. Even after we have apologized and sought to rectify our

mistakes, the memories still linger. Of course, this in and of itself is not a bad thing; memories of past transgressions can often keep us from repeating the same mistake. But our inability to let go is often more destructive than that; the lingering memory frequently becomes a festering wound and we beat ourselves up again and again for past transgressions...for our imperfection. What should be a healthy drive "to try to do better next time" is transformed into a stain on our character and mark against our self-worth.

"Forgiveness of self has to begin with an acceptance of who we are. So go ahead and ask, 'Who am I? What are the character flaws of which I am so unaccepting, the flaws that scream out my imperfection, the flaws that ultimately tell of my humanity?' I'll start...

I am not a very disciplined person; often I am even lazy.

I am a procrastinator. I tend to wait until the last minute to get things done.

I am an over-emotional person who frequently keeps important feelings bottled up inside, often to the detriment of the people I love most.

I am passionate about the things I believe in and often am too outspoken.

I am a pleaser and I have a difficult time saying 'no', even when my first priority, my family, suffers.

I am, in my heart of hearts, a terribly insecure person who yearns for acceptance in my personal and professional life.

"For me this year, Yom Kippur is about seeking self-forgiveness for not measuring up to the imaginary perfect ideal to which I have held myself my entire life. I am who I am. And maybe for the first time ever, I am trying to make peace with my reality. In the spirit of forgiveness, I invite all of us here to do the same."

And so I also invite you all to look at the "imaginary perfect ideal" you have been holding yourself up to for (probably) most of your life, and begin to find out who you really are. Do you have the courage to look at yourself that honestly? It does take courage to look yourself in the face and see what and who is really there. And then it takes another act of courage - the willingness to both accept and forgive yourself for who you are and who you have become. In that act lies your freedom.

Many thanks to Rabbi Segal for his willingness to share his wisdom and be vulnerable with us. That vulnerability, along with his honesty, lets us know he is not "above his message." May we all have the courage to be that honest with ourselves.

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