

ArtScroll® Series



HOW TO GIVE AND GET FORGIVENESS

THE HERTZ FAMILY EDITION

SEEK PEACE
בקש שלום

Live the Blessing

Daily wisdom on how to live in peace
with family, friends, and yourself

CHOFETZ CHAIM  HERITAGE FOUNDATION

“אמר רבא כל המעביר על מדותיו,
מעבירין לו על כל פשעיו.”

“Whoever refrains from exacting his
measure will have Heaven refrain from
exacting punishment for his sins.”

Rosh Hashanah 17a

We welcome you to sample this
pre-Yom Kippur inspiration for giving and
asking forgiveness, excerpted from CCHF’s
new daily-learning book, *Live the Blessing*.
Each chapter gives many examples of where
machlokes can arise and how to avoid it.

It's like having a personal coach for
living a life of harmony.

With abundant gratitude to Hashem, we dedicate this
book to our children and their families.

Dedicated for the well-being and success of our family and all
of Klal Yisroel ברוחניות ובגשמיות

Dedicated by Mr. & Mrs. Yaakov Shadrooz

As a zechus for all cholim in Klal Yisrael

“If each person extends a *chesed* by forgiving the other,
thus enabling that person to receive *kapparah* (atonement),
the benefit to all of us will be immeasurable.”

The Forgiveness Initiative A World Washed Clean

You want to live in peace. The benefits are clear – a life of blessing
and a world freed from much pain and suffering. But there’s still an
obstacle. How can you make peace with someone you don’t even know you
hurt? For instance, the boy you laughed at in eighth grade because of his
comically clueless answers to the teacher’s questions – how can you know if
he still harbors a grudge against you?

Or what about a wrong like *loshon hora*: How can you know how many
people heard it, believed it, and passed it along? How could you even figure
out how to repair the damage? Whom could you ask for *mechilah*?

There are many such grievances lying in people’s hearts. You have them
against others and others have them against you. Together, they add up to
a huge pile of rubble blocking the channels of *brachah* into our and others’
lives.

Not even Yom Kippur can erase these sins. As the *Shulchan Aruch* (606:1)
informs us, “Sins between a person and his fellow, Yom Kippur does not
atone for until [the wrongdoer] appeases [the wronged].” The path remains
obstructed even after we’ve fasted and prayed for forgiveness and life!

**Forgiveness clears the path. It washes away all the rubble and leaves
an open channel between heaven and us, through which all Hashem’s
blessings can surge.**

This is the vision of The Forgiveness Initiative: We each make a mindful,
focused declaration of forgiveness of those people who don’t know they’ve
hurt us, or those who have hurt us in ways they cannot repair. If each per-
son extends a *chesed* by forgiving the other, thus enabling that person to re-
ceive *kapparah* (atonement), the benefit to all of us will be immeasurable. By
all of us forgiving each other, we will have succeeded in shifting Hashem’s
judgment to the side of mercy. Each of us and the entire world will be wor-
thy of Hashem’s abundant blessings.

Tefillah Zakkah: The Purifying Stream

We have a potent tool for accomplishing this world-changing wave of forgiveness. It is *Tefillah Zakkah*, which many people recite before Yom Kippur. This prayer, written by Rav Avrohom Danzig, author of *Chayei Adam* and *Chochmas Adam*, expresses regret for misusing the body Hashem has given us to serve Him. In the final paragraph of the prayer, we declare our forgiveness of anyone who has hurt us in any way, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and pray that nobody suffer punishment on our account. Likewise, we pray that we will be forgiven for any hurt or damage we have inflicted on others.

So vital is this to our personal welfare and that of Klal Yisrael that the Chofetz Chaim requested that the last portion of the *tefillah* be moved to a position near the beginning of the prayer. In this way, people would be less likely to forget or omit it.

The Forgiveness Initiative seeks to awaken every Jew to the vital importance of this prayer. We need not wait for Yom Kippur to begin saying it, because it is also part of the prayers we say each night before bed. It enables us to end each day with serenity.

But certainly, before we stand before Hashem on Yom Kippur, we want to earn the immeasurable merit of forgiving the wrongs committed against us. Moreover, we can acquire the forgiveness of others, a crucial step if our Yom Kippur *tefillas* are to be effective in earning Hashem's forgiveness for our sins against others. At the moment we most keenly feel that our fate is hanging in the balance, *Tefillah Zakkah* can count heavily in tipping the scale toward life and blessing.

Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky, in a letter to *rabbanim* and Klal Yisrael, said that reciting *Tefillah Zakkah* is "a matter of extreme importance which, unfortunately, is not frequently addressed." He recommended saying the complete prayer, but if a person does not have time to do so as he goes into Yom Kippur, he should "say words to the effect that he completely forgives anyone who has wronged him." With everyone taking a few moments to say this prayer, he said, tremendous benefit will result for all of Klal Yisrael.

Open up the stream of forgiveness and let it wash away your grievances against others, while others cleanse their hearts of their grievances against you. Help a new year begin with a wide-open channel of blessing, for no Jew's suffering benefits any of us, and every Jew's welfare increases our own.

For those who are not able to say the complete prayer, saying this abridged text will fulfill the urgent appeal of the Chofetz Chaim, as well as that of Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky, *shlita*.

Take 30 seconds before Yom Kippur and say the following prayer:

וְהִנְי מוֹחֵל בְּמַחִילָה גְמוּנָה, לְכֹל מִי שֶׁחָטָא נְגַדִי, בֵּין בְּגוּפוֹ וּבֵין בְּמַמוֹנֹ, אוֹ שֶׁדָּבַר עָלַי לְשׁוֹן תְּרַע, וְאֶפְלוּ הוֹצֵאת שָׁם רַע. וְכֵן לְכֹל מִי שֶׁחִזֵּק לִי בְּגוּפִי אוֹ בְּמַמוֹנִי. . . חוּץ מִמַּמּוֹן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי יְכוּל לְהוֹצִיא עַל פִּי דִין, וְחוּץ מִמִּי שֶׁחֹטָא בְּנֶגְדִי וְאוֹמֵר, אֲחַטָּא לוֹ וְהוּא יִמְחַל לִי. . . וְכֵשֶׁם שֶׁאֲנִי מוֹחֵל לְכֹל אָדָם, כֵּן תִּפְנֹ אֶת חַיֵּי בְּעֵינַי כֹּל אָדָם שֶׁיִּמְחַלוּ לִי בְּמַחִילָה גְמוּנָה. וְלֹא יַעֲנֹשׂ שׁוֹם אָדָם בְּסִבָּתִי.

Behold I forgive completely anyone who has sinned against me or harmed me, whether physically or financially, or who has gossiped about me or even slandered me – except for money that I wish to claim and I can recover by law, and except for someone who sins against me and says, "I will sin against him and he will forgive me." ... And just as I forgive everyone, so may You (Hashem) grant me favor in every person's eyes so he or she will grant me complete forgiveness. And may no person be punished on my account.

To bring this project to your shul or to spread this message, email tefillahzakkah@cchfglobal.org

To download a pdf of the Tefillah, go to cchf.global/tefillahzakkah.

An Important Note:

In normal interpersonal relations a certain amount of insensitivity can be expected—and forgiveness is in order. However, a situation in which one party consistently dominates, insults, and belittles another, must be addressed by professionals, for this constitutes abuse and must be stopped. Even so, forgiveness has its place and can contribute greatly to the victim's healing.

**The
Wisdom***Forgiveness
allows us to
thrive.***Intro:**
Hashem's Miracle of Healing

What if wounds couldn't heal? How long would we survive with our lifeblood endlessly seeping from every cut and scratch we incur in the course of our day-to-day activities? How could we focus, learn, love, and grow when the pain of every injury remains fresh, demanding our attention and sapping our strength?

Healing is a miracle. It is also a process that sometimes requires tremendous exertion from us. The wound has to be cleansed and bandaged or stitched. These procedures can sting and burn; they can strike fear in our hearts. But we submit to them because we know that there's no other way to become whole again. We also know that if we don't treat our wounds, they can lead to far more debilitating pain. We have to do our part, and then Hashem's miracle of healing does the rest.

