

**The Gift of Forgiveness**  
**September 25th, 2020 ~ Shabbat Shuva 5781**  
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True to my millennial status, I am a huge fan of the TV show Friends. I fall asleep to it playing every night, and have attended many a Friends trivia night before the pandemic. There are some who say that the reason 2020 has been such a disaster is because January 1st is when Friends was taken off Netflix, but I won't go that far.

In one particular episode in the later part of the show (spoiler alert) Joey and Rachel begin dating, even though Ross and Rachel have been on and off for years. Here's how Ross reacts:

(Play 1:30-2:34)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06PJ-V0QAJE&list=RD3BtFB5kAjCQ&index=2>

Ross is not fooling anyone with his words because his tone is so clearly one of panic. My brother and I (he is an avid fan as well) have developed a shorthand based on this. If I ask him how he is and he says "I'm fine", I'll say "Ross fine or actually fine?" It's our way of asking each other- are you just saying the word and pretending or is everything actually okay?

We are all guilty of saying the "right thing", or whatever we think others want to hear, even if we don't mean it, especially when it comes to apologies and forgiveness. It's easy to fake an apology, to say we're sorry to someone when we know we *should* but we don't really mean it, and it's certainly easier to say that we forgive someone when we don't really feel forgiving. We *want* the words to be true, so we say them in the hopes that we will fool the other person, and mostly in the hopes that we'll fool ourselves. Our tradition warns us against this; we are told not to say what we don't mean- and I quote from Numbers 30: כְּכַל־הַיְצֵא מִפִּי יַעֲשֶׂה - we should carry out all that has crossed our lips.

We teach that these High Holidays are both a celebration of the New Year and a chance to review what we've done wrong, to apologize to those we've hurt, and to try to do better in the coming year. We are taught to say the words, "I'm sorry" and to respond to another's apology with "That's okay, don't worry about it."

The problem is that when we mechanically let these words spill out of our mouths, we don't actually look inside ourselves to make sure that it truly *is* okay, that the other person *shouldn't* worry about it. We often have the *words* of forgiveness, but we don't

always do the *work* of forgiveness. Having this inauthentic conversation--rushing into offering or accepting forgiveness, or acting a part that we feel we are supposed to play, whether of the forgiver or the apologizer--can be like putting a bandaid on a bullet wound. We are still hurt, still reeling from the incident, from whatever hurt has accumulated to cause a rift or a rupture in a relationship--but we have not worked through it fully, in order to let it go for real, to forgive the other, and, as is often the case, to forgive ourselves.

Over the summer I read a book that changed the way I think about forgiveness. Katherine Schwartzeneger Pratt's book *The Gift of Forgiveness* collects the experiences of 22 people from around the world who have, to quote straight from the book cover, "overcome the unforgivable." Every single story highlights a different way in which true forgiveness can change someone's life. I was astonished at all the different ways in which people went about forgiving in the aftermath of tragic circumstances, when it might seem that forgiveness under such conditions would be an unattainable goal. I'd like to share a story from the book surrounding an incident that was discussed in the national news, so it likely won't be news to you; however, it does involve sexual abuse, and is a story that is difficult to hear.

Sarah Klein grew up in Lansing, Michigan as an aspiring gymnast, beginning her training at just 5 years old. When she was eight, a man named Larry Nassar joined the staff at the gym as a doctor. He set up a treatment room in the back of the gym and would treat Sarah and the rest of the gymnasts there. Larry was a calm, kind, goofy presence who seemed to truly care for the girls. Sarah continued to grow up in the competitive gymnastics system and would go to Larry for any and every illness or ailment she had. She would later describe what she experienced in that backroom as sexual molestation. During his "treatments" she never thought of it that way because it had become so normalized. Even throughout her early adulthood they maintained a close relationship. Sarah saw Larry for the last time when she was 25 and finally admitted that there was something off in their relationship.

In the years following she suffered from tremendous pain, anxiety and depression. She was diagnosed with endometriosis, which is often linked with early childhood trauma, especially sexual abuse. Yet it wasn't until 2016, when another former gymnast came forward with allegations of sexual abuse charges against Nassar, that she was able fully to come to terms with what had happened. She had loved him and looked up to him for most of her life; Nassar was even at her wedding. It was difficult to accept that someone who loved her, and whom she loved, would also have destroyed so many lives, hers included.

Today, she reflects that giving her statement at Nassar's criminal sentencing hearing in 2018 was a turning point for her. Being able to stand up in front of a courtroom, and especially in front of Nassar himself, allowed her to release the anger and shame that she had been holding. Once she shared her story out loud, she was able to let go and move forward with her adult life. Just by sharing it with the public, she was able to acknowledge to herself that she had forgiven him.

However, her journey is far from over. She says, "I can appear put together but it's still a process. A process that requires nurturing everyday." Her journey to forgiveness has brought her to seek out justice for other survivors of sexual abuse; she is now a lawyer who exclusively represents survivors of sexual abuse.

Sarah's story of forgiveness is a journey, and boy do we Jews know from journeys. The Israelites traveled through hurt and trauma and forgiveness when they were slaves in Egypt and wanderers in the wilderness. And even once the Israelites made it to the Promised Land after 40 years in the desert, it wasn't smooth sailing. Reaching the destination doesn't mean that the journey is over.

On this Shabbat Shuva, we have reached the end of a year, and are embarking on a new one. Just as one year ends, another begins. Just as on Simchat Torah we read the end of the Torah immediately followed by the beginning, we know that our journeys will continue. We will continue to make mistakes and ask for forgiveness, and we will continue on our journeys to forgive those who have wronged us.

Just like we should think twice before offering Ross' "I'm fine" when we're not fine, we should also regard our process of forgiveness with the same authenticity. Being perfunctory about this process doesn't serve us or the people in our lives. I challenge us in 5781 to strive to forgive those people in our lives who have hurt us--perhaps, even, we may think, unforgivably --We can all work on our forgiveness as a process, as work, work that often takes a long time. It may not require continuing to be in a relationship with the people who have injured us, although it *does* mean relieving ourselves of the weight that we carry when we hold on to our anger. We have learned that this process might take many years, but once we do it, we will free up the anger and resentment that has been living inside of us.

I want to close with a poem by Rabbi Karyn Kedar, called "Forgiveness":

Forgiveness is a process, a path without an end,

a bridge that leads to restoration  
of what you have lost.

It is a shift of perspective,  
a way of being.

Forgiveness is what you do to your soul when you  
choose to live in light rather than in darkness.

G'mar Chatima Tova and Shabbat Shalom.