

## PRAISE FOR THE FORGIVENESS EXPERIMENT

“Rabbi Bernath doesn’t just talk about forgiveness, he lives it. The Forgiveness Experiment is a master-class in courage, compassion, and choosing freedom over bitterness. If you’ve ever wanted to let go but didn’t know how, this book will take you by the hand and show you the way.”

—Aleeza Ben Shalom, *Global Dating Coach & Star of Netflix’s Jewish Matchmaking*

“Forgiveness is not optional; it is essential. In this powerful book, Rabbi Bernath shows us that letting go of resentment is the only way to make space for joy. A timely, vital work.”

—Rabbi Manis Friedman, *World-Renowned Speaker, Author, and Philosopher*

“Rabbi Bernath bares his soul in these pages, offering not just a book but a road map back to your pure self. It will stretch you, challenge you, and ultimately set you free.”

—Dr. Assael Romanelli, LCSW, MFT, *Author of Feel Free Together*

“As a professor of social work, I’ve seen many approaches to healing, but few as practical and life-changing as the one Rabbi Bernath shares in *The Forgiveness Experiment*. This is an invaluable tool for

mental health professionals to use with clients and in their own lives."

—*Dr. Jonathan B. Singer, Ph.D., LCSW, Professor, Loyola University Chicago School of Social Work*

"A mesmerizing book — filled with profound, life-changing truths. This is a book the world urgently needs to read."

—*Rebbetzin Esther Tiechtel, Co-Director, Chabad of Nashville*

"Rabbi Bernath has brought to the forefront of our minds a fundamental but often forgotten topic — forgiveness. This book promises to be healing and liberating for all those that read it, addressing a contemporary yet age old struggle with the Torah's insight and guidance."

—*Rabbi Dovid Faiden, Rabbinical College of America*

"This book is a true page-turner — written with clarity, and depth, it tackles the topic of forgiveness in a way that is both accessible and profound, offering not only fresh insight and timeless wisdom but also practical tools that can be applied in real life"

—*Eda Schottenstein, Psychotherapist and Co-Host, From the Inside Out Podcast*

"This is a remarkable book. Rabbi Bernath boils down so many of our anxieties into one transformative word — Forgiveness. With profound yet simple language, he presents Jewish wisdom, personal experience, and practical exercises that could save years

of therapy. We all need to read this book, because we all need to learn forgiveness.”

—*Dr. David Morris, Associate Professor of Medicine, McGill University*

“Rabbi Bernath does an excellent job of highlighting and bringing home the importance, benefits, and richness of this oft overlooked and very fundamentally Jewish practice.”

—*Rabbi Zalman Abraham, director of the Wellness Institute at the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute and co-author of People of the Word.*



# THE FORGIVENESS EXPERIMENT

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WHAT WOULD YOUR LIFE LOOK LIKE IF YOU  
LET IT ALL GO?

YISROEL BERNATH



*First Edition, 2026*

*The Forgiveness Experiment*  
*What Would Your Life Look Like If You Let It All Go?*

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This book is a work of nonfiction based on the life, experiences, recollections and teachings of Rabbi Yisroel Bernath. In some cases, names of people and places have been changed solely to protect the privacy of others.

*For every soul who has been hurt,  
and for every heart that still aches.*

*For those who lie awake at night replaying words they wish had  
never been spoken,  
and for those who wonder if they'll ever feel whole again.  
This book is for you.*

*May you discover the courage to release what holds you,  
the humility to ask for forgiveness when it's yours to ask,  
and the faith to believe that G-d can rewrite even the most  
painful chapters.*



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## PREFACE

I've spent a large part of my life replaying painful memories. I can recall, in vivid detail, every insult in the schoolyard, every friend who betrayed me, every person who bullied or belittled me. I can recall traumas, like getting held at gunpoint when I was fifteen. These memories have lingered like unwelcome guests in my mind. For years, I've held onto them tightly — too tightly — nursing grudges, imagining that somehow, someday, someone would come to rescue me from the hurt. I didn't realize that by clutching those grievances, I was only deepening my own wounds.

