

TRAUMA, HEALING, FORGIVENESS: A process for the Jewish New Year

Forgiveness is a complex story, central to the ritual process of Jewish New Year. It speaks of injury and repair and, for the purposes of this discussion, it is between 2 people which means that it involves:

- a. 2 sets of constitutional emotional givens and 2 sets of emotional resiliencies;
- b. 2 sets of awareness of other's feelings and 2 two sets of personal history,
- c. 2 sets of vulnerabilities; 2 sets of pride and shame; 2 sets of stories

In my view, forgiveness actually is the final step healing process that follows an emotional trauma.

Let's look at trauma

Why do I call hurt feelings a trauma? Being hit by a bus is a trauma.

Being blown up in Afghanistan is trauma. How could having feelings hurt be a trauma?

The issue of "what is a trauma," of course, depends on one's definition of trauma. My definition of trauma is a psychoanalytic definition. It defines trauma as an emotional experience that is precipitated by an event in one's world that sets off an overwhelming flood of feelings. It makes no difference if the precipitating event is physical, as in an accident, or emotional as in an insulting personal insensitivity or in a betrayal.

All people have been emotionally traumatized at some time. All people have experienced troubling situations that replay repeatedly in their heads. Actually, that's exactly what people who have been physically injured do in their dreams. Their brain replays the traumatic situation repeatedly in their dreams in a non-conscious effort to undo the trauma and make things come out better. People do

the same thing in daydreams when they replay a hurtful situation over and over. As in the night dream, the daytime repetition of the hurt is part of the healing process. It's an attempt, through thought, to redo the painful situation and make it come out right. The trouble is that when people repeatedly tell their woe to someone close, the listener might eventually lose patience and say, "Why can't you just let go of it. Move on!"

But people can't "just move on" because if the hurtful story is repeatedly told that means that the healing process is not yet complete. In fact, a hallmark of a traumatized state is the thinking and rethinking of the hurtful event. People can't yet get the hurt out of their minds. A person cannot "just move on," cannot forgive if the hurt hasn't healed because forgiveness is not simply an action. Forgiveness is the final step in the process of healing a trauma.

Healing a trauma

1. Apology

What is needed to heal fully? A group of 2nd century rabbis had an answer. They knew that real forgiveness required two things. One is an **acknowledgement** of the hurt by the hurtful person. The other is an **apology** to the injured person by the hurtful person. For that group of rabbis the only unforgiveable act was murder. Why is that? Because in murder the injured person no longer exists which makes direct apology impossible. By definition then, murder is an act that cannot engage the rabbi defined process of forgiveness.

2. The nature of our feeling lives

To understand how an apology aids in the repair of a hurt one must first know that all people live in sea of feelings. Life is about feelings. The way we experience ourselves is tied to what we feel. Our feelings are us, we are our

feelings. To paraphrase Descartes who said, "I think therefore I am," I would say, "I feel, therefore I am."

Perhaps the most central feeling all is a sense of self-esteem and self-worth.

As part of self-esteem and worth, we people need to know that they are loved, or at least cared about.

People also all need to feel recognized and known by others even if that affirmation is communicated only by a smile. People need an echo of who they are and of what they feel. That echo is like oxygen for one's emotional life. It's essential. It's sustaining.

The awareness of the need for one's affirmation, the need for an echo of one's existence, is found in a society's desire to punish someone severely. When a society decrees a severe punishment the offending person is placed in solitary confinement where no one is present to validate their existence. On an individual basis, when someone wants to punish an hurtful other they pretend to ignore the hurtful person.

What happens when feelings are hurt?

Emotional injuries are inflicted when what one values in oneself is insulted by another. These highly valued parts of oneself could be anything from a sense of joy over one's own beauty or of over beautiful taste, a sense of pride in one's being smart, or one's pride in being fair-minded, or one's pride in having integrity. These are but a few of the many personal attributes for which people want to be admired and validated. When these aspects of one's self have been insulted people feel deeply negated. A different, but often devastating, hurt occurs when trust has been betrayed. When that happens one's sense of certainty in the predictable order of things is assaulted which leaves people with a sense that the emotional safety once taken for granted has been profoundly attacked.

The core experience of any of these hurts is that people have been treated as though their feeling lives don't matter. That negation of such an essential part of people is what lies at the heart of an emotional hurt.

Evidence of this exists when someone who has been hurt says, "You treat me as though I don't exist." If they don't say it they probably think it, as in "What am I, chopped liver? She treats me as though I don't exist."

The healing effect of an apology

What does an apology, offered from a place of understanding and remorse, do for the healing process? A real apology is an **open**, direct acknowledgement that "I hurt your feelings. I'm sorry." There is no defensiveness, no "Yes I did that - but..." Defensiveness has no place in a heartfelt apology. Defensiveness is an act that benefits the so-called "apologizer." It undoes the existence-affirming echo that is essential for repair. If the hurt was inadvertent, in apologizing one might say, "I know I hurt your feelings but it's not clear to me exactly what I did. I want to understand. Could you please help me?" here is no "yes, - but..." There is no defensiveness.

The honest question, "Please tell me how I hurt you" is itself an affirming echo of the hurt and of the previously negated validity of the injured person's experience. The question acknowledges to the hurt person the reality of the insult, their pain, and the reality of that hurtful moment.

Forgiveness, the last step in the healing process

The process of forgiveness begins with the hurtful person finding the courage, and the love, to make a sincere, affirming apology. While it's hard to admit one's imperfection, the admission of one's fallibility in the hurtful situation promotes healing and enables repair of the injured person and of the damaged relationship. The point is that the eventual ability to forgive comes as an outgrowth of repair.

One last word about people who tend to be hurtful. Usually people tend to support the person who got hurt and the person who did the hurting tends to get demonized. In my experience though, the serially hurtful person is also a hurting person. His or her rage, envy, or insults come from a broken, vulnerable place within them - although they don't usually realize that. Somewhere in that person's life an important person did not affirm his or her value, smarts, integrity, beauty or simply his or her existence.