All of this applies equally to emotional healing. If we do not treat our wounds, clean them out, and initiate the healing process, they will gradually drain out our lifeblood. They will keep us in pain and remove us from the joys and productive activities of life. Ultimately, they will fester, infecting our entire personality with bitterness.

Nevertheless, many people carry with them through life the painful wounds that others, whether through malice, insensitivity, or neglect, have inflicted upon them. These hurtful words and deeds can pierce the victim's self-esteem and cripple his ability to trust and love. Lives have been ruined by acts that the perpetrator never could have imagined packed such power. On the other side, those who inflict these injuries and fail or refuse to make amends may go through life wondering why the blessings they seek in life never arrive.

Forgiveness – whether we are giving it or accepting it – is the treatment for these wounds. Just as Hashem created the world with a means of erasing our physical wounds, He created *teshuvah* and forgiveness to erase the wounds we inflict upon each other. Imperfect human beings could not be expected to behave perfectly – not toward Hashem and not toward each other. For this reason, Hashem created the

possibility of *teshuvah* even before He created the world. Hashem does not rule the world with strict justice alone, sending instant punishment for every wrong. Instead, He mixes *chesed* into his judgment, acknowledging our challenges and flaws and waiting for our *teshuvah*.

But that applies only to our sins against Him. It's up to us to introduce *chesed* into our own judgment of others when we feel that they've sinned against us. When we do, we are not only emulating Hashem, but also, "measure for measure," we are earning His *chesed* and forgiveness in His judgment of us.

The barrier to forgiving others and asking for their forgiveness is that, like iodine and stitches, these can be painful. Unlike a bleeding, gaping wound, the dangers are not readily obvious. People may not connect their festering anger to their sleepless nights, their distrust of others, or their difficulty in connecting to Hashem. They may wait for the other side to apologize, thinking, "I can hold out as long as it takes." They may be so bitter that they decide, "I will never forgive him," failing to realize that their emotional and spiritual vitality are leaking out of these unhealed wounds.

Those who are separated from others by *machlokes* – grievances and feuds – are standing outside the circle of family and friendship. They are like wedding guests who stand off to the side, clutching their burden of misery as they watch all the others dancing together. They may be telling themselves that they have no desire to drop their burden and free their hands to become part of the circle with "those people," and yet deep in their hearts, they long to rejoin.

This, says Dr. David Pelcovitz, describes a deeper meaning of the word *mechilah* – forgiveness. *Mechilah* shares a root with the word *machol* – circle. *Mechilah* enables those who are on the outside to rejoin the circle of friendship. Moreover, once those on the outside join, the circle is complete, for not only were these people missing, but they were also missed.

**Practicing
Peace***Start today,
when small
issues arise, to
practice the art
of forgiving or
apologizing.
Don't let
grudges simmer.*

Own It All

“If he only knew why I did it, he wouldn’t be so angry. It wasn’t as bad as he thinks.” When someone is provoked to anger by something we do, these are often our thoughts. After all, we never set out to hurt or inconvenience the person. Surely if he saw the situation from our perspective, he would be quicker to accept our apology.

The only problem with this kind of thinking is that an apology wrapped in a justification is not an apology at all. When the shoe is on the other foot – when we are the ones to whom an apology is owed – we can and should take the other person’s side of the story into account and forgive freely. But when we’re the ones who owe the apology, we have to give it unadorned by our justifications – even if they are true. Later, when the balance is restored in the relationship, we might explain ourselves. But **when we’re trying to appease someone we’ve hurt, all he wants to know is that we genuinely regret what we’ve done.**

We learn from Dovid HaMelech that this is exactly what we are supposed to do. The Maharsha points out that when Dovid is criticized for arranging that he could take Batsheva as his wife, he responds with one simple word: “*Chatasi* – I sinned.” In contrast, when Shaul departs from Hashem’s command and fails to kill the king of Amalek, he offers justifications. As a result, Shaul loses his kingship, while Dovid retains his. In the same way, when we lose our standing with another person because we’ve offended him in some way, a sincere “I was wrong. I shouldn’t have done that” is the only way to get back on track.

Adapted from Tehillim – Overview by Rabbi Avraham Chaim Feuer, ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications

The Wisdom

Don’t justify it; just admit it.

Wisdom in Action

Shani and Ruth both worked in Manhattan, and once in a while they would meet for lunch. But Shani was often late; this angered Ruth, who had exactly one hour for lunch and sometimes ended up ordering and eating alone while she waited for her friend to show up.

On Shani’s birthday, she made a point of setting a lunch date with Ruth. Ruth warned that she would come only if Shani would make a special effort to arrive on time. “I have an appointment with a client right after lunch,” she said.

Predictably, Ruth arrived right on time for their lunch date, and just as predictably, Shani was nowhere to be seen. “I can’t believe it!” Ruth thought.

When Shani arrived, she found a morose Ruth already seated and eating a salad.

“I can’t believe you’re late again!” said Ruth. “I have to leave in 15 minutes.”

“Oh, I got held up on a conference call,” Shani replied.

“You could have told them up front that you have an appointment to keep,” Ruth retorted.

“I don’t know. They might have been annoyed,” said Shani.

“Well, now I’m annoyed,” Ruth answered. “Why is that better?”

“Why are you so insulted?” Shani replied. “I didn’t mean to be late. Are you always perfect?”

What if, instead, Shani had considered for a moment the wrong she had done in inconveniencing Ruth? Perhaps if she allowed herself to feel the full weight of remorse, it would motivate her to be more considerate in the future. Dovid HaMelech teaches us that the only way to rise again is to quickly and completely root out the cause of our error. Doing so repairs the connection with the person we’ve wronged, and prods us toward real growth.

Practicing Peace

The next time you need to apologize to someone, remember Dovid HaMelech’s one-word admission. Just say, “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

The Wisdom

For an apology to stand, it has to be well constructed.

The Way to Say I'm Sorry

"Say you're sorry," the mother instructs her 7-year-old son, who has just snatched a toy truck out of his little brother's hands.

The boy stares sullenly at his brother, who is crying pitifully.

"Say you're sorry right now, or you're going up to your room," the mother repeats sternly.

"I'm sorry," the boy says petulantly. The little boy is still crying but his older brother, freed from his obligation, runs off to find something else to do.

Many people do not progress much further than this 7-year-old in the way in which they deliver an apology. They don't want to give it, and when they finally do, they try to discharge their obligation with as little actual blame-taking as possible. This leaves the recipient of the apology feeling dissatisfied; the apology failed to soothe the sore spot, which means that peace has not been restored and the wrongdoer hasn't really achieved *mechilah* for his wrong.

Apologies that work are built with four components. First, the apology must be said with sincerity. The tone of voice should express real regret, not lightness, sarcasm, or lack of interest. **Secondly, the person must state specifically what he has done wrong,** not issue a general "Sorry if I hurt you." **Thirdly, a person apologizing must take full blame** for what he did – no excuses. Finally, he must **ask if there is anything he can do to right the wrong.** This shows that he doesn't think that the two words "I'm sorry" are enough to fix everything.

Equipped with the formula for an effective apology, we can be confident that when we find ourselves in the wrong, we have a way to set things right.

Wisdom in Action

Yael, a kindhearted, level-headed woman, was a magnet for troubled, older single women. She always had her one or two "friends," for whom she would be sure to make some time in her week. She often invited them for Shabbos meals and treated them like eagerly awaited guests, even though many of them lacked basic social skills.

Over the years, the women came and went. Some moved out of town, some got married, and some found other people to befriend. Rarely would they keep in touch with Yael once they were gone from the scene, but to Yael, it didn't matter.

When Yael's daughter got engaged, the Shabbos table became an epicenter of the family's excitement. Atara, one of Yael's friends, was a Shabbos regular in those days and she was an eyewitness to the hectic countdown to the chuppah. She was expecting her invitation in the mail any day. When it didn't come, Atara was heartbroken.

"Some friend," she thought. "I'm just a chesed case to her. I'm not even on her guest list."

It wasn't until Shabbos sheva brachos approached that Yael thought about Atara. "Oh no, what did I do?" she cried out to her husband. "I didn't invite Atara to the wedding!"