On the outside, my life seemed fine. I functioned; I was considered relatively successful — at least by the standards of Western society. I smiled, I carried on. But inside, I often felt fearful and empty. Fearful that those old hurts meant that I wasn't good enough or worthy of love. Empty because so much of my emotional energy was stuck in the past, replaying old scenes of victimhood. I became an expert at feeling sorry for myself and blaming others for my unhappiness. In truth, I was living in a world of unhealed trauma

without even knowing it. The weight of resentment was my constant companion.

I had told myself I'd forgiven before — but if I'm honest, I hadn't. Not fully. Not deeply. Then one day, I had a simple but profound realization: I had never actually *tried* forgiveness. Not the real kind. Sure, I had talked about it. I had even taught it. But I hadn't lived it. Not in my body. Not in my heart. Not in my soul. I was still waiting for apologies that never came, for justice that would magically set things right. In the meantime, all that bitterness was eating me alive. So I asked myself: *What would my life look like if I just let it all go? What if I decided to forgive the people who hurt me, and to finally evict those painful memories from the space it was taking up in my heart?* In that moment, something shifted. I realized I had never really given forgiveness an honest try. But now — I was ready. Ready to begin.

So, I decided to run an experiment on myself: I would attempt to forgive. Truly forgive. Not in a superficial way, but from the heart. I would attempt to let go of my grudges, large and small, and see what happened next. Would it make any difference? Would I feel lighter, freer, happier? Or was I so used to my resentments that I'd miss them like an old security blanket? I honestly wasn't sure... but I knew I had to try.

This book is the fruit of that experiment. It's called *The Forgiveness Experiment* because I invite you, the reader, to undertake it with me. It's a journey based on my lived experience, some timeless spiritual wisdom, and down-to-earth practices. As a Chabad rabbi, I've drawn on the deep well of Jewish teachings — especially the Hasidic teachings that emphasize compassion, personal growth, and the transformative power of the soul. I've also learned from modern psychology and healing modalities, things like Internal

Family Systems and somatic therapies, which teach us how trauma and emotions live in the body and how we can gently release them. You won't see those terms mentioned explicitly, but you may recognize their influence in the exercises and reflections throughout these chapters.

Most of all, this book is filled with stories. Some are from ancient texts, some, from contemporary life, and some are from my own experiences. Stories have a way of opening the heart. They allow us to see ourselves in others and glean life lessons in a non-threatening way. I've always loved telling stories — to my community, to my students, and to my children, so I'll share many of them here. The stories in this book illustrate the challenges and triumphs of forgiveness in a way that mere theory cannot.

My tone in these pages is personal and informal. You'll hear my heart speaking, not just my head. I'll be honest about my struggles and candid about what worked for me and what didn't. I want you to feel like we're just two people having a heartfelt conversation about one of the most important (and hardest) things in life: letting go of anger and opening up to healing. Whether you are Jewish or not, religious or skeptical, deeply wounded or simply feeling irritated by life's annoyances, I hope you'll find something here that speaks to you. I write from within my own tradition, but the message is universal.

This is a workbook as much as a book, so, before we dive in, I have a small request: please be willing to try the exercises and reflections in each chapter. Insight is wonderful, but experience is what truly transforms us. The exercises are simple and often just involve writing a few thoughts or silently reflecting. They are the practical steps of the forgiveness experiment. If you approach these practices with sincerity, you'll likely begin to feel something shift — maybe

a gentle opening at first, or maybe a full-on “aha” moment that takes your breath away. Either way, change is possible.

Forgiveness is not magic; it’s a process. At times it’s two steps forward, one step back. It may even be one step forward and two steps back. I still consider myself a work-in-progress in this area, so I am in no way an expert. But I can promise you this: forgiving has been one of the most uplifting and liberating experiences of my life. It has not only eased my inner pain, but it has opened up new possibilities. It has allowed me to reclaim parts of myself that I’d kept shackled to the past. It has even improved my relationships in unexpected ways. It has allowed me to start living *my* life as the person I was meant to be, not as a perpetual victim.

