

Yom Kippur Reflections 2011: Generational Forgiveness
October 7, 2011

The last time I shared High Holiday reflections at Kahal B'raira was 2006. My family looked starkly different then than it does now. Then I was not a parent and I had a parent. In 2007, I had a daughter. And in 2010, my mother died. As I reflect on Yom Kippur this year, I approach the holiday from a new perspective. When I think about forgiving others, forgiving myself, and ways I want to improve, becoming a parent and caring for an aging parent who died put a new spin on Yom Kippur.

Most of us have, are, or will struggle with the difficulties of having aging parents. Also, many of us have grappled with ambivalent feelings, at times, about the job our parents did raising us. The judgment of our parents starts as teenagers, but sometimes lingers into adulthood. As we see parents of friends, we may wish our own parents had some of their qualities. If we become parents, we remember the behavior our parents modeled that we wish to emulate and that we choose to discard. As we grow and learn about life and ourselves, we can see our parents' flaws. These revelations can lead to feelings of anger and resentment.

It's like the joke...

There were 3 older women sitting around talking in Florida. They were each bragging about how much their sons love them.

The first one says, my son, he loves me so much, he took my whole family on a cruise for my 80th birthday and everybody came—my son, my daughter and their kids & he paid for the whole thing.

The second woman says—oy. that's nothing-- my son loves me so much he bought me a house in Florida so I would have a nice place to live and he and his family would have a place to stay whenever they visit me.

And the third woman says—that's nothing. My son loves me so much--he sees an analyst 3 times/wk and pays \$150/hr. And what do you think they talk about----me.

So whether or not we choose therapy to examine our childhood, how do we reconcile feelings of anger and blame with forgiveness? Do we need to let go of all the things we wish our parents would have done differently in place of gratitude while our parents are alive? People say they want to resolve conflicts while people are alive, so they don't carry these negative feelings after someone has died.

I certainly had my share of “corrective parenting,” a list of things I wish my mom had done differently. But when she was sick, none of that mattered. My job as a daughter was clear, and with an open heart, I did everything I could to make her life more comfortable. In fact, it wasn’t until after my mom died that I realized some of the great sacrifices she made in her life for her children. Looking through her files in cleaning out her house, I discovered things I didn’t know that demonstrated all the ways she put her kids first, financially and emotionally.

So I was left with the question. Was it ok that I didn’t resolve all the issues I had with my mom before she died? Can I appreciate all that she did for me and let go, forgive her, for the things she could have done better? At some point, as my mom was aging, I realized that there was no purpose in bringing up with her all of the perceived transgressions I thought she had made years earlier. It would only hurt her feelings and true mutual resolution seemed unlikely at that point. So I needed to understand how her behavior had affected me and resolve my feelings on my own.

As Oscar Wilde said,
“Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them.”

So how do we resolve these feelings and forgive our parents for their mistakes? Is confrontation critical to forgiveness or this Yom Kippur, can we let go of any lingering anger, resentment, or blame we carry and forgive our parents, whether they are living or have died?

And then there's the part of Yom Kippur that changes when we become a parent.

As a parent, forgiveness is a running theme. First, there's the issue of forgiving our kids, and second, the harder challenge of forgiving ourselves for our mistakes.

When I told a friend I was planning to speak on forgiveness and parenting, he assumed I meant that I would talk about forgiving children. But I was more focused on issues around forgiving oneself for parenting errors.

Then I found this quote about forgiving children that made me realize why I didn't think about the need to forgive my daughter. It's not that she's perfect and never does anything that requires forgiveness.

This quote is by Rob McGinley Myers. He's the Associate Producer of a radio show called "On Being." They produced a show called "[Getting Revenge and Forgiveness.](#)" He writes about how easy is it to forgive our children:

"I forgive my seven-year-old son every day. ... Because he's an active, inquisitive seven-year-old who sometimes accidentally elbows me in the mouth when we're cuddling and sometimes puts Crayons on the walls. And yet it seems demeaning to call it forgiveness. ... It's just what you do with your children. You know, you accept their limitations and you move on."

And, as a parent, it's true. I forgive my daughter everyday, several times a day—for waking me up early, for overreacting because she wanted the blue coat and not the red coat, for interrupting, for whining—but I don't think of it as forgiveness. And, whether you are a parent or not, we all have these special relationships where you are so close to someone, be it your best friend, spouse, or sibling—that we forgive them every day for little things or big things without even thinking about it as forgiveness. It's just part of relating to someone on an intimate level.