"Oy! She must be so hurt," he replied. "What are you going to do?"

Yael drove to Atara's apartment, knocked on her door, and waited. Atara opened the door and then began to close it in Yael's face.

"Wait!" Yael called. "Atara, can I please come in?"

"Take your chesed somewhere else," Atara shot back. "I don't need you."

"I was wrong," Yael replied. "I'm so embarrassed that I didn't remember to invite you to the wedding, and there's nothing I can do to fix it. I was just plain thoughtless and I don't blame you at all for being insulted. Would you be willing to come to the Shabbos sheva brachos? We would be so honored if you'd come."

Atara saw the sincere remorse on Yael's face. Her anger ebbed. "I guess these things happen all the time," she said.

"True," said Yael. "But it shouldn't have happened to you. Can you forgive me?"

"I forgive you," Atara replied. "You'll have to invite me over to see the video."

Practicing Peace

The next time you apologize, include these four points: be sincere, be specific, accept the blame, and offer further amends.

The Wisdom

No one is too great to apologize.

The Great Ones

Parents, teachers, *rabbanim*, employers – all face the same dilemma. Should they apologize when they make a mistake? How will they look in the eyes of those who are under their authority?

Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Lowy, in an issue of the *Impressions* newsletter the Chofetz Chaim Heritage Foundation distributes to teachers across the globe, answers that an apology is not only a good idea, but it is a mitzvah. “In Torah *hashkafah*,” he adds, “admitting to making mistakes is praiseworthy.”

Will an apology make the authority figure look foolish and weak? On the contrary, as Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman said, it will garner him respect. When parents, teachers, and *rabbeim* apologize for a mistake, they create an unforgettable living lesson in honesty and humility. And if they don’t, the child will be convinced that there is no justice in the world.

“Such an act can lead students to feel even greater respect for the teacher,” says Rabbi Lowy.

But apologizing is much more than a strategy to teach others that it’s proper to admit when we are wrong. It also rights the wrong – it redresses the harm done by a mistaken reproach or an undeserved consequence. In fact, Rabbi Lowy explains that the *halachah* specifies that if the damage was done in front of others, the apology must be made in front of others as well.

On the other hand, there are times when a reproach or a consequence is justified. Bosses sometimes have to give constructive criticism. Parents sometimes have to address a child’s behavior. Teachers sometimes have to discipline a student. When done for constructive purposes in an appropriate way, no apologies are necessary. But justified criticism must be offered without embarrassing the recipient.

People who can’t stoop to ask forgiveness might feel that they stand at a higher level than others. In reality, however, when we lower ourselves to repair a wrong, we raise ourselves up to the highest heights.

Wisdom in Action

One of the students in the Yeshivah of Pressburg had a great deal more confidence than ability. He posed many questions that were off the mark, indicating that he didn’t understand the shiur. Once, when the Chasam Sofer was delivering a shiur, the boy posed one of his clumsy questions. The Chasam Sofer reprimanded him for asking a question that showed no comprehension of the subject.

Later the Chasam Sofer regretted his reaction. He had embarrassed a student in public! To appease the boy the Chasam Sofer invited him to his Shabbos meal, an honor that was generally limited to the finest boys in the yeshivah. He subsequently invited the boy to his home and taught him the concept he had raised during the shiur until the boy understood it well.

“Please, in our next shiur, ask this question again according to your fresh understanding,” the Chasam Sofer concluded, “and I will be happy to explain it to the whole class.”

As they had arranged, during the next class the student asked the question correctly, just as his Rebbi had laid it out for him.

“Surely this was what you meant to say when you asked this question last week!” the Chasam Sofer exclaimed. “I simply did not understand your words correctly and admonished you for nothing. Please forgive me! Your question is a strong one indeed!” The Chasam Sofer then went on to resolve the difficulty.

“Please forgive me.” These are the words that the great Chasam Sofer spoke in front of an entire shiur to one lackluster student who had bungled a question. The Chasam Sofer was not interested at all in protecting his image. What was important was to correct the damage he had done to his student.

Practicing Peace

If you are in a position of authority, be quick to apologize for an unnecessarily harsh word or deed that hurts those who depend on you. If you worry about lowering yourself in others’ eyes, remind yourself that in reality, asking forgiveness shows greatness.

The
Wisdom

Help yourself
do what you
know you
should do.

What's in It for Me?

Great as the dividends of making peace may be, many people just can't budge from their position. They get used to the situation: "We have nothing to do with each other." They talk themselves into believing that the first move is not theirs to make: "I didn't do anything wrong. *She* should be apologizing to *me*." Sometimes, the only obstacle is that it seems too uncomfortable and embarrassing, and therefore, "I can't."

But like any difficult job, when the stakes are high enough we find a way to mobilize ourselves. That is why there are so many stories of people traveling continents, spending fortunes, and humbling themselves completely in order to remove long-held grudges that are stopping up the flow of blessings into their lives. When gaining *mechilah* means being able to find a *shidduch*, have a child, or heal from an illness, all the obstacles melt away.

However, not everyone who has hurt someone is suffering from a serious challenge that drives him to set things right. We would prefer that such challenges not be necessary – that we could motivate ourselves without the pain. **One way to create this motivation is to apologize as a merit for someone else who is in need of a *yeshuah* – salvation.** Everyone knows people who are waiting for Hashem to answer their longings in some way. Why not help them in a way that is very powerful – by taking the first step toward making peace?

But what if a person apologizes as a merit for something, and then it doesn't happen? In that case, he still scores a triumph; instead of stagnating behind his mountain of justifications, he's climbed over it and landed upon a far sweeter and smoother path through life.

Wisdom in Action

Rochel and Chanie were two sisters who were very close. When Rochel went through a painful divorce, Chanie was by her side offering practical help and emotional support. Then, in the midst of the disarray, a bright spot of happiness emerged. Rochel's son became engaged.

Naturally, Chanie helped Rochel with all the preparations. The wedding day arrived and miraculously, the many conflicted emotions were quickly overpowered by the sheer joy of the occasion.

Then came the sheva brachos, which Chanie and her siblings planned to sponsor together. The question arose: Should the ex-husband be invited? The siblings debated without consulting Rochel. When she got wind of the discussion, she was furious. How could her siblings consider excluding a father from his own son's simchah? Somehow, she came to believe that Chanie was behind the whole issue.

Rochel lashed out at Chanie, who had been her staunch ally through the worst of times. Chanie was heartbroken. She tried to clear the air, but Rochel wouldn't respond. Chanie was going to boycott the sheva brachos, but her better instincts told her to attend. Nevertheless, the sisters did not speak to each other that entire evening.

The feud stretched on. Chanie went to a bungalow colony for the summer, but the usual peace she felt there eluded her. Finally, one day as she was driving, she was overcome with despair. She pulled off the road and wept. She knew that she had to reconcile with her sister, but feeling so wronged and misunderstood, she couldn't make the move. Finally, she spoke to Hashem. Her son had been married for a few years and was still without a child.

"Hashem, if I knew I would soon be a Bubby, I could find the strength to end this feud. I could have peace," she said.

By the end of the summer, the two sisters were the best of friends again. Exactly four weeks from the day Chanie made her phone call, she got a call from her son. "Are you alone, Ma?" he asked. It was the good news she had longed to hear. That same day, another son called and began his conversation with the same question – "Are you alone?" Chanie had done the seemingly impossible, and Hashem had sent her an unequivocal sign that her efforts were cherished.

Adapted from Stories that Warm the Heart, by Rabbi Binyamin Pruzansky, ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications

Practicing Peace

If you have an outstanding machlokes, make the first move toward peace as a merit for someone in need of Hashem's compassion.

The Wisdom

Asking *mechilah* at a gravesite is the next best option.

Gone but Not Forgotten

Countless stories are told of people who can't seem to overcome certain obstacles in their lives, or who seem to suffer an endless series of troubles. When they seek a *gedol's* advice for dealing with their troubles they may be asked, "Is there anyone you've hurt? Do you need *mechilah* from anyone?" The person then goes on a mission to determine if there is someone he needs to appease, to find that person, and to gain his forgiveness. But what happens if that person is no longer alive?