If you’re carrying hurt, I invite you to join me in this experiment. Imagine what your life might look like if you could set that burden down. Imagine waking up not haunted by yesterday’s grievances, but energized for today’s opportunities. Imagine your heart being lighter and more open, finally making room for new joy. You don’t have to imagine it forever: you can make it real, step by step, as we journey together.

Let’s see what happens when we choose to forgive. I have a feeling it will be nothing short of transformational.

Welcome to *The Forgiveness Experiment*.

I’m honored to walk this path along with you.

RABBI YISROEL BERNATH  
JANUARY 2026  
MONTREAL, QUEBEC, CANADA

## A NOTE TO THE READER

Dear Reader,

While writing this book, I wanted to keep my thoughts pure and my pen honest. I didn't want to echo someone else's ideas or borrow another author's conclusions, so I made a deliberate choice not to look at other books on forgiveness, whether secular or Jewish, until my manuscript was complete.

When I finally did peek into what else was out there, I found plenty of secular self-help books on forgiveness, numerous Christian works on grace, and many Jewish books on suffering or repentance. I did come across the occasional chapter on forgiveness in a Jewish book here or there, but even then, it was almost always presented as a sidebar to *teshuvah*, return, or as part of understanding suffering. Rarely, if ever, was forgiveness treated as a spiritual practice in its own right, something to be cultivated not because we sinned, but because we're human. I didn't find a single Jewish book that explored forgiveness for what it truly is: a powerful path to emotional healing, personal freedom, and divine connection.

With this book, I hope to change that. Jewish tradition speaks volumes about compassion, mercy, and *teshuva*, yet somewhere along the way, the conversation seems to tilt toward enduring pain but never focusing on releasing it. I believe forgiveness is not about excusing what happened or letting someone “off the hook.” It’s about reclaiming your own life. It’s about walking out of the prison you didn’t even know you were guarding. It’s about turning the key and stepping into freedom.

If this book does anything, I hope it gives you permission, rooted in Jewish wisdom, to shift the story you tell yourself from one of captivity to one of courage. To mark the world not only with the scars of what you’ve survived, but with the seeds of what you’ve actively decided to grow.

Finally, while every effort has been made to credit sources accurately, any mistakes, oversights, or uncited references remain my responsibility alone.

With blessings for your journey,

*Rabbi Yisroel Bernath*

## INTRODUCTION

### RETHINKING FORGIVENESS

*“Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much.”*

– Oscar Wilde

That quote cracks me up every time. It's snuck into my social media feed more times than I can count, like a little wink from the universe. It's witty, no doubt. But let's be real, it's also a bit twisted.

Forgiveness just to spite someone? That's not healing. That's just revenge with a halo.

Oscar Wilde, like much of the internet pretending to quote him, was being cheeky. But hidden in the sarcasm is a sliver of truth: forgiveness *is* surprising. It *is* disarming. It breaks the cycle. It disrupts the usual pattern of hurt and retaliation.

This book isn't about getting even, it's about freeing yourself. I've learned, sometimes painfully, that forgiveness isn't something you do for the other person — it's something you do for yourself. It unhooks you from the emotional grip of the one who hurt you. As long as you're

seeing your life through their lens, you're not really healing, you're just outsourcing the pain.

For me, the hardest part was the beginning. I call it the “zero-to-one” moment: that first time I stopped blaming everyone else and just sat with the raw pain. No stories, no distractions. Just me and the ache. It was uncomfortable... agonizing, even. I wanted to run away, the same way I’ve been running away for as long as I can remember. And to be honest, writing this book brings up that same pain. Part of me still wants to run from it. So if you’re scared, I get it. This isn’t easy. It hasn’t been easy for me either. But it’s worth it — you’re worth it.

I think the idea of forgiveness is widely misunderstood, so I want to start by clarifying what forgiveness *is* and what it *is not*. Forgiveness does *not* mean that you approve of what someone else did. It does not mean that you agree with them, or that you’re willing to be a doormat and let them hurt you again. It doesn’t even necessarily mean reconciling or continuing a relationship with the other person (which can be unhealthy sometimes). And it certainly isn’t about forgetting in the sense of erasing the past from your memory. I’m certainly not implying we have an erase button in our brains.

