

# Interreligious Insight

## January, 2005 Edition

### On Forgiveness

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*Forgive us, our Father for we have sinned. Pardon us, our king, for we have transgressed, for You pardon and forgive. Blessed are You Eternal One, who is gracious and quick to forgive.*

(The Amidah from the Daily service of the Jewish people)

Three times a day, observant Jews recite the *Amidah*, the ‘*Standing Prayer*’, that forms the core of our statutory services. The prayer differs in content depending on the day it is recited. On weekdays, the intermediate section is composed of petitionary prayers. The order of the first three is most instructive when it comes to understanding the Jewish notion of forgiveness.

The first asks God to give us *knowledge*, the second asks God to lead us to *repentance*, and only then does the third request Divine *forgiveness*.

The theological outlook of rabbinic Judaism can most easily be expressed as: God is a righteous Judge; God rewards the just and punishes the sinner; the sinner who repents is almost always forgiven. (The exceptions to this rule are generally taken as those who have committed the more serious type of sin that leads others astray, e.g. those who desecrate God’s Name or those who use evil language in general.)

The classical texts stress God’s desire to forgive. Thus in a Midrash (a rabbinic exposition on the Torah), it is stated: “Says the Holy One, Even if your sins should reach to heaven, if you repent, I will forgive (Pes. Rab. 44:185a).’ And in a beautiful Talmudic passage, we are treated to an image of God praying to God’s own self in order that the attribute of Divine mercy should prevail over that of Divine anger, and so that God can deal with humanity in mercy even though strict justice would suggest that punishment was more appropriate at that time (Ber. 7a).

However, forgiveness is only available to those who seek repentance first. The idea of arbitrary Divine grace being granted an individual is almost entirely absent in Judaism. Indeed, the major emphasis in Jewish life is not on the Divine forgiveness that may be shown to us, but on our need to repent so that we can return to God.

As the sequence of prayers illustrated, the first step in repentance is knowledge. In Greek philosophy, knowledge evokes pride. In Judaism, true knowledge awakens an awareness of how short we fall when we measure our acts against what we should be doing in life, and so motivates us towards repentance.

The next step is to make amends for the sin that we have committed. If we have sinned against a person, than we must try to rectify the wrong which may entail monetary compensation: if against God, then maybe try to compensate for the sin through the giving of charity. There then has to be an act of contrition, a real deep felt apology and finally, the intention adopted never to commit such an act again. Only at that moment can we seek forgiveness.

For misdeeds that affect other people adversely, the perpetrator has to seek forgiveness of the injured party. The early first century Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, wrote: "If you ask pardon for your sins, do you also forgive those who trespassed against you? For remission is granted for remission (ed. Mangey, 2 (1742) 670)." The wronged person is obliged to accept that apology. "A person should be as pliant as a reed, not hard like a cedar" when it comes to granting forgiveness (Ta.an 20a). As we hope that God will be merciful to us, and as we are made in the image of God, so we too must act mercifully towards those who come seeking forgiveness.

In the interfaith world, we often come across those of other faith traditions seeking forgiveness for the sins their ancestors committed against another faith. I understand the genuineness of their desire to make a fresh start but the idea of blanket post facto forgiveness is difficult in Judaism. Rabbi Hugo Gryn, a Holocaust survivor, told me that he was asked if he had forgiven the Germans. His answer, a stance based on Jewish thought, was that, "No one has ever asked me yet!" That, however, did not stop him from working for reconciliation between faith communities.

God's compassion challenges us to face the truth of our lives, to make amends, to make plans for a better future and to receive pardon, so that we can get on with life. "Then the Eternal One will open your heart...and you will again heed the Eternal and obey all His commandments (Deuteronomy 30: 6-8)."