The next best option is to go to the person's grave and ask for *mechilah* there. Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman stressed that a person can't actually give *mechilah* when he is no longer alive, and therefore the effort doesn't provide complete atonement for the sin. However, this is what he is required to do; and because the person has humbled himself, admitted his wrong, and experienced sincere regret for his action, he has helped his cause.

According to *halachah* (*Shulchan Aruch with Mishnah Berurah* 606:2), a person wishing to ask *mechilah* at a grave must stand barefoot at the gravesite in the company of a *minyán* and say, "I have sinned to the G-d of Israel and to this person" and state what he did. Those present respond, "*Machul lach*" (you are forgiven) three times. If a person can't go to the grave himself, he may send someone else in his stead.

Wisdom in Action

Miriam, a Lakewood wife and mother, relates the following first-person account.

I was 27 and still not married. I went to gedolim for brachos and did everything I could to merit a shidduch, but nothing was working. Someone had introduced me to Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Klugman when he was in America, and he consulted with Rav Yaakov Edelstein about my situation. The rav asked if anyone had been hurt by either me or my family.

When Rabbi Klugman asked me this question, there was only one thing I could think of. Many years ago, my grandfather had gotten a ride with somebody, and the car was involved in an accident. For whatever reason – I don't know the details – my grandfather sued the driver. The driver was very angry, and the two families kept their distance after that.

I knew that this man had passed away already, but I got up my courage and called his wife. I explained my situation, thinking that she would be sympathetic. But she had had a very hard life and she was bitter. She basically said, "What do you want me to do about it? My husband is gone and I can't forgive what was done to him." I was crying and begging her to help me. She told me she wanted to ask her rav. I called again a few days later and finally she softened up a little and told me, "I can be mochel you for what you did to me, but my husband is no longer alive. You could go to his grave and ask him for mechilah."

My grandparents were very elderly at the time and we didn't want to trouble them. Instead, my father went to the cemetery with a minyan, took off his shoes, and went through the whole process. This was a little after Pesach. Not long after that, I got a "yes" from someone the shadchan had been pursuing for a long time. It didn't work out, but I felt that something had opened up. Then, right before Rosh Hashanah, we got a "yes" from someone who had said "no" countless times before. We went out before Rosh Hashanah and were engaged right after Succos.

The thing that struck me most about all of this is how much pain this woman still suffered all those years later. I keep this in mind and try very hard to be good to people, even if they offend me.

Practicing Peace

Don't write off old conflicts if the other side is already in the Next World. Do the work of humbling yourself and asking forgiveness at his gravesite, because even if it doesn't erase the sin, your teshuvah will surely help.

The Perfect End of an Imperfect Day

In the Jewish view of life, we're responsible for knowing what our obligations are to others. Often, however, we flip that knowledge on its head and use it to pinpoint what others owe us.

In doing this, we've gone one dangerous step too far. The Torah's way is for each of us to take responsibility for what we owe to others, not to demand what we believe they owe to us. Rav Chaim Shmulevitz would support this idea with two conflicting statements of *Chazal*: "One should love his wife like himself and honor her more than himself," and "A fine wife is one who does her husband's will." How can it be both ways? Rav Chaim says that **when each party takes care of his or her obligation to the other, peace reigns**, whereas when each is concerned with the other's obligation to him or her, trouble is sure to arise.

The same holds true in all human relationships. Although we are all obligated to treat each other with kindness and respect, when someone doesn't do so our best option is to ignore the slight (within the realm of normal relationships). If we can't do that, then the next best option is to forgive and forget, even if the other person doesn't ask for forgiveness.

This is the message of *Krias Shema al HaMittah*. Every night before going to sleep, we declare that we forgive anyone who has angered or antagonized us in any way, whether the affront was to our emotions, finances, possessions, honor, or anything else. "May no person be punished on my account," we implore. While this formulation does not address serious and ongoing harm one person has done to another, it is an invaluable tool for the sometimes overblown irritations of daily life.

These words can be much easier to say sincerely if we think about the person who slighted us – most likely a family member, friend, or acquaintance – and imagine how we would feel if he actually suffered Divine retribution. Would his illness, poverty, or bad fortune make us happy? No! We would probably rush to his rescue.

With these few lines we recite each night, we release

the people in our lives from liability for their mistakes. Equally as precious, we release our own hearts from the bonds of stress and anger. It's the perfect ending to the day, no matter what that day has brought.

Wisdom in Action

At 1 a.m., Shulamis was finally ready to go to bed. The late hours of the night had been occupied by a long, difficult conversation with her teenage daughter Zehava. The girl, now in the middle of tenth grade, was clearly in a state of anger and confusion. Shulamis wanted to help, but everything she suggested just seemed to add fuel to Zehava's blaze.

"How am I supposed to talk to you when you don't understand one single thing about my life?" her daughter had shouted at her. "You think everything is just like it was when you were growing up. Just forget it. Forget about me. I'll figure out my own life!"

Shulamis's heart broke when she thought of the sweet girl Zehava had once been and the closeness between them then. How could she speak so hurtfully? How could she reject her mother so harshly? She was becoming arrogant and stubborn, and nothing good could come of it.

Settling heavily into a rocking chair in her room, Shulamis said Shema. Did she really forgive everyone? How could she forgive her daughter when her angry words were still echoing in her ears? "May no person be punished on my account," Shulamis recited, and then she felt her heart open up. G-d forbid that Zehava should suffer for her mistakes. "It's in Hashem's hands," Shulamis thought, and then whispered, "Please help my child." With that, she was ready to sleep.

Practicing Peace

When you say Krias Shema al HaMittah, imagine that you are the judge and jury for those you feel have hurt you. It's up to you to condemn them, or to release them into a life of goodness and peace.

DAY 8

from *Live the Blessing* Day 172

The Wisdom

You can't fix it if you don't know it's broken.

Why Can't I Just Get Over It?

If you unknowingly harmed someone, what reaction would you want from him? Assuming that you would not want an angry, humiliating response, there are two other options. One is that the offended person decides to take the high road and say nothing. He chooses to suffer in silence, assuming that eventually the pain will fade. In that case, you never have to feel the distress of knowing that someone out there is suffering from a wound that you inflicted. The other possible reaction is that the person confronts you. You might feel embarrassed by this encounter even if the person expresses his complaint in the most tactful way possible. You might feel guilty, ignorant, or inept because of your mistake. So which would you prefer?

A wise person prefers Option B, because that's the only option that enables him to move past his error. **We can't fix what we damaged if we never find out that we've caused damage.** What seems like a plus – that we can live our lives in blissful ignorance, never needing to offer a humble apology – is in fact the worst negative. Not only does this liability remain an issue, albeit a hidden one, between us and the other person, but it can also interfere with the flow of blessings we wish to receive from Above.

By keeping our grievances against others stuffed into a dark corner of our hearts, we are not overlooking the wrong but blocking the other person's route to a clean slate, and littering the path to peace with unrecognized, unlamented wrongs.

Wisdom in Action

In school, Rachel was known as a bit of a rebel; in camp, she was developing the same reputation. One day she overstepped the line. The camp director called her into the office and told her she would have to return home for five days.

Despite her tough exterior, Rachel was horrified. "OK," she said. "But promise me that you won't let anyone know why I'm going home. I don't want everyone talking about me."

The director agreed to let Rachel explain her departure any way she saw fit. Rachel's parents picked her up from camp that afternoon, and after five days, she went back, determined to "just go with the program."

Soon, she noticed that girls were giving her strange looks. Word was out about what she had done, and Rachel discovered the source of the leak. The rest of the summer was pure misery for Rachel.

Fifteen years later, she called a woman who mediated disputes. "Am I being ridiculous?" she asked. "I still can't get over my anger at this girl." The mediator asked her, "Did she ever ask you to forgive her? Often, when someone can't get over a grudge, it's because the other side never acknowledged the hurt and asked for forgiveness."

Rachel responded that the girl had never contacted her; she allowed the mediator to initiate contact. When the mediator told the girl, now a grown woman, what her deed had caused, the woman felt terrible. She had never given the episode a second thought until that moment.

