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Senior Moments

To Let Go, to Love, to Forgive

By Ellie Kahn



Elsie Schwartz and her grandson Robby. "I'm the kind of person who doesn't carry a grudge," Elsie says. "I look for forgiveness."

"I have good news! My cancer is in remission." I've called Elsie Schwartz to talk about the High Holy Days, but the news about her illness is an unexpected surprise and a huge relief. At 89, Elsie has taught me a great deal about life and about choosing to face death by living fully and fully loving.

I ask Elsie to tell me how forgiveness enters into her life.

"I'm the kind of person who doesn't carry a grudge," Elsie says. "I look for forgiveness. It's part of my heritage as a Jew. They tell us in the Torah, 'To forgive is divine. If you forgive others, God forgives you.'" Elsie makes it sound so simple.

According to psychiatrist and author Dr. Gerald Jampolsky, "Forgiveness means letting go of the past." But so many of us seem determined to cling to past hurts and resentments, as if these provide some odd form of safety or control. I know the challenge of letting go of disappointments from one's past and the pain, for instance, of not having an all-accepting, always-loving mother. I can see how forgiveness isn't possible if one is still hanging on to such old stuff. But what a relief when we do, like a weight being lifted.

"I'll tell you something," Elsie says. "I had a friend who's the opposite of me. She hasn't talked to her daughter for years, because she doesn't know how to forgive. Well, this friend got angry at me when I

suggested that she help her daughter out when the daughter was in need. When I knew she was angry, I told her I was sorry I'd upset her, but instead of letting it go, she hasn't spoken to me in two years."

Elsie apparently tried various ways to bring down the wall her friend erected, to no avail. When Elsie found out she had cancer, mutual friends told this friend, but she never called Elsie.

One day, Elsie ran into this woman. "I told her that I forgave her for being so angry at me and for not talking to me," said Elsie. "I told her that, now that she knows I've forgiven her, when I die she won't feel uncomfortable. Jewish law says that if you're still angry with someone when they die and you hadn't forgiven them, you have to go to their grave and ask for their forgiveness. I felt good about saying this to her."

I make an effort to apply what I learn from people like Elsie. This New Year, I have a perfect opportunity. For better or worse, by the time Rosh Hashanah begins, my sister and I will have transferred my mother's primary care to strangers.

It's been a painful, difficult decision, but the assisted-living facility near my sister in North Carolina seems to be the best place for mom, now 82, to grow older and to be taken care of. Unfortunately, her dementia means that mom doesn't recall that she *agreed* to the plan. She's extremely angry with us for "putting her away," as she calls it. "We would never have done this to our parents," she bitterly told me in a recent phone call.

As the New Year approaches, I consider my mother's frightening transition, her anger - and her rather nasty comments to my sister and me that are reminiscent of past interactions with her. I reflect on a host of feelings and memories (both painful and joyful) that we each have from our family's past, and I see that forgiveness might be more of an issue for us this year than ever before.

I mention this to Elsie (who kiddingly informs me that she charges \$50 an hour, which I think is pretty inexpensive for all of her wisdom). She suggests that I ask for my mother's forgiveness, since mom is so angry about the move. I realize that she might not be able or willing to forgive, and then I'll have the opportunity to do some letting go of my own. There certainly is an assortment of things I need to let go of from the past, in order to forgive her. It would be good to do that while I still have her around to love. The late Rabbi Joshua Liebman said, "We achieve inner health only through forgiveness - the forgiveness not only of others but also of ourselves." I can see how the fact that I am neither able nor willing to take care of my mother anymore - or feel responsible for her happiness - is something for which I need to forgive myself.

It's hard to believe how my mother is declining. I feel like I'm losing her and that somehow this move she's making confirms it. It seems really important to have things current and clean between us. This is not easy, but the High Holy Days reminds me to face this task.

Norman Cousins once said, "Life is an adventure in forgiveness." And so, as the adventure continues, the New Year begins.

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