However, as a parent, as a partner or a friend, forgiving oneself can be the challenge. If we thought the guilt our parents could inflict on us was bad, the guilt we heap upon ourselves for not being perfect can be even more powerful.

Even though my daughter is only four, I can already feel the things I wish I would have done differently or the things I will inevitably screw up. Am I too lenient? Too strict? Does my patience run short too often? Do I show frustration when she asks 'why' the umpteenth time, even though I think it's great she's so curious? Do I spend enough time with her? How will my decisions and my parenting ultimately affect my daughter?

I can imagine her turning into a teenager and then an adult who realizes all the ways I was inadequate as a parent.

In my case, my daughter doesn't have a father. In fact, she has very little blood family—no grandparents, no siblings, no cousins. I worry about this teeny tiny family for her and how it will affect her when she's older. But these are NOT things I can change. So, this Yom Kippur, I will examine my parenting more closely. What are the things I want to change, to improve and **can**?

What are all the things you wish you had done differently in your close relationships? Take a minute and think about it.

Are you able to forgive yourself for the things you cannot change at this point? Can you focus on all the positive things you've done? And look to the future to change anything that you can?

A couple months ago, my daughter bit me, and it hurt. She's really too old for that, and when I expressed my displeasure, she apologized. Then she got very upset when I didn't say "That's okay." I realized that's how they taught the kids to communicate in her pre-school. It got me thinking about forgiveness. Should we say "That's okay" every time someone apologizes? Or are there some things that aren't okay?

And what's the difference between saying "That's okay" and actually forgiving someone? I've seen my daughter use the "That's okay" line repeatedly. When someone, even me, does something that needs an apology, she always says "that's okay" after the person says "sorry." When she says it to me, I really get the feeling that she forgives me. I know it's just words, but the act of apologizing and being forgiven feels like a healthy way of dealing with hurt. Perhaps, as adults, we need a little more "that's okay" when someone shows remorse rather than lingering anger and holding a grudge.

I know that I hold my friends to a very high standard and remember their errors long after they've past and the person has apologized.

They do say "everything you need to know, you learn in kindergarten."

Rob McGinley Myers further writes: "As a father of two toddlers, the thing that amazes me is not how easily parents forgive their children, but how easily children forgive their parents. Every parent I know has had moments of utter exasperation and impatience with their kids that they later regretted. But when our children are little, they have an extraordinary capacity to forgive our mistakes. ...it seems that, though our children will forget it by adolescence, they are apparently born knowing the secret of forgiveness."

Robyn Sarah wrote a poem about children forgiving their parents called **Nursery, 11:00 p.m.** It goes like this:

Asleep, the two of you,
daughter and son, in separate cribs,
what does it matter to you
that I stand watching you now,
I, the mother who did not smile all day,
who yelled, Go away, get out, leave me alone
when the soup-pot tipped over on the stove,
the mother who burned the muffins
and hustled bedtime, tight-lipped.
You are far away,
beyond reach of whispered
amends. Yet your calm
breathing seems to forgive,
unwinding
into the air to mesh
like lace, knitting together
the holes in the dark.
It makes of this dark
one whole covering
to shawl around me.
How warm it is, I think,
how much softer
than my deserving.

So can we forgive ourselves just as easily as our young children can? Are we able to let go of things we have no control over or cannot change? Can we take an inventory of the ways we can improve, as a parent, a daughter, a son, a friend, a sibling, a partner and take action on those things?

Can we forgive our parents if we need to? Instead of carrying anger, can we remember that they, like us, are flawed? And can we move past blame and see that our strength lies in those closest to us?

In the wise words of our beloved Rabbi Sherwin Wine, a song my mother and I often sang together:

AYFO OREE? OREE BEE
AYFO TIKVATEE? TIKVATEE BEE
AYFO KOKHEE? KOKHEE BEE
V'GAM BAKH

Where is my light? My light is in me.
Where is my hope? My hope is in me.
Where is my strength? My strength is in me. And in you.

This Yom Kippur, I hope you'll pledge with me to focus on the things you want to change and can, forgive yourself for the things you can't change, and when someone says they're sorry, think about saying "That's okay," and mean it.