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Forgiveness and the Jewish High Holy Days
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During the month preceding the Jewish High Holy Days, Jews spend time examining their behavior of the past year and asking forgiveness of those whom they have wronged.

However for some people there is a dilemma. Are they required to forgive acts which may be truly unforgivable? Are there, in fact, acts which are unforgivable? Each fall as we approach the Days of Awe, victims of early childhood sexual abuse, and others who have survived psychological or physical abuse at the hands of those whom they loved and trusted may ask themselves these questions. They may never have reconciled with the perpetrator of the terrible acts against them; the perpetrator may have refused to even acknowledge the abuse or may have died without ever taking any steps to make amends.

At the very time when we should be looking inward to examine our actions, and to make atonement to those whom we have wronged, the survivors of abuse may be overwhelmed by anger or resentment for the painful memories that continue to plague them. When memorial prayers in the synagogue encourage us to laud the virtues of parents or spouses who have died, these survivors may feel even more isolated and alienated from the very community to whom they turn for support.

Judaism teaches us that a person who has committed an act against another must go to that person to ask forgiveness, to rectify their behavior, to do *tshuvah*. While we are not required to forgive the wrong doer, we are encouraged to do so. Asher ben Yehiel admonishes us "each night before retiring, forgive whomever offended you." But how does one forgive the perpetrator of early childhood sexual abuse, or violence that has left us with deeply scarred?

When we are struggling with flashbacks and nightmares and a variety of ailments brought on by the abuse, forgiving the offender may be far from our minds, or our ability. While we may not be able to forgive, we cannot continue to live with rage, fear and anger. Perhaps we need to find a word other than forgiveness in order to move forward. Judaism has the concept of *shlemut*, wholeness, personal integrity and peace. Seeking *shlemut* may help us find our way toward recovery. There is also the concept of *shachrer*, to be free of, to be independent from, in other words to move beyond. When victims achieve *shlemut*, they may find the power to leave the abuse behind and move to a condition of *shachrer* to become survivors, even thrivers.

During the Holy Days we can use the prayers that speak of forgiveness as a time to draw deep into ourselves to begin to heal the pain. When we say *kaddish*, the memorial prayer, we remember that we are not praising the dead, but rather praising God who acts in this world. We can use this season to look at our own actions so that we do not use what was done to us as an excuse for what we have done to others. As

we grow in strength and courage we may eventually be able to leave the past behind, and for some forgiveness may be possible.

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A suggested preface for *Yizkor* (memorial) services prepared by Marcia Cohn Spiegel

As we prepare for the Memorial Service, we must acknowledge that for some of us this is a particularly difficult time. Many of us mourn for loved ones whose memories are a blessing; others of us have troublesome memories, unfinished business with those who died. Those of us who have not reconciled ourselves with family members cannot extol their lives, exalt their memories. But we cannot live forever with bitterness, anger or rage in our lives.

While Judaism does not require that we forgive those who have perpetrated evil against us, in order to move toward *shlemut*, wholeness and personal integrity, in our lives, we can use this time of memory for our own personal healing and growth. *Kaddish* is not a prayer that praises the dead, it is a prayer that praises God, and the power of God in the world. As we recite *Kaddish* together with Jews all over the world, we remember that death is an inevitable part of life, we mourn those who died before their time, those who died in suffering and pain, those whose lives enriched the world, and we remember the living, asking healing for all who suffer so that they can move on.

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