Forgiveness is a conscious choice to let go of resentment and revenge towards someone who has wronged you, in order to find your own peace. It’s releasing the bitterness that poisons you, even if the memory of the event stays. It’s deciding not to let the wrongdoing define your life or dictate your emotions in the present. Psychologist Jerry Jampolsky, author of *Love is Letting Go of Fear*, taught that forgiveness is, in theory and practice, “giving up all hope for a better past.”<sup>1</sup> We can’t change the past harm, but we can change how we carry it forward. Forgiveness is about changing the way we

remember, so that the memory no longer controls us or causes us pain. That all sounds good in theory, right? But forgiveness gets a lot more complicated when real people and real emotions are involved.

Consider Ari and Liora, a couple who came to see me a few months ago. During our conversation, Ari related that a while back they were at a party with friends and he had too much to drink. He made a fool of himself and passed out; his embarrassed friends helped his wife get him home. The next day, filled with regret, Ari apologized to his wife. She said, “I forgive you. Let’s just forget it happened.” But in the months that followed, whenever Liora was upset with him, she’d say something like, “It’s not like that time you got drunk and humiliated me in front of everyone.” Finally, Ari protested: “I thought you were going to forgive and forget!” Liora responded, “I have forgiven and forgotten, I just don’t want *you* to forget that I have forgiven and forgotten!”

This is what forgiveness is *not*. If we continually bring up the offence as a weapon, then we haven’t truly let it go. True forgiveness means we stop nursing the grievance. We stop using it as ammunition. We resolve not to actively seek ways to punish the person emotionally (even if it’s just little jabs or passive-aggressive reminders). Instead, we work on cleansing our hearts of the bitterness.

**Carrying resentment doesn’t hurt the other person... it hurts you.**

In my moments of trying to justify my resentment over the years, I used to say things to myself like, *why bother?* I used to think, *why not* cling to resentment? After all, when you’ve been hurt, there’s a certain *satisfaction* in holding a grudge. It feels like a weapon we wield to uphold justice in our small

universe. We think, “If I forgive, they’re getting away with it scot-free. My anger is the only thing holding them accountable.” This mindset is very human and very common. But it contains two great fallacies: one, that our resentment punishes the other person; and two, that letting go of anger is the same as letting someone off the hook.

There’s an old saying (attributed to at least thirty of the greatest people who ever lived): *“Resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.”* Or, if you prefer something a little more vivid, it’s like setting yourself on fire just so the other guy might choke on the smoke. In both cases, the damage lands squarely on you.

Resentment doesn’t punish the person who hurt you, it punishes *you*. It keeps you tethered to the pain long after the moment has passed. Pain may be inevitable, but suffering? That’s optional, and it can last as long as we allow it to. In the end, *we* are the ones who suffer most from our own unforgiveness.

The truth is that our resentment never punishes anyone aside for ourselves; usually, they’ve moved on with life or are oblivious to our inner turmoil. I’ll give you proof: no one has ever called me in the middle of the night to say “stop thinking about me so I can go to sleep!”

Nothing illustrates that kind of thinking quite like a story I came across years ago. I was reading the autobiography of Simon Wiesenthal, world-famous Holocaust survivor and Nazi hunter, when I stumbled upon a short anecdote tucked away at the bottom of page sixty-eight. I’ve carried that story with me for years! For a long time, I used it as my proof that holding onto resentment was not only understandable, but justified.

After the war, Simon was in a displaced persons camp, and a man living near him asked to borrow what he said was

the equivalent of ten American dollars. He assured Wiesenthal that a package was coming soon from a relative, and the money would absolutely be paid back in a week.

A week passed. Then another. Then another. Excuses piled up.

Finally, almost a year later, the man ran over to Wiesenthal holding a ten-dollar bill. "Simon, Simon," he could barely catch his breath, "My visa has just come through," he said. "Tomorrow I leave for Canada. Here's the ten dollars I owe you."

