

Preparation for S95 – The Path of Forgiveness

For many Jews, a crucial aspect of the ten-day period that begins with Rosh Hashanah (September 27 this year) and ends with Yom Kippur (October 8) is the process of T'shuvah, which means both "repentance" and "return to our highest selves." The High Holy Days, or Days of Awe, provide the opportunity for each individual, as well as the religious community as a whole, to become involved in introspection and transformation. Everyone is encouraged to closely examine the shortcomings in their lives and to develop ways to bring about changes in the coming year. It's a time of looking inward in order to move forward toward wholeness with less baggage from the past.

Forgiveness has been called the path back to the true self.

It is essential to the healing of old wounds and letting go of old wrongs. In forgiving others, we do not deny or condone the wrongdoing. Instead, we stop the flow of pain, reclaim hope, and commit ourselves to beginning anew. As Lewis Smedes has said, "When we forgive, we come as close as any human being can to the essentially divine act of creation."

Forgiveness begins primarily in our relationships with ourselves.

In the words of Rev. Barbara Wells of the Paint Branch UU Church: "All of us, if we can learn to accept our own limitations and 'fess up to our wrongs, can and will be forgiven. First, we must forgive ourselves. I know I was taught at an early age that if I made a mistake I was somehow flawed. As I grow and change, I am trying hard to see that mistakes are life's way of teaching us. If we can't let go of guilt and shame toward ourselves, then why should anyone else forgive us?" And if we can extend loving compassion to ourselves, we will naturally develop more compassionate relationships with others. This compassion frees us from hate and the desire to even the score, allows us to let go of shame or discomfort about the hurt, and enables us to recognize our capacity for healing.

We invite you to enter into the process of T'shuvah.

If you wish, use some or all of the following questions in your self-reflection. The questions may touch on painful issues and although it can be of great benefit to explore them, do so carefully and at your own pace. We also acknowledge that any preparation provided by the SGM Content Team is just one approach to a topic. You may prefer to take a different approach to forgiveness.

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1. Forgiveness means remembering that everyone sometimes makes bad choices.

Practice is needed if we judge and criticize others or ourselves.

Have you made bad choices in the last year? What have you done, or can you still do, to correct wrongs that may have resulted? Have others made bad choices that have affected you? Can you see a way to forgive them? How would you acknowledge that forgiveness?

2. Forgiveness means having the courage to face the truth.

Practice is needed if we are afraid to look at our mistakes.

In the past year, have you avoided dealing with problems or mistakes? What has been the result? Are there any problems or mistakes you wish to examine and work toward changing this year?

3. Forgiveness means honoring our feelings without taking revenge.

Practice is needed if we take revenge or hold a grudge.

In the past year have you held a grudge and been unable to forgive someone who has wronged you, or have you taken revenge? Has someone done this toward you? Is there a way to heal the wounds this year?

4. Forgiveness means not giving uncaring people opportunities to hurt us.

Practice is needed if we allow careless people to keep hurting us.

Do you need to set boundaries more firmly with certain individuals this year? What freedom would you achieve if you were able to do this? How could friends, family, or others help you do this?

5. Forgiveness means deciding to correct our mistakes instead of punishing ourselves.

Practice is needed if we feel hopeless and helpless over bad habits.

Are any “bad habits” affecting your quality of life right now? Do you punish yourself for these practices? Can you see a path to understanding and change in the next year? How could friends, family, or others help you?

Resources

- Much of this material is based on “Taking Spiritual Transformation Seriously,” by Rabbi Michael Lerner, TIKKUN Magazine, September/October 1997, previously adapted by our congregation for a worship service on forgiveness in 1997. For more information about TIKKUN, visit www.tikkun.org.
- We have also used material from The Virtues Guide: A Handbook for Parents Teaching Virtues, by Popov and Kavelin, arranged by Margaret Curry for our own R.E. program.
- The full text of the Rev. Barbara Wells’ sermon, quoted above, is available through the website of the Unitarian Universalists for Jewish Awareness (www.uuja.org). The sermon URL is www.uuja.org/holidays/sermons/sermon_roshhashana-pbuu.html. The sermon provides interesting background on the Days of Awe and why they may be relevant to Unitarians. The website has other sermons, essays, RE material, resources, and a bibliography.