In keeping with recent research-based insights about the multiple benefits of incorporating religious values in our lives, a number of up-to-date studies have documented the benefits of granting forgiveness. These studies have found that individuals who hold on to anger at others — friends, family, and associates — and repeatedly mull over perceived slights at the hands of others are at greater risk for depression, health difficulties, and even premature death. In addition to the biblically derived prohibition against bearing grudges, when an individual’s thinking and emotional life includes sustaining feelings of resentment or a repetitive reliving of hurtful experiences, they are liable to feel a loss of control over their lives. Such individuals are more likely to have higher pulse rates and blood pressure than individuals who are able to let go of their anger.

Jewish Perspectives

INSIGHTS FROM JEWISH LAW

Perhaps the greatest difference between the Jewish perspective of forgiveness and the attitude that dominates much of the Western world is whether there is an obligation to forgive. In contrast to the view that encourages “turning the other cheek” (i.e., granting forgiveness even when the offending party makes no efforts to seek exoneration), Jewish law is clear on the obligation of the offending party to actively seek forgiveness.

The Talmud states:

Even though the offender pays him compensation, the offense is not forgiven until he asks him for forgiveness.\(^2\)

Rambam (Maimonides) expounds on this obligation:

Repentance and Yom Kippur only grant forgiveness for sins that occur between man and God, such as one who eats prohibited food or engages in promiscuous activity. However, sins that take place between one man and another, such as one who assaults, curses, or steals from his friend, are not forgiven until he pays his friend what he owes and also appeases him. Even if he pays the money that is owed for the damages he causes, he still is obligated to appease him and seek his forgiveness. This holds true even if the damages were only caused by words; he still must appease his friend and entreat him until forgiven. If his friend does not want to grant forgiveness, he should bring a group of three of his friends and entreat him and ask for forgiveness in their presence. If that doesn’t work, the process should be repeated a second and third time. At

\(^2\) Bava Kamma 92a.
that point, if forgiveness is not granted it is the offended party who is considered the sinner.\(^3\)

The language of the Sages, as summarized by the Rambam, in discussing the obligation of the offender regarding the process of seeking forgiveness is instructive. The two words that are used in describing this process are “ritzui” and “piyus.” The word “piyus,” appeasement, relates to the *emotional* realm. Placating and soothing the wronged party’s hurt feelings is an essential component of the process of seeking forgiveness. On the other hand, *ritzui* describes appeasement, pardon in the *cognitive* realm as opposed to the emotional one. It is an attempt to change the victim’s attitude by altering his perspective. If an apology is sincere, the process of *ritzui* should lead to reconsideration by the wronged party of the way he views the event. Our Sages therefore describe a process of reconciliation that paves the way to both a cognitive as well as an affective process of forgiveness.

The Rambam explains the obligation to forgive in a more detailed manner:

*The harmed party is not allowed to be cruel and deny forgiveness. This is not the way of the people of Israel. Rather, once the offender pleads for forgiveness several times, and it is known that he has repented regarding his sin and reconsidered his evil ways, forgiveness should be granted. Anybody who is quick to forgive is praiseworthy, and our Sages are pleased with such behavior.\(^4\)*

The responsibility to forgive when the offending party makes sincere efforts to request forgiveness is related to the Torah’s mandate not to harbor ongoing resentment toward others. The Torah commands us not to hate others in our heart, nor is one allowed to take revenge or bear a grudge:

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You shall not hate your brother in your heart... You shall not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, (but) you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am Hashem.  

Rashi explains the difference between revenge and harboring a grudge by giving the example of someone who refuses to lend his sickle to his neighbor. The next day, the person who refused his neighbor the sickle asks to borrow his neighbor’s ax. Refusal to lend the ax because of harboring resentment at his neighbor’s refusal to lend his possession is a violation of the Torah commandment against taking revenge. Lending the ax, accompanied by the comment, “I am not like you who refused to lend me your sickle,” is a violation of the commandment not to harbor a grudge.

The Sefer HaChinuch points out that this prohibition against bearing a grudge refers to an emotional process of feeling resentment in one’s heart, even when not accompanied by expressing these feelings in words or action.

**INSIGHTS FROM THE WORD “MECHILAH”:**

Valuable insights into the psychological process involved in granting forgiveness are hinted at in the multiple meanings of the Hebrew word for forgiveness: mechilah. The word can be viewed as related to machol, or circle/dance, and it also can be related to the Hebrew word for tunnel.