"In fact, right now, my own son is sitting at home because no camp will accept him," she said. "He's got a little bit of a reputation, but he really thrives in camp. Maybe now I know why this is happening."

The woman called Rachel immediately and acknowledged the suffering she had caused. She begged Rachel's forgiveness, and suddenly Rachel felt 15 years' worth of pain melting away. Soon after the conversation, the woman called the mediator to report that her son had been accepted to camp. Apparently, the scales in Heaven were back in balance.

As heard from Mrs. Sury Friedman on Chazak, Shalom Series [menu option 6,4]

Practicing Peace

If someone has wronged you and you haven't forgiven him, make sure he is aware that you feel aggrieved by something he did.

It's Fine, Don't Worry About It

What's a little misunderstanding between siblings? Even if someone's feathers were ruffled, shouldn't everyone just let it pass?

We might think that this is the high road, but Rabbeinu Bechayah (*Vayechi* 50:17) tells us that it's an extremely dangerous road. Words left unsaid in the course of reconciliation are like small, unnoticed shards of broken glass that we fail to sweep up and discard. Eventually they will cause pain, not only in this world, but in the World to Come. That is because until the person who has done wrong receives explicit forgiveness from the person he wronged, his *teshuvah* is incomplete. His wrongdoing still stands and he is liable in Heaven for his error. In fact, *mussar* teaches that when a person responds to an apology with a dismissive "Don't worry, it's nothing," his inner desire is to prevent the wrongdoer from discharging his debt. He still wants to "be owed."

Rabbeinu Bechaya states that the need for explicit forgiveness is clear from the conversation of Yosef and his brothers after their father Yaakov died. Yosef assuaged his brothers' fears that he would turn against them, assuring them that everything that had happened to him was part of Hashem's plan for saving the world from famine. That would seem to convey that he held no hard feelings, but it wasn't a clear "I forgive you," and therefore it wasn't enough to release the brothers from Heaven's verdict of guilt.

Rabbeinu Bechaya says that the reckoning for this guilt came generations later with the deaths of the Ten Martyrs, *Asarah Harugei Malchus*, whom we mourn in the Yom Kippur prayers and on Tishah B'Av. The Roman Emperor Hadrian condemned them specifically to expiate the "sin" of the selling of Yosef. Based on Rabbeinu Bechaya, Rav Moshe Feinstein rules that "I'm *mochel*" or "I forgive you" **must be said** explicitly for *mehilah* to be valid.

Even on the personal level, saying the words, "I forgive you," changes everything. The person who says it feels purged of lingering resentment, and the person who

hears it feels fully restored to the other's good graces. The words might seem too formal for inter-sibling slights and squabbles, but they are vital maintenance for our family ties. They are also our guarantee that future generations will not suffer from our unspoken words.

Wisdom in Action

Yossi traveled all the way from Montreal to Los Angeles to be at the bris his brother Binyamin was making for his first son after five daughters. As the bris ceremony proceeded, the various honors were given out. Knowing that the baby was going to be named for his and Binyamin's father, Yossi felt sure that he would receive the honor of announcing the name, but instead, Binyamin's long-time chavrusa got that job.

"I shouldn't let this get to me," Yossi told himself. "What's the difference? Do I need an honor? But when will he ever grow up? When will he ever look around and see someone besides himself? I can't believe I traveled all this way and he barely notices that I'm here."

Yossi's heart was heavy, and his face showed it. Binyamin noticed right away, when Yossi came to give him a hug and a mazel tov, that something was wrong. In a flash, he realized what it was.

"Oh, no, Yossi, I can't believe what I just did. I can't believe it! How could I have overlooked you, my own brother, for an honor? Please, can you forgive me?" Binyamin looked as though he might cry.

"Forget it, Bimmy, it's nothing. No need to apologize. You had a lot going on," Yossi said, trying hard to believe his own words.

"Are you sure?" Binyamin asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Yossi answered. And they left it at that.

Will Yossi ever feel, "I'm really over it," though he never actually forgave his brother, or will he step on this shard over and over again? The only way to truly lay the issue to rest is to sweep it away completely with one definitive phrase: "I forgive you." In this way, we ensure that any guilt the person bears will be dispelled and never become a cause of punishment.

Practicing Peace

The next time someone apologizes, don't dismiss it with a "no big deal, forget about it." Instead, offer your sincere forgiveness.

The Wisdom

Explicitly saying, "I forgive you," is the only way to enable the other person to achieve complete forgiveness.

The Work Behind the Word

The Wisdom

Until you say, “I forgive you,” forgiveness is incomplete.

We’re supposed to forgive those who ask; every Jew knows that. In fact, it seems like such a simple thing to do; just say those magic words: “I forgive you.” With this we dispel the heavy grudge weighing down our heart and move forward in life. With this we remove the burden of guilt that the other person has been carrying around in his heart.

But can a few words really accomplish all of that? Can hurt, insult, real financial or even physical damage evaporate by simply saying, “I forgive you”?

Rav Hillel Cooperman relates from Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman, *zt”l*, that a person may have to work just as hard to give valid *mechilah* as the wrongdoer has to work to face his victim and ask for it. Rav Shteinman learns this from the above-mentioned thought from Rabbeinu Bechaya, that Yosef’s brothers died without Yosef’s *mechilah*. While Yosef did not exact revenge on them from his position of power, and accepted that the events set off by their selling him into slavery were part of Hashem’s design, this was not enough to erase the pain of being betrayed by his brothers.

The Chazon Ish ruled that *mechilah* that is said with just the mouth, without the heart, means nothing. The solution, however, is not for a person to accept a lifetime of grudge-bearing. Instead, he has to realize that he has a job to do. That is to work, by learning *mussar* and readjusting his view of the situation, to truly accept that Hashem is the source of everything that happens. Until we can disconnect the suffering we experienced from the person who was the agent of that suffering, our *mechilah* may be “just words.”

Wisdom in Action

Rabbi Cooperman tells of a man who was a loyal employee of an organization for 25 years. Then, suddenly, he was fired. The man was shocked and humiliated. The financial damage, too, was tremendous. In his heart and mind, he could not accept that these people, to whom he had given his best efforts for so many years, could have no sense of loyalty to him, no feeling for him as a human being.

The man would not forgive his employer. On Yom Kippur, he specifically excluded them from any statements of mechilah he made. “Let them eat what they cooked,” the man said.

Disturbed by the man’s insistence on nursing his grudge, Rabbi Cooperman returned to Rav Shteinman to discuss the issue and how it could be resolved. The Rosh Yeshivah became agitated by the question. How could anyone think that a wrong so deep and pervasive could be erased with one simple word? How could anyone expect that someone who, after 25 years of devoted service, was drummed out of the company in a humiliating way, should just forgive and forget?

“He can forgive,” said the Rosh Yeshivah, “if he will learn mussar for a full year, if he’ll learn about the value of being maavir al middosav (overlooking our claims against others) and the prohibition against nekamah (revenge).”

We might wonder why, indeed, the man should devote himself to elevating himself to the point where he could give heartfelt *mechilah*. What did he owe these people who had hurt him? We learn from the Gemara (*Shabbos* 149b) that even if he owes them nothing, there is one compelling reason to forgive, and that is that he puts himself in danger by holding onto the grudge: “Anyone who has a friend who is punished because of him cannot enter into Hashem’s domain.”

Rabbi Cooperman offers a further answer that Rav Shteinman once gave to this question when it arose regarding a different matter. “Do you think you will have *simchah* in your heart from their being punished? If that’s what you want, that’s not good. Take yourself out of the picture. Don’t be a side in the story. Hakadosh Baruch Hu knows their address. Everything is just a test. The Ribbono Shel Olam wants to see if we’re willing to sacrifice for this mitzvah [of *mechilah*].”

Practicing Peace

If you can’t yet forgive someone in your heart, make it a priority to get to that point. Speak to a mentor to work through the issue. Learn mussar to come to a point of acceptance. Don’t brush your grievance under the rug.

