

# GOD FORGIVES: CAN WE?

RABBI ANGELA WARNICK BUCHDAHL, YOM KIPPUR 5780

## FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

### BIG QUESTION: WHAT IS OUR CAPACITY FOR FORGIVENESS? FOR TESHUVAH?

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There are 70 million people in this country who are or were incarcerated; 2.2 million of them are currently behind bars; and roughly 1 in 5 Americans have criminal records. We can better understand the experience of incarceration, its causes and its effects, when we turn away from the numbers, and turn instead toward individual stories and the guidance of our tradition. Jewish texts call us to pay individual attention and take collective responsibility for our neighbors—requiring us as a people to find a balance between retribution and redemption. Rabbi Buchdahl invites us to consider what we can do as individuals and as a community to help support people who are or were incarcerated.

### DISTRIBUTING THE SERMON:

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Links to a video recording of the sermon, as well as a copy of the written text, are available on the CORE Groups page of the Central Synagogue website. A few days before your meeting, you should contact your group members to let them know which sermon you will be discussing, so that they can watch and/or read it in preparation for the discussion. (It is helpful to include a link to the materials in your email). In order to keep the sermon fresh in everyone's minds, you may wish to recommend that participants make a note of any questions or reactions they have immediately after watching it. Even if you saw the sermon in person, please at least review the written text before the meeting, so that you can participate fully in the discussion.

### NAME TAGS:

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For at least the first several sessions, please ask everyone in the group to wear a name tag (or, if seated around a table, to place a name card in front of them). Even if most people know one another, it is important that no one feel uncomfortable for not remembering everyone else's name.

### INTRODUCTION AND ICE-BREAKER:

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Ask each person to introduce themselves, and to share with the group:

- (a) their name; and
- (b) whether it is easier to ask for forgiveness or to grant forgiveness.

## OPENING ACTIVITY

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### **Jewish Connection Timeline**

*Materials: post-it notes, pens.*

1. Distribute some post-it notes and a pen to each participant.
2. Ask each group member to write on each post-it note a few sentences about a time they either a) asked someone for forgiveness, or b) were asked by someone else to forgive them. When they have written at least one of each answer, they can post the story (with or without their name) on the table or on the walls.
3. Invite members to read the responses that are posted. In pairs, invite the group to discuss what they read. Are there any themes that emerge? Does it seem harder for people to ask for or to grant forgiveness? Is it harder for them to ask for or grant forgiveness?

## TEXT STUDY

Attached is a text-study sheet that you may use to facilitate a discussion of the themes and issues raised by the sermon. Please make sure to either make a copy for each member or ask everyone to bring it themselves, in paper or electronic form. If you choose the latter course, you may still wish to print a few extra copies for those who may forget to bring theirs.

Here are some things to consider:

- (a) It is customary to recite a blessing before studying Torah.

**BARUCH** atah, Adonai  
Eloheinu, Melech haolam,  
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav  
v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.

בָּרַךְ אֹתָהּ, יי  
אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו  
וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

**BLESSED ARE YOU**, Adonai our God,  
Sovereign of the universe,  
who hallows us with mitzvot,  
commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

- (b) Our tradition teaches us that Torah study can be a source of healing and blessing. You may want to ask members of the group if they would like to dedicate their study to anyone in particular. This is a nice way to help the group get to know one another, and to learn about significant events in each other's lives.
- (c) Depending on the preferences of your group, you may choose to distribute this sheet the week before the meeting, so that participants will be familiar with the texts, and can begin to think about their own responses.
- (d) You can choose to either work through the texts as one group, or to break up into pairs ("hevruta") for an initial period of discussion, and then allow the pairs to share something they learned with the group.
- (e) The ultimate goal of these groups is not for participants to master a particular number of Jewish texts, but to connect with one another. If group members are sharing their own stories and experiences in a way that seems fruitful, there is no need to cut off that conversation in order to make sure you "finish" the text sheet. If you are unsure, you can always poll the group to decide whether it is time to move on.

## CONCLUSION

We recommend that you wind down the text study about 15 minutes before the end of the session, to allow for a meaningful conclusion. This conclusion may take any shape you wish. Some possibilities are:

- (a) Ask each person to name one insight they have gained, or one question that they are taking with them.  
 (b) Ask each person to offer a blessing to the group, drawn from your learning together.  
 (c) Ask each person to say one word to represent how they are feeling coming out of your discussion.