Wiesenthal looked at him with that quiet, unflinching intensity that only Simon Wiesenthal could summon: "Keep it. For ten dollars, it's not worth changing my opinion of you."<sup>2</sup>

I've thought about this story hundreds of times over the years. Simon Wiesenthal was a man who carried a grudge, and honestly, who could blame him? His was a grievance so justified, so universally recognized, that the civilized world all but nodded in agreement. And he didn't just carry that pain — he turned it into purpose. Wiesenthal spent his life hunting Nazis and holding them accountable for unspeakable crimes. His grudge wasn't just personal, it was historic, and he wore it like armor.

Simon Wiesenthal was a great man. As a survivor, he was absolutely right to carry the weight as he did. But as a *thriver*, he may have missed something deeper. And honestly, I think this is the great challenge of our generation: not to survive trauma, but to transform it.

**We're the first generation that can actually do this.**

I don't blame the generation before us. How could I? They were survivors in the truest sense. Many of them lived

through times when they didn't know where their next meal would come from. When your focus is survival, there isn't much bandwidth left for emotional healing or inner growth.

But we, you and I, we're living in a different reality. Thankfully, we've never known that kind of fear. Most of us in the Western world don't wake up wondering if we'll eat today. Apples grow in aisle two, and if we don't feel like getting off the couch, we can press a button and have that apple appear at our door.

That's not just comfort, it's opportunity. And with that opportunity comes a new and, in some ways, harder challenge: to shift from surviving to *thriving*. To leave the cycle of fight or flight. To look within. To heal what's been passed down, often silently, for generations. Because when we begin to heal ourselves, we begin to heal everyone around us and maybe even the world.

### **Lead with compassion.**

In my own tradition, Judaism, forgiveness has been a cornerstone of spiritual life for *millennia*. On the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, we stand in prayer for hours, asking G-d to forgive us for the mistakes we've made. And yet, for so many years, I didn't truly *hear* the core message behind all those prayers. In Yiddish, there's a beautiful distinction between *heren*, to hear, and *derheren*, to internalize. It took me years to truly *derher* this teaching: *G-d will forgive us... only if we forgive others.*

There's a striking line in the Talmud<sup>3</sup> that cuts straight to the heart: "*Who is forgiven?*" The Talmud asks, "*One who forgives others.*" And then it goes even deeper: "*Whoever overlooks the offences of others, all his sins are overlooked in Heaven.*"

Now, that might sound lofty or abstract, but it's actually

deeply personal. So, I want you to pause and really *derher* this: *None of us gets through life without hurting or being hurt.* None of us.

I'll say it again, because honestly, I probably had to hear it twenty times before it landed. I was distracted, self-justifying, hurt... and numbing the pain. Here it is one more time: *None of us gets through life without hurting or being hurt.* None of us.

You're going to get hurt. And yes, hard as it is to admit, you're going to hurt others too. That's not failure. That's life. That's part of being human.

If I want to be met with compassion, I need to lead with compassion. If I'm asking Heaven for mercy, I have to be willing to offer some down here. Because harshness begets harshness. But forgiveness? Forgiveness opens gates, *not just above, but within.* It softens the heart, quiets the storm, and makes room for healing.

I often wish I could explain this to Simon Wiesenthal. And maybe I have, in the countless conversations I've had with the Simon Wiesenthal in my head. The part of me that clung to justice so tightly, that I couldn't imagine letting go. I get it. I still wrestle with it. But more and more, I'm learning that forgiveness isn't surrendering truth, it's choosing freedom.

Even if you don't believe in Divine judgment, there's a deep psychological truth here: holding onto anger keeps us stuck in a mindset of judgment and negativity. And that mindset inevitably seeps into how we see ourselves — often without us even realizing it.

### **Forgiveness isn't easy or quick.**

Forgiveness is anything but easy, let's be real about that from the start. People love to toss around the phrase "forgive and forget," as if it's just a matter of flipping a switch. But that couldn't be further from my experience. Forgiveness, for me, has almost never been instant. It's a journey: a slow, often uncomfortable peeling back of resentment, one stubborn layer at a time. And some of those layers? They've been buried so deep, I didn't even know they were there until they started to surface.