**The
Wisdom***Get it on
paper and out
of your heart.***The Mechilah Letter**

A young couple is house-hunting. With a limited budget, they know they will have to settle for something less than perfect. Finally they find a reasonable option. For several tortuous days, they weigh and reweigh the house's pluses and minuses. "OK, let's do it," they finally decide. Once they sign, they are no longer preoccupied with their doubts. They turn their energy toward their plans for their new home.

Signing a commitment changes the landscape of our lives. "I've taken into account all the imperfections of this situation and have still chosen to commit myself," it says. This is very much the case when a person signs a letter of forgiveness – a *mechilah* letter.

A *mechilah* letter doesn't say, "I have no reason to be angry at you and I want to be your friend." Instead, it says, "I no longer hold this against you." High-impact grievances occupy a great deal of space in our lives. We may waver back and forth for years, simultaneously irritating the wound and wishing it would heal. A *mechilah* letter ends the debate and puts us firmly on the road to healing. While there is a mitzvah to forgive and to accept an apology, there is no halachic requirement to write or accept such letters. Nevertheless, they have proven invaluable in laying *machlokes* to rest.

They are often exchanged by the two sides, recognizing that no conflict is completely one-sided. A mediator who has facilitated many such letters says that sometimes the would-be recipient doesn't even want to see the letter; he just wants to know that it's been written and can't be recanted. In that case the mediator holds the letter in her file, which contains many such letters.

We don't have to live in limbo, wanting peace but at the same time resisting a commitment to it. We can write a letter of *mechilah*, sign our name on the dotted line, and buy into the best deal in the world.

Wisdom in Action

The wedding gown was being altered, and the furniture had been ordered. The bride and her mother had chosen linen and dishes. But in the home of the chassan's family, there was another reality. Could they break it off this late in the game? But how could they stand under the chuppah smiling when they knew that this match was a mistake?

After consulting their rav and thinking hard about the stark options, they broke the engagement. The searing pain in the kallah's heart was nearly impossible for her parents to watch. She climbed into bed and cried for days. But eventually time did its healing work, and she moved forward. She got married six months later.

More than a year after her marriage, not yet expecting a child, she and her husband visited a rav, who clearly perceived that an unresolved grudge was blocking the path to brachah. The woman had no doubt as to who was the object of the grudge. Her parents contacted a mediator to request that the families exchange letters of mechilah, covering both the emotional and financial losses incurred by both sides.

The young man's mother agreed. The chassan's letter arrived at its destination signed by both parents and son. And the kallah and her parents sent theirs. The couple hoped that soon they would have good news to share, but another year went by and nothing happened. They returned to the rav, who told them, "There has been no mechilah." Confused, they contacted the mediator and related the rav's words.

"Bring me the letter," the mediator requested. The couple brought the letter to the mediator and she examined the signatures. "Look," she pointed out. "The mother's signature and the son's are in the same handwriting. The mother signed for her son. I'll get in touch with them and see if they'll redo it."

Without accusations, the mediator asked the mother to write a new letter and have her son sign it. The couple received the letter shortly thereafter, signed by mother, father, and son, each in their own handwriting. Ten months later, the couple's first child was born.

Heard directly from the mediator.

**Practicing
Peace**

If there has been a major machlokes in your life – even if it's been resolved but your feelings remain murky – clear your heart with a letter of mechilah.

We Don't Have Forever

The Wisdom

Give forgiveness before it's too late.

Because asking and giving forgiveness are so difficult for people to do, they put it off. Sometimes it doesn't seem so important, because the two people may still be talking to each other; they may even be living in the same house together. Nevertheless, there's an unresolved issue floating in the air between them. They each may believe that as long as no one is mentioning it, it should not be mentioned. The person who caused the hurt may even believe that the entire episode has been forgotten.

In other instances, the anger is so deep and pervasive that forgiveness seems to be out of the question. The wronged party feels, "Why should I forgive you? Look what you've done to me!" The other party feels certain that his efforts will be rebuffed and isn't willing to risk the humiliation.

Under either of these scenarios, however, there is one incontrovertible fact: We don't live forever. **If a person lets embarrassment or anger stop him from asking or giving *mechilah*, the time will certainly come when the opportunity is gone.** This may mean that someone must carry the heavy burden of his guilt or grudge into the Next World. The person left behind can never fully repair the situation. Instead of achieving peace of mind, he has gained nothing but everlasting regret. When we stubbornly refuse to make peace or put off the process, we must remind ourselves that **today might be our last opportunity.**

Wisdom in Action

Lani and Shmuel emerged from the doctor's office in a daze. Lani's diagnosis was dire. The couple tried to shore up their faith as they embarked on a long, difficult road of treatment. Meanwhile, they visited many gedolim to receive blessings for Lani's recovery. At one point, when things seemed to just keep getting worse, they visited a gadol who suggested that perhaps Lani needed to obtain forgiveness from someone she had wronged. Lani knew right away who the person was: her former close friend, Abby.*

Lani didn't feel she had done anything wrong. Abby had asked her to testify as to her fitness as a mother in the midst of a contentious divorce, in which Abby's husband was trying to remove the children from her custody. Lani did the best she could, but the judge's probing questions and the tension of the situation left her grasping for words. She wasn't very convincing, and in the end, Abby lost custody. She never forgave Lani for failing her.

With no choice, Lani visited Abby and threw herself on her former friend's mercy. However, Abby remained bitter. She was not willing to forgive Lani just because at this moment in Lani's life, she needed it. Following her rav's advice, Lani went back a second time, but this time Abby was even more unreceptive. "Don't come back," she said.

Lani's condition worsened until she lapsed into a coma and hovered between life and death. Her family knew that the greatest kindness at that point would be for Hashem to bring her soul back to its home. However, the days dragged on. It seemed that Lani's neshamah would simply not let go.

Then one night, Abby was awakened by a vivid, frightening dream. In it, she heard a voice demanding that she say out loud, three times, that she forgave Lani. Shaken to the core, Abby realized that nothing that had happened to her was Lani's fault. She forgave Lani with all her heart, tears streaming down her cheeks. And in a hospital bed on the other side of town, Lani's neshamah finally slipped away.

**Names have been changed.*

Adapted from Final Forgiveness, by Batya Ruddell, published in the CCHF Tishah B'Av magazine

Practicing Peace

Don't delay. Realize that if you miss the opportunity to make peace, the regret will be yours to keep.

HELLO?!

Does anyone know where my loshon hora is?

Unfortunately, the answer is no.

Loshon hora is like Covid-19. It spreads from person to person. Where it started and where it will end is anyone's guess.

But if your loshon hora has spread far past the one person you told, and you have no idea where it landed, how can you do *teshuvah* for it?

If each of us would forgive each other for the loshon hora that was spoken about us, that would also effect *teshuvah* for each of us, regardless of where our words might have landed.

This Erev Yom Kippur, be a part of the worldwide Forgiveness Initiative, reciting *Tefillas Zakkah* to acquire *kappara*/forgiveness for the *aveirah* of loshon hora for *Klal Yisrael*.

If you don't have enough time to say the entire *Tefillas Zakkah*, say the shortened version before Yom Kippur to forgive anyone who spoke loshon hora about you.

We know that forgiveness can be hard to grant, but *Chazal* taught that, "Whoever forgives will be forgiven."

We may never know what happened to our loshon hora, but now, each of us can forgive each other, bringing forgiveness to *Klal Yisrael* and opening up the channels of blessings for all of us.

Take 30 seconds before Yom Kippur and say the following prayer:

והִנְנִי מוֹחֵל בְּמַחִילָה גְּמוּרָה, לְכָל מִי שֶׁחָטָא נֹגְדִי, בֵּין בְּגוּפוֹ וּבֵין בְּמִמּוֹנִי, אוֹ שֶׁדָּבַר עָלַי לְשׁוֹן הָרַע, וְנִאֲסַלּוּ הוֹצָאֹת שֵׁם רַע. וְכֵן לְכָל מִי שֶׁהִזִּיק לִי בְּגוּפִי אוֹ בְּמִמּוֹנִי. . . חוּץ מִמּוֹמֵן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי יָכוֹל לְהוֹצִיא עָלָי שִׁי דִין, וְחוּץ מִמִּי שֶׁחָטָא בְּנֶגְדִי וְאוֹמֵר, אֲחַטָּא לוֹ וְהוּא יִמְחַל לִי. . . וְכֵשֶׁם שֶׁאֲנִי מוֹחֵל לְכָל אָדָם, כֵּן תַּתֵּן אֶת חַיֵּי בְּעֵינַי כָּל אָדָם שֶׁיִּמְחַלּוּ לִי בְּמַחִילָה גְּמוּרָה. וְלֹא יַעֲנֹשׂ שׁוֹם אָדָם בְּסָבְתִי.

