

# Yizkor: Is There a Right Time to Ask for Forgiveness?

Category: Holidays, Yom Kippur

*Forgiveness in Jewish tradition — each night, each week, and each year.*

## The Power of Forgiveness

On the eve of Yom Kippur, it's tradition to ask for forgiveness. People call friends before the holiday, apologize for any hurt, and wish each other a good, sweet year.

This custom comes from a teaching in the Mishnah (Yoma 85b), which says that Yom Kippur can atone for sins between us and G-d, but when it comes to things between us and other people, Yom Kippur doesn't help until we make things right with them. So, when you come to shul on Yom Kippur asking G-d for forgiveness, He's ready to forgive you for anything between you and Him. But if you hurt or embarrassed someone, you've got to ask them directly for forgiveness. You can say "Ashamnu" and "Al Cheit" as many times as you want, but the only thing that will actually help in this case is a genuine apology to the person.

The Rebbe explains in one of his talks (Sefer HaSichos 5746, Vol. 2, p. 60) that when you ask someone for forgiveness, it helps ease their pain. When they see how much you regret what you did, enough to humble yourself and ask for forgiveness, it begins to heal the hurt.

Of course, the person should forgive and move on. But if they don't forgive the first time, you need to ask again—up to two or three times. After that, if they still don't forgive, it's no longer on you. At that point, it's on them for not being able to let go.

## Timing is Everything

In real life, things don't always go as planned. Sometimes, you apologize to someone, but instead of fixing things, it just makes it worse. The person gets even

angrier, and you end up feeling worse than before.

In Jewish circles, there's a well-known situation where butchers often get upset with the rabbi. Why? Because sometimes the rabbi has to rule that an animal the butcher slaughtered isn't kosher, which means a big financial loss. Naturally, the butcher gets mad at the rabbi for costing him money.

The Talmud (Yoma 87a) tells a story about Rav, a leader of Babylonian Jewry who lived about 1,600 years ago. He's the one who composed part of the Mussaf prayer for Rosh Hashanah, including the sections "Malchuyot, Zichronot, and Shofarot," known as "Tekiata d'Rav."

One time, Rav had a disagreement with a local butcher. Rav expected the butcher to come and apologize before Yom Kippur, but the butcher never showed up. So Rav, deciding to let go of his honor, said, "I'll go and make peace." On his way, Rav bumped into his student, Rav Huna, who asked where he was headed. When Rav told him he was going to make amends with the butcher, Rav Huna warned, "Aba (Rav) is heading for trouble."

Ignoring the warning, Rav continued on to the butcher, who was in the middle of chopping up the head of an animal. When the butcher saw Rav, his anger flared up again. Still fuming, he kept cutting the bones, but in his frustration, a bone shard flew up and hit him in the skull, killing him instantly.

It's a tragic story. Even though it was the butcher who should have apologized, Rav humbled himself and tried to make peace before Yom Kippur. But instead of calming the situation, it took a terrible turn.

This is why the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot teaches, "Don't try to calm someone down when they're still angry" (Avot 4:18). The Talmud in Berachot adds that we learn this from the story of the Golden Calf. When Moshe asked G-d for forgiveness on behalf of the Jewish people, G-d told him, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." G-d was teaching Moshe that it's better to wait until the anger has passed before asking for forgiveness (Berachot 7a).

## **Asking Forgiveness from Those Who Have**

# Passed

So, when is the right time to ask for forgiveness?

In Judaism, there are specific times when we focus on forgiveness. Every night, before bed, we say the Shema, and as part of that prayer, we ask forgiveness from anyone we may have wronged that day.

Every marriage counselor will tell a newlywed couple that if they have a disagreement, they should never go to bed angry. I once shared this advice with someone, and he joked, “If I try to do that, I’ll never get any sleep!”

It reminds me of the guy who, after 40 years of marriage, runs into an old friend who asks, “How do you still look so good? What’s your secret?” He replies, “At my wedding, the rabbi gave me golden advice—whenever you and your wife have an argument, just go out for a walk to calm down. So, I’ve been walking non-stop ever since!”

The idea of not going to bed angry is deeply rooted in Judaism. Before we say the Shema at night, we recite a special prayer that begins, “I forgive anyone who has angered or upset me.” Before a Jew goes to sleep, they should let go of any frustrations or anger from the day, allowing for a peaceful and restful sleep.

Another time we ask for forgiveness is on Friday night. We light Shabbat candles to bring peace and calm into our homes. It’s also customary to bless our children on Friday night because, let’s be honest, sometimes (even if it’s rare) we may get upset or argue with them during the week. By blessing them on Shabbat, we let go of any tension or frustration we may have carried over from the week.

And of course, there’s one very special time of year that’s entirely focused on forgiveness—Erev Yom Kippur. This is the time to forgive anyone who has hurt or upset us and also to ask forgiveness from anyone we may have wronged over the past year. But you have to be smart about it. Use your judgment to know if it’s the right moment to ask for forgiveness from someone you’ve hurt.

As we approach the Yizkor prayer, remember that asking for forgiveness isn’t just for the living. We also ask for forgiveness from those who are no longer with us. This is why, at a funeral, it’s customary to ask the deceased for forgiveness, speaking directly to them and requesting their pardon if we ever wronged them in

life.

Jewish law even states that if someone feels they seriously wronged someone who has passed away, they should bring ten people to the grave and say, "I have sinned before G-d and before this person whom I harmed." Now, I'm not suggesting anyone start gathering minyanim at cemeteries! But during the Yizkor prayer, the barriers between this world and the next are lifted for a moment, and it's a time when we can connect with our loved ones who have passed.

This is a beautiful opportunity to ask for forgiveness. Even if you feel that *they* should be the ones asking you for forgiveness, it's still appropriate to ask them for forgiveness. In this merit, may G-d forgive all of us and grant us a good and sweet year.