



PARDON ME? PERSONAL MECHILAH AS A TOOL FOR PERSONAL GROWTH

Mechilah (forgiveness) is more than a temporary reprieve to spare the sinner of punishment. It can also be a powerful psychological tool to end the cycle of self-doubt, anxiety, and sadness that we often face when confronting our flawed past.

In the weeks approaching the Yomim Noraim, we often think about *mechilah* as something we seek from others. As Chazal teach us, teshuvah cannot grant us atonement for wrongs committed against others until we first make amends and seek *mechilah* from them (See Mishna, *Yoma* 8:9 and Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 2:9). So it has become commonplace in our communities to ask for *mechilah* from our family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. *Mechilah* is the tool we use to repair our spiritual relationships with others.

But what about our relationship with ourselves? When it comes to our

personal shortcomings throughout the last year — the goals we set but didn't meet, the bad habits we promised to end but didn't — we need *mechilah* from ourselves too. Without the ability to forgive ourselves, we remain psychologically stuck, unable to move forward on a growth-oriented trajectory. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks (Sacks, 2012, 15:55) put it:

... if there was no forgiveness, we would always be slaves to the past, we would never be able to wipe the slate clean, every sin we committed would be an indelible stain, we would be imprisoned in our past. Because there is forgiveness the slate can be wiped clean. We can begin again and write a new and different story in our lives.

Mechilah is more than a surface-level forgiveness. In describing the process of seeking *mechilah* from others, the Rambam's language is instructive:

אָבֵל עֲבֵרוֹת שְׂבִיבֵי אָדָם לְחַבְרוֹ כְּגוֹן הַחֹבֵל אֶת חַבְרוֹ אוֹ הַמְקַלֵּל חַבְרוֹ אוֹ גִזְלוֹ וְכִיוּצָא בְהֵן אֵינּוּ

נִמְחָל לוֹ לְעוֹלָם עַד שֶׁיִּתֵּן לְחַבְרוֹ מֵה שֶׁהוּא חָיֵב לוֹ וְיִרְצֶהוּ. אִף עַל פִּי שֶׁהִחְזִיר לוֹ מִמוֹן שֶׁהוּא חָיֵב לוֹ צָרִיךְ לְרַצּוֹתוֹ וְלִשְׁאֵל מִמֶּנּוּ שֶׁיִּמְחַל לוֹ.

But sins between man and man, for instance, one injures his neighbor, or curses his neighbor or plunders him, or offends him in like matters, is ever not absolved unless he makes restitution of what he owes and begs the forgiveness of his neighbor. And, although he makes restitution of the monetary debt, he is obliged to pacify him and to beg his forgiveness.

Rambam, Hilkhot Teshuva 2:9

It's insufficient to merely repay the person for the damage we caused. Making them whole is only the first step. *Vi-ratzaihu* means we have to assuage him. It implies comity and social harmony. We must do whatever we can to renew the sense of friendliness or congeniality that our sin severed. *Teshuvah* demands that we address the emotional aspect of sin.

Self-forgiveness demands no less.

Personal *mechilah* sets the stage for a new beginning. It offers a chance to truly and completely forgive ourselves, freeing us from the shackles of the past, and allowing us to begin the hard work of true, lasting, personal growth. Psychologist and Holocaust survivor Edith Eger says about her clinical work with patients, “I can’t heal you — or anyone — but I can celebrate your choice to dismantle the prison in your mind, brick by brick. You can’t change what happened, you can’t change what you did or what was done to you. But you can choose how you live now. My precious, you can choose to be free.” (Eger, 2017, p. 486-487).

One question we can ask ourselves is, How do we dismantle the prison of our minds not to be a slave of the past?

When these unhelpful cognitions of self-doubt and self-deprecation begin to reinforce our negative beliefs about ourselves and others, it becomes difficult to engage in accurate self-reflection, further limiting our ability to develop healthy relationships with ourselves, others, and Hashem.

The Yamim Nora'im call upon us to be active participants in self-forgiveness. Personal *mechilah* provides a mechanism to identify how our conscious negative thoughts about ourselves adversely impact our perception of life, both in the present and the future consistent, with teachings in cognitive behavioral therapy (Beck, 1976). According to rational emotive behavior therapy, negative thought patterns lead to negative associations, further causing us to have a critical attitude towards ourselves and others (Ellis, 2005). This cycle of reinforcing negative patterns similarly impedes opportunities to fully engage in healthy constructive *teshuvah*.

Only when we psychologically give ourselves the gift of *mechilah* — a free

pass, so to speak — true *teshuvah* can begin.

Personal *mechilah* starts with self-compassion. Many who struggle with excessive negative thinking have difficulty speaking about themselves compassionately. According to Rav Nachman of Breslov, self-compassion is a religious imperative.

וְכִן צָרִיף הָאָדָם לְמַצָּא גַם בְּעֲצָמוֹ. כִּי זֶה יְדוּעַ,
שֶׁצָּרִיף הָאָדָם לְזָהָר מְאֹד לְהִיּוֹת בְּשִׂמְחָה תָּמִיד,
וּלְהִרְחִיק הָעֲצָבוֹת מֵאֵד מְאֹד.

Likewise, a person must find [some good point] within himself. It is known that a person must take care to always be happy and to keep very far away from depression.

Likutei Moharan 282:2

Practicing self-compassion, allowing ourselves to see the good in ourselves, makes us more empathetic to others.

זֶה בְּחִינַת (תהילים ל"ז): וְעוֹד מַעֲט וְאִין רָשָׁע
וְהַתְּבוּנָה עַל מְקוֹמוֹ וְאִינְנוּ; הִנּוּ שֶׁהַפְּסוּק מְזַהֵר
לְדוֹן אֵת הַכֹּל לְכַף זְכוּת, וְאִינְנוּ שֶׁאֵתָּה רוֹאֶה
שֶׁהוּא רָשָׁע גְּמוּרָה, אִינְנוּ שֶׁצָּרִיף אֵתָּה לְחַפֵּשׁ
וּלְבַקֵּשׁ לְמַצָּא בּוֹ מַעֲט טוֹב, שֶׁשֶּׁם אִינּוּ רָשָׁע

This is the aspect of “[i]n yet a little bit the wicked man is not; you will reflect upon his place and he will not be there” (Psalms 37:10). That is, Scripture warns to judge everyone favorably. Even if you see that he is completely wicked, you must search and seek the little bit of good in him, wherein he is not wicked. We cannot forgive others until we first forgive ourselves.

How can we go about this healing process? What do we do after weathering the storm of a past year — personal failures, psychological and physical illnesses, separations and divorces, breakups and broken engagements, infertility and pregnancy losses, unpredictable financial and emotional upheavals, or simply feeling unfulfilled? The first step is asking ourselves for *mechilah*. The simple act of requesting *mechilah* from ourselves is a powerful statement of our belief in the ability to change.

The Torah’s approach to *teshuvah* reflects the scientific belief in neuroplasticity, that we are always capable of change — deep, profound, long-lasting change (Mateos-Aparicio & Rodríguez-Moreno, 2019). Through hardship, we build resilience. Post-traumatic growth is possible after a crisis. But it is only possible when we give ourselves permission through personal *mechilah*, when we stop ruminating about our own faults and judge ourselves with the same compassion with which we are taught to judge others. Just as we are only entitled to atonement for sins committed against others after we first seek out their forgiveness, so too we cannot expect God to wipe our slates clean until we’ve sought — and granted — forgiveness from ourselves.

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