Behold I forgive completely anyone who has sinned against me or harmed me, whether physically or financially, or who has gossiped about me or even slandered me – except for money that I wish to claim and I can recover by law, and except for someone who sins against me and says, "I will sin against him and he will forgive me." ... And just as I forgive everyone, so may You (Hashem) grant me favor in every person's eyes so he or she will grant me complete forgiveness. And may no person be punished on my account.

- from *Tefillas Zakkah*

Acquire an incredible *zechus* before Yom Kippur.

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"By all of us forgiving each other, we will have succeeded in shifting Hashem's judgement to the side of mercy."

- From the Introduction

The Interview

Forgiveness: A Rav's Perspective

An interview with Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Klugman, Rav of Beis Midrash I'Torah u'Tefillah, Ramat Eshkol, Jerusalem

Are there halachic guidelines for asking *mehilah*?

Yes, there are. First, the wrongdoer has to rectify the situation to whatever degree is possible. If he owes the other person money, he has to give it back. He can't do *teshuvah* or receive forgiveness until he does this. It's comparable to a person who immerses in a *mikveh* while holding a *shertz* (insect) in his hand. If you're holding on to the source of impurity, nothing is going to make you pure. Of course, rectifying a situation is relatively easy when it's just a financial matter.

Someone was married and then divorced, and the girl's family spread rumors that her former husband was unstable and abusive. The girl's mother became very ill and the family asked the former husband to be *mochel*. He asked a certain great *talmid chacham* if he had to forgive them, and he said that he should do so if the mother went back to those to whom she had spread the slander and told them the truth. But even in those dire circumstances, the woman refused to undo the slander.

Once a person has done whatever can be done to rectify the situation, he has to appease the victim. This is the crucial element of asking *mehilah*. It means lowering yourself before him and suffering the embarrassment of admitting you were wrong and that you did something that hurt him. It can't be accomplished with a quick "Will you be *mochel* me?"

There was a tradition on Erev Kippur in the Ponevezher Yeshiva for everyone to stand up and together say the sentence of *Tefillah Zakkah* which states that we forgive those who have wronged us and we don't

want them to be punished on account of anything they did to us. The Chazon Ish, however, said that mere words are not worth anything in situations where there was real harm done. *Mechilah* isn't an E-ZPass. The wrongdoer has to be contrite (regretful) and express that feeling to the person he wronged.

Does a request for *mechilah* have to be worded in any specific way?

Rav Moshe Feinstein said that a person should ask specifically for the victim to "please forgive me" or "please be *mochel*." The person being *mochel* should use those specific words when being *mochel* and not just say, "Don't worry. It's nothing." That is not *mechilah*.

The *poskim* write that if a person refuses to forgive, the wrongdoer should find different ways to ask each time. It's not enough to just repeat the request three times in a row and then say, "OK, I asked three times; now he has to forgive me."

Were there circumstances where Rav Shteinman would push people to see if they may have hurt someone and ask *mechilah*?

Very often, Rav Shteinman and Rav Yaakov Edelstein would encourage older singles to look deeply into their past and see if they ever hurt or embarrassed anyone. Rav Yaakov Edelstein would almost always ask if there was someone the older single had ever gone out with and had said no to and the other side felt hurt, even if they hadn't actually gotten engaged. Rav Shteinman would especially encourage teachers who were older singles to remember if they had ever embarrassed a *talmidah* in class (even years earlier) and track down the *talmidah* to ask *mechilah*. It happens, he would say, that a teacher embarrasses a student in class in order to restore discipline. But this, he said, is not permitted.

Are there any specific rules regarding whether one should ask for *mechilah* in person versus sending a letter or sending a *shalich*?

The basic obligation is to ask for *mechilah* in person. However, there are instances in which this may not be possible or appropriate. The advantage of a letter is that it can sometimes be more effective. You can take time to compose it and find the right words. Also, a letter doesn't put the recipient on the spot. He has time to digest what you've said and respond when he's thought it over. The negative aspect of a letter is that it can be perceived as (and often is) cowardly.

In *halachah*, there is no difference between a letter written on paper or one sent by text or email. A letter does carry a stronger air of seriousness. But if someone can genuinely be *mochel* on the basis of a text, that's fine.

Is forgiveness effective if the victim gives it unilaterally, without the wrongdoer asking for it?

It is partially effective, but it doesn't accomplish a full *kapparah* because the main event in receiving *mechilah* is the appeasement – the lowering of oneself in front of the victim. A person who forgives unilaterally is taking himself out of the picture. He is no longer involved in the dynamics of the *machlokes*. The grudge is no longer a presence on his record. However, the person whom he has forgiven has not done *teshuvah*. In statements like *Tefillah Zakkah* or the *Krias Shema al HaMittah*, where we unilaterally forgive those who have wronged us, we are really only forgiving the smaller things.

Are there circumstances under which a person is not required to forgive?

The Rema says that a person is not required to forgive someone who has defamed him, but the *Mishnah Berurah* writes that a person demonstrates that he has the great trait of humility by forgiving in such a case. Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman would urge people to be *mochel* even though it is not required, because "the reason people don't want to be *mochel* is that they want the other person to be punished – just a little *nekamah* (revenge)... However, *Chazal* say (*Shabbos* 149b) that if someone is punished because of you, you do not gain entry into Hashem's presence. A person who isn't *mochel* is risking that outcome, and it's simply not worth it." Even if the perpetrator doesn't want to undo the slander, the victim can try to forgive for his own sake. Rav Chaim Shmulevitz would say that when a person overcomes a negative *middah*, breaking through his pain and resentment, he acquires tremendous merit.

Are there circumstances under which a person is not permitted to forgive?

Yes. If the wrong is not about you but about *kavod haTorah*, or if someone has belittled your *rebbe* or your parents, you cannot be *mochel* because the *mechilah* is not yours to grant. Rav Moshe Feinstein once adjudicated a *din Torah* involving a prominent person, who disagreed with the decision and sent it back to him. Rav Moshe said he was *mochel* on his own honor, but not the honor of the Torah. The man's act was a debasement of *kavod haTorah*, which Rav Moshe did not have the ability to forgive. We should note, however, that with few exceptions, insults are personal and not an issue of *kavod haTorah*. A person must be very careful not to conflate his own honor with the honor of Hashem and the Torah.

How does a person forgive a wrong that cannot be repaired, such as if someone *chas v'shalom* causes another person to be crippled or killed?

If the person has died, there is nothing to do but go to the *kever* (grave) and ask *mechilah* there. And one is obligated to do so. Nevertheless, Rav Shteinman says that even when you go to the *kever*, you are not obtaining complete forgiveness from the deceased. It is not as it would have been if you had sought forgiveness in his lifetime. If you didn't get it in his lifetime, you can't get it *ever*. However, it does accomplish something. You have lowered yourself, and that does something for you.

The same is true if someone is so disabled that he cannot knowingly give you *mechilah*. In an elementary school in Yerushalayim a group of girls bullied a classmate, who eventually became deranged. Rav Elyashiv said they could not ask for her forgiveness because she didn't know what she was saying. When she would die, he said, then they could ask *mechilah* because she would no longer be hearing their request with her physical faculties of understanding.

People-to-people sins are redressed in this world because the damage is done in this world. If someone becomes crippled from someone else's wrongdoing, the victim would have to be a saint to forgive fully. Not everything is fixable in this world.

The Chofetz Chaim writes that if someone does not receive *mechilah* from the person he has wronged, even the wrongdoer's death does not provide atonement. This is a frightening reality.