**THE CIRCLE OF FORGIVENESS:**
**FROM BLAME TO CONTRIBUTION**

While according to the strict rules of Hebrew grammar the word machol, circle, is not linked to the word mechilah, Rabbi David Kimchi, the Radak, makes this association on the following passage:

You have changed for me my lament into dancing... and girded me with happiness.⁶

While the Metzudos and Targum on this passage translate machol as related to the circle of dancing, the Radak ties the word to mechilah, forgiveness:

I was mourning over the specter of my soul perishing because of my sins, but you gladdened me by the prophet Nathan with good tidings: “Hashem has also forgiven your sin, you shall not die” (II Samuel 12:13). Accordingly, our verse should be rendered: “You have changed my lament to forgiveness.”⁷

What is the connection between machol, a circle formed in dance, and the word mechilah, forgiveness? When one remains angry at a member of their family or community, they are taking themselves out of the circle of belonging and continuity. They experience the sadness of not feeling fully connected to their circle of family and friends. A circle symbolizes belonging, connection, and equality. In the Talmud, our Rabbis tell us⁸ that in the World to Come the righteous will form a circle and dance around God, Who will be in the center of the circle. Unlike a line where there is an inherent lack of equality— defined by a beginning, an end, and points in between — in a machol everybody is equidistant from their peers while dancing, forming a circle that has focus and surrounds a common purpose and central point.

We see this phenomenon as well on the holiday of Succos when during the Hoshana service we surround the Torah that is carried in the center of the circle, and similarly at a wedding where we dance around the chassan or kallah. In both

⁶. Psalms 30:12.
⁸. Taanis 31a.
cases, the circle symbolizes two powerful forces associated with belonging and happiness: equality and connection to meaning and sublime purpose.

When we grant others mechilah we join them in a “dance” of reconnection and reconciliation. Arguments can never be resolved when the wronged party remains stuck in an alienated morass of anger and accusation. Conflict resolution is not about the straight line of certainty and unilateral blame. In fact, the offended party almost always makes some contribution to the conflict. When one’s mindset shifts from blame to relative contribution, the process of healing and reconnection follows. When one stops standing in the lonely, disconnected space outside of the circle and joins in the dance of reciprocity, all of the positive benefits of uniting with others will inevitably follow. When forgiveness is granted, when we rejoin the circle in a manner that lets go of ill feelings, we experience the happiness and sense of meaning that inevitably accompanies healing reconciliation and reconnection.

Insights from the Baalei Mussar

Humility is a character trait which is a prerequisite for the process of asking for forgiveness. The Rambam teaches us:

There are traits regarding which it is prohibited to strike a middle path. Rather one should avoid these traits to the extreme. One of these traits is haughtiness. It is not enough to be humble; rather one should be extremely humble. That is why it is written regarding Moshe, our teacher, “he was extremely humble,” not just “humble.”

Therefore, our Rabbis taught us “be extremely humble,”

and they also taught us that anybody who is conceited is denying an essential aspect of our faith.

This is also the case with anger, which is a terrible trait. It is fitting that a person should avoid this trait to the extreme and teach himself not to become angry — even for a worthy reason. If he wants to instill fear in his children and household members, he should feign anger, but internally be calm.¹⁰

When the Torah speaks of the second plague in Egypt, the plague of frogs, the verse uses the singular:

*And the frog came up [from the Nile].*¹¹

Certainly there was a multitude of frogs, not just a single one! The Talmud in *Sanhedrin* interprets this event as follows:

*Rabbi Akiva says that there was one frog, but [the Egyptians] kept hitting it in anger. Consequently, hundreds more came forth that they also hit, thereby producing thousands more.*¹²

A great Mussar master used this midrashic interpretation as an example of the negative power of the emotion of anger. When the first frog appeared and an Egyptian annoyed by its croaking hit it with a stick, he saw that this merely brought forth many more frogs. Then, as the others appeared, he continued to smite them which in turn caused many more frogs to come forth. So why does he continue to hit them? Doesn’t he know full well that this will exacerbate rather than solve the problem? The answer obviously is that this was done in anger, and when a person is overtaken or possessed by anger logic and reason disappears. This insight helps us more fully appreciate why the Rambam lists anger as the gravest of all negative traits.

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¹¹. Exodus 8:2.
¹². *Sanhedrin* 67b.