



Yom Kippur: Forgiving Others and Forgiving Ourselves

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One of the most challenging aspects of Yom Kippur is understanding and internalizing the obligation to grant forgiveness-- forgiving others, as well as forgiving ourselves.

A Talmudic tale recounts the story of Rabbi Eleazar ben Shimon who came upon an “exceedingly ugly man.” In disgust, the rabbi looked down upon the man and said to him, “Worthless one! How ugly you are.” Immediately recognizing his error, Rabbi Eleazar dropped to the ground and publicly begged the man for forgiveness. But the man could not find the will to forgive (Talmud Bavli Taanit 20a).

Without defending the behavior of Rabbi Eleazar, let us try to understand what could possibly have made the man appear ugly. As human beings, we are often unable to mask the intensity of our emotions and our thoughts. Our facial expressions and our manner are both influenced by our inner emotional state. Through this lens, perhaps it is possible that the man appeared ugly to Rabbi Eleazar because he was unable to rise above an insult. Maybe we can consider that the man appeared ugly because he harbored long standing resentments and held onto grudges.

Rabbi Eleazar looked down and saw a man who was contorted with anger, resentment, and hate. A person so tormented, that his physical appearance manifested his inner state. And so, to others, he appeared ugly, and his inability forgive visibly altered his demeanor.

Maimonides, in *Hilchot Tshuva* (the Laws of Repentance) 2:10 states, “...one must not show himself cruel by not accepting an apology; he should be easily pacified... when an offender asks his forgiveness, he should forgive wholeheartedly and with a willing spirit.”

On Yom Kippur, we are given the opportunity to find it within ourselves to let go of everything that creates ugliness. We have the opportunity to let go of the grudges that we hold and the stubborn pain that they cause. But even more significantly, Yom Kippur provides us with the opportunity to forgive ourselves. After all, we are our own worst critics. We set aspirational goals, which are difficult to quantify and achieve: we didn't lose enough weight, we didn't make enough money, we didn't work as hard as we should have.



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We all have flaws that we must atone for. But we should not interpret the elements of the Yom Kippur prayers, the *Al chayts* and the *vidui* confessions, as a reinforcement of our negative self perceptions. Rather, the intention is that as we say these prayers, we gently tap our hearts to awaken ourselves. We tap our hearts and then open our hands and let go. So this Yom Kippur, after you tap your heart, combat the ugliness and allow yourself forgiveness.

May this year be a year we are more easily able to forgive others and ourselves.

Shana Tova,

Rabba Sara Hurwitz



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.