If the victim forgives the wrongdoer and sincerely hopes that no harm come to him as a result of his deeds, but still strongly dislikes the wrongdoer, is that considered effective *mechilah*?

Yes. If a person sincerely forgives someone but doesn't like him – he says, “I don't want to have him in my life” – it's still effective *mechilah*.

Does forgiveness have to be 100 percent sincere?

You have to do your best. But 100% sincerity is not always easy.

Most *Poskim* (other than Rav Yisrael Salanter) say that because the hurt is in the heart, the forgiveness has to be in the heart. If my heart didn't forgive, then even if I said the words I didn't really forgive.

Someone caused harm to Rav Elya Lopian and then came to ask him for *mechilah*. Rav Lopian told him to come back in two weeks. He needed time to work on himself and arrive at sincere forgiveness. He didn't want to just say, “I'm *mochel* you” without meaning it.

On the other hand, once I asked Rav Shteinman for *mechilah* for something and he answered, “I was *mochel* before you did it.” Rav Shteinman trained himself not to let himself become bothered by what people did or said.

How should a person react if someone refuses to forgive him? What is he required to do in order to obtain forgiveness?

If he has tried to appease the person and asked three times for *mechilah*, he doesn't have to ask anymore. However, for a parent or a *rebbe*, one is required to keep asking until he is *mochel*. In other circumstances, if a person asks three times and is turned down, he should gather ten people together and tell them that he tried to ask *mechilah* but the other person did not want to forgive him.

There is a question as to whether a woman can do this with ten women. Some *poskim* say that she can. The point is that the person has lowered himself, is contrite, and wants others to know that he is truly sorry.

Asking three times and telling a *minyán* that you did it is still not a free ticket to forgiveness. Even though the wrongdoer doesn't have to ask for *mechilah* more than three times, he still hasn't achieved a *kapparah*. He will have to go to the victim's grave after he dies and ask him for *mechilah* there. For this reason, a person might want to continue seeking *mechilah* even after the third refusal. We're allowed to ask as often as we want. Only if it's belittlement of the Torah should a person refrain from continuing to ask. For instance, [someone like] Rav Chaim Kanievsky shouldn't run back and forth trying to get *mechilah* from someone who just wants to hold a grudge against him.

What are some of Rav Shteinman's guidelines for living *b'shalom*?

Vitur, vitur, vitur (giving in to the other person). This was Rav Shteinman's answer.

There's an organization called Binas haLev that is dedicated, among other things, to teaching couples who are about to get married. They asked Rav Shteinman what basic principles they should teach couples to help with their marital harmony. The Rosh Yeshivah responded, “*Vitur, vitur, and more vitur.*” On another occasion, Rav Shteinman added that spouses must be aware that their role is not to improve and educate each other.

Rav Yaakov Edelstein quoted Rav Dessler that the key to *shalom bayis* is for the husband and wife to realize that the other spouse doesn't owe him or her anything. It's all about **my obligation to my spouse, and not my spouse's obligation to me.**

What are some guidelines for restoring peace between people who are engaged in *machlokes*?

You can't make peace while people are still angry. They don't want to be patronized or taken for granted. They want to think that they are right. I have a friend whose daughter was married for six years and had no

children. I asked him what happened to someone who had worked for him for 25 years and had never had children. This was someone who was also a friend, and the families were close. He said he had let the man go.

I called that former employee and told him that something needed to be done about this outstanding grievance, which seemed to be hurting the first man's daughter. But the man insisted he was not angry. "He had the right to do what he wanted. I don't care." However, after more discussions, it turned out that his anger was so profound that the only way to deal with it was to insist that it wasn't even there. He also was annoyed that here he was the one who was wronged and now it's *his* "fault" that the daughter of the one who fired him didn't have children.

After further discussion, though, he finally agreed to write a *shtar mechilah*. It was arranged that the couple would visit on Motzaei Shabbos of the first day of *Selichos*. This is a very good day to make peace because people's hearts are open. Six weeks later, the young woman was expecting.

Another story: Two fine families were neighbors. The wives had been friends since childhood. Then something happened that pitted them against each other, and they didn't speak to each other for a year. Someone who was friendly with both families sat down with them, and in a couple of sessions brought them to a peaceful resolution.

The situation couldn't begin to resolve itself until each side had a chance to explain why she did what she did. If people understand what made a person do something that ended up being hurtful to them, they can make peace. We can only make peace with something that makes sense. Just saying you're *mochel* without the perpetrator admitting that he was completely wrong or at least explaining the basis of what he did is generally close to impossible.

How do we maintain peace with people whose *hashkafos* differ from our own? How do we protect our own boundaries while maintaining peace with people who are at odds with us?

You respect a person because he's a person, not because he thinks like you do. If there are differences in *hashkafah*, it's important to avoid giving the other person the feeling that you don't respect him.

Chazal say (*Sanhedrin* 38a), "Just as people don't look alike, they don't think alike." Rav Bunim Eiger (brother of Rav Akiva Eiger) explained that just as you're not angry at someone for not looking like you, so too you shouldn't be annoyed if someone doesn't think like you. (When it comes to halachic standards, people often don't even know what the *halachah* really is. They saw something in their parents' home and assume that it's *halachah*.) There's no reason why differences in *hashkafah* have to damage shalom.

The Mechilah Letter: How and Why

Although writing a *mechilah* letter is not halachically required, there are several great benefits to those who do so:

1. **The letter clearly and unambiguously articulates the writer's firm decision to forgive the wrong.** This provides effective *mechilah* for the recipient, which is not the case with vague statements such as "Don't worry about it," or "It's nothing." This clarity helps both parties to move forward.

2. **Writing a letter is a concrete action;** going through the steps of taking an action makes the forgiveness real in the writer's mind. Action possesses power that amorphous thoughts, feelings, and spoken words may lack.

3. **People's memories can play tricks on them,** especially when strong emotions are involved. If the aggrieved person becomes angry again at the same person, even a short time after offering verbal *mechilah*, he may delude himself into thinking that he never really forgave the wrongdoer. A letter reminds him that he did indeed give wholehearted forgiveness.

4. **When the statement of *mechilah* is in writing, the writer cannot later backtrack** on his forgiveness, implying that he never really intended to forgive.

5. If the *mechilah* pertains to a broken *shidduch* or business partnership, a letter of *mechilah* assures prospective partners that you are not the kind of a person who holds a grudge. In addition, without such a letter, they may stay away out of concern that they will be stepping into the middle of an active *machlokes*.

6. In the above situations, **the recipient of a *mechilah* letter can assure prospective partners that he/she was forgiven** by the other party. This means that there is no lingering, ongoing conflict to complicate or overshadow a new relationship.

Sample Mechilah Letter

Date

I (name of writer)_____ forgive _____ [and (parents' names where applicable)_____] for any sin he/ she/ [they] may have committed against me, whether physically or financially, and for gossiping against me or slandering me, or harming me, or causing me harm in any way. Not included in this *mechilah* is money that I wish to claim and that I have a right to by *halachah* and that I can recover in *beis din*. Also not included is if he/she/ they say[s], "I will sin against him and he will forgive me."

May it be Your Will, Hashem, that no person be punished because of me.

Signature
(Parents' Signature)

In a broken engagement or similar circumstance, it is worthwhile for the parents to sign as well. And in any such conflict, both sides should write a *mechilah* letter.

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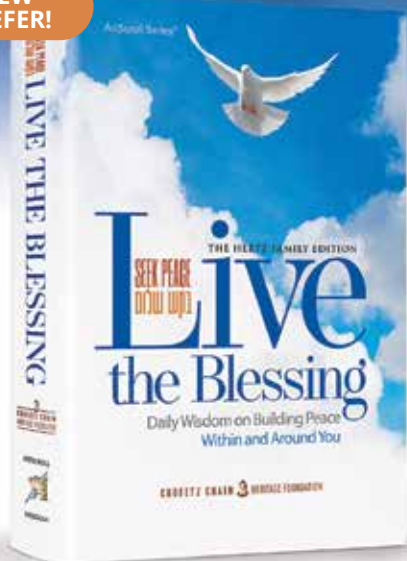
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