In the chapters ahead, we'll walk this path together, tiny step by tiny step. We'll explore why forgiveness can feel so hard, and gently uncover the inner resistance that holds us back. We'll find powerful antidotes to those blocks, drawing wisdom from people who found the strength to forgive the seemingly unforgivable. Along the way, we'll learn practical tools to reframe our thinking, regulate our emotions, and truly heal.

### **You can forgive and still have boundaries.**

We'll also look at how to set strong, healthy boundaries while still releasing old grudges. And we won't shy away from the hardest questions: What if the person who hurt us isn't sorry? What if they're no longer here?

Forgiveness and justice can coexist. For now, suffice it to say that forgiving someone doesn't mean that there are no consequences or boundaries. It just means that we choose not to be the executioner or judge exacting those consequences in our heart.

Forgiveness isn't about erasing the past, it's about releasing ourselves from the burden of carrying it. It's the

difference between saying, “What happened was wrong,” and “I no longer want to be chained to it.” We can still seek justice. We can still set clear boundaries. But forgiveness is the moment we stop letting the wound define us. It’s the quiet, powerful decision to stop bleeding for someone else’s actions.

**This book isn’t some preachy “just move on” manual.**

This isn’t a theoretical manual written from an ivory tower; it’s the story of my own journey. I’ve *lived* this work.

Years ago, I had the privilege of meeting Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, a brilliant psychiatrist, author of countless books, Torah scholar, and pioneer in the field of addiction and emotional well-being. I approached him at a conference and asked, “How do I know who to trust for advice? Who’s actually worth listening to?” He smiled and said, “diplomas don’t matter”. “A lot of people with degrees know what to say, but have no lived experience. The only real credential someone needs is this: they’ve successfully done what you’re trying to do.”

And so I offer you this: I’ve been in the trenches of resentment. I’ve lived with the righteous rage of being wronged and I’ve also felt the emptiness it leaves behind. I’ve tried avoiding pain, numbing it or spiritualizing it away. None of that worked. Only when I turned to the hard, humbling, heart-opening work of forgiveness did I begin to see change. And even then, it hasn’t been linear. I’ve forgiven people in my mind, only to feel that familiar pang of anger rise up later and realize there’s more to let go. If you’ve struggled with forgiveness, you’re not alone. You’re actually in good company! It’s one of the hardest things

we're asked to do as human beings... and yet, it might just be the most important key to our happiness.

### **Forgiveness is about taking back the pen.**

Ultimately, forgiveness is about freedom. It's about saying: *I will not let the person who hurt me continue to have power over my inner life.* It's about reclaiming authorship of your own story. When we hold a grudge, in a sense we allow the person who caused us harm to write one chapter of our life story and keep rereading it to us. When we forgive, we take the pen back. We say: *This happened; it hurt, but I will determine what it means for me and how the rest of my story unfolds.*

This brings me to a guiding image that will appear throughout this book: the idea that *each of us has a unique life story authored by something greater, call it G-d, destiny, the universe... and that no human being can "ruin" that story unless we hand them the pen.* One of the most powerful biblical examples of forgiveness, the story of Joseph, will teach us this perspective in Chapter 2. Joseph's words to the brothers who betrayed him — “Am I in place of G-d? You intended to harm me, but G-d intended it for good” — contain a profound lesson in letting go of anger and resentment. They show how changing our interpretation of events can transform bitterness into growth.

### **Be gentle.**

As we embark on this journey, I encourage you to be patient and gentle with yourself. Very, very gentle with yourself, please. You might read a chapter and say, “This makes sense, but I still feel angry.” That’s okay! Insight often precedes feeling. Keep going. Do the exercises, reflect on the stories,

maybe discuss the ideas with a trusted friend, or therapist, or journal about them. Give the ideas time to percolate. Forgiveness might come in a sudden wave, or it might trickle in gradually, like melting ice. However it comes, each piece you lay down is like dropping a suitcase you didn't realize you were carrying.

### **Humor is a survival tool, so we'll use it here too.**

I also want to invite you to approach this experiment with a sense of curiosity and even a bit of playfulness. “*Playfulness?*” you might be thinking. “*This is heavy stuff!*” And you’re right — the pain we carry is often deep and heavy. But sometimes, paradoxically, it’s a light touch that helps us carry the heaviest burdens.

