

Asking For Forgiveness
By Rabbi Michael Lotker

If you've been to any Yom Kippur service, you heard the words over and over again. The words are from the Mishnah, the core of our sacred Talmud. "For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones; but for transgressions of one human being against another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another." In this way, we are taught that God can (and we believe does) forgive sins against God (such as ritual violations) when sincerely asked on Yom Kippur. But it is stressed that even God cannot forgive sins or offences of one person against another until the offender has sincerely asked for forgiveness, made all possible attempts to right the wrong, and then actually received forgiveness. Thus certain sins are, by definition, unforgivable (such as murder), and many, many others are never forgiven by God since we never made the effort to ask forgiveness from the person we offended.

Here, it's important that Judaism doesn't consider sin to be a state of being. Unlike other religions, we don't believe that you live or die in a "state of sin" and then are automatically punished accordingly. For Judaism, a sin is something that you've done (one Hebrew word for sin is "*chet*," coming from archery it means "to miss the mark"); now the question is, can you and do you erase it off "your books." We each die with many sins and good deeds to our credit and Judaism teaches that God is both just and merciful and will tilt the scales in our favor in our final judgment.

Back to Yom Kippur and these days leading up to Yom Kippur. I think that asking for forgiveness is the most difficult thing that Judaism demands of us and therefore may be the most important. First it places you (the asker) in a perilous position. You may have assumed that what you did wasn't so bad in the first place ("everybody make cracks like that") or, even more hopefully that your spouse, parent, child, sibling or friend may not have even noticed the offence and even if they did, they have surely forgotten it by now. Why dredge up old stuff anyway? Perhaps scariest of all is that moment of emotional free-fall between the asking for forgiveness and receiving it.

Let me make this even more difficult. A blanket request ("honey, if there's anything I've done in the past year to hurt your feelings, please forgive me") is not sufficient. You've got to remember and name the sin or at least an example of it ("remember the time you had your heart set on a romantic anniversary and I thought a night with lots of friends would have been much more fun? – I'm sorry that I didn't listen to you more carefully!"). This specificity is especially difficult with one's children. But as difficult as the task is the power of the healing that results. I have seen this in my own life and in the lives of people around me. If you want to take this a level deeper, in asking for forgiveness, go on and ask what you can do to right the wrong. And do it this year; who can assure you that you will have the ability and opportunity to ask next Yom Kippur.

I know this is scary but I invite you to try it. I'm always intrigued by people who tell me that they get so little out of Judaism when I strongly suspect that they don't really try to

put some of our most important teachings to the test. And remember, if you are sincerely asked for forgiveness, you are required by our tradition to grant it.

If you truly want to grow spiritually during this sacred season, put in the work before another Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur slip away.