Did you know that even in Auschwitz, the prisoners had a collection of jokes they would tell one another? Yes, in the darkest place imaginable, people still reached for humor — not to escape reality, but to survive it. Some of those jokes are incredibly dark, but also surprisingly warm, clever, and deeply human. One joke went something like this:

*“Did you hear about the man who tried to escape by disguising himself as a Nazi guard?”*

*“No, what happened?”*

*“They made him the camp commander.”*

It’s raw, tragic and yet profoundly resilient. Humor, like forgiveness, is one of the soul’s secret ways of reclaiming agency in the face of powerlessness. So as we journey through this book together, yes, we will honor our pain. We’ll take it seriously. But we’ll also give ourselves permission to be fully human — curious, creative, and even light-

hearted. Because healing doesn't only flow through tears; sometimes, it shows up in laughter too.

I was recently subbing for a local rabbi here in Montreal, sitting on the dais of this large synagogue behind a young woman, maybe sixteen, who was giving a heartfelt speech at her little brother's bar mitzvah. She faced the crowd, so I couldn't see her face. Throughout her speech, I kept hearing this sound, but I couldn't tell if she was laughing or crying. From where I sat, it was impossible to distinguish. And I was captivated. Was she overcome with joy? Or grief? Or both?

That moment has stayed with me because it reminded me of something so deeply human: sometimes, laughing and crying are just two languages our soul uses to say the same thing. They both come from the same deep well of feeling, of love, of loss, of longing, of letting go. In forgiveness, we often find ourselves standing at that same emotional threshold, where sorrow and relief hold hands. And in that space — raw, holy, and unscripted — we begin to heal.

When I invite you to be playful, I don't just mean light-heartedness, I mean open-heartedness. A willingness to try things differently, to experiment with healing in ways that might feel unfamiliar, even a little strange. That's exactly the point. As my dear friend Dr. Assael Romenelli likes to say, *"Play is the courage to step into the unknown with curiosity instead of fear."* Sometimes, it's the playful, creative, outside-the-box approach that slips past our defences and reaches the places inside us that words alone cannot.

Because healing doesn't always walk through the front door. Sometimes, it climbs in through a window you didn't even know was open.

Forgiveness is rarely a one-and-done event. It's more like learning to walk: wobbly, uncertain, full of stumbles. But

like a toddler, who falls over and over yet keeps getting back up with that innocent, stubborn joy, we, too, can move forward with gentle determination. Let yourself toddle. Let it be imperfect. The sacred work is in the getting up.

**Your pain is real, no matter how “small” it looks next to someone else’s.**

Some of the stories and examples I use might involve people who went through extreme circumstances — for example, Holocaust survivors, or people who forgave violent crimes. These can be both inspiring and intimidating. You might think, “Well, if they can forgive *that*, I should certainly be able to forgive [my coworker/family member/etc.] for the smaller offence.” That perspective can be motivating. But I caution you not to minimize your own pain by comparing it to others’. Trauma is trauma; hurt is hurt. Sometimes a “small” betrayal by a close friend can cut as deep as a “big” injustice by a stranger. The point of those stories isn’t to say your hurt is insignificant, it’s to expand the horizons of what humans are capable of in terms of forgiveness. Take them as inspiration, not judgment.

No matter who you are or where you come from, I believe forgiveness is accessible to you. You do not need to be especially religious or spiritual to benefit from it. You just need a willingness to heal and an openness to see things differently; if you have that, even barely, then you have everything you need to start.

In the pages ahead, you’ll encounter wisdom from rabbis and sages, insights from therapists and thinkers, and the voices of ordinary people who chose forgiveness. You’ll also encounter *yourself*: your honest feelings, your fears, and, I hope, your untapped strength and compassion. Let’s

begin this experiment together and discover what life looks like when we choose to forgive.



## Two ways to read this book

Since this is an introduction, I want to introduce you to two ways you can approach this book.

The first is simple: read it like any other non-fiction or self-help book. You'll learn the ideas, encounter stories that may move you, and come away with new insights. That alone has value.

The second way is deeper: treat this book as a course, a lived practice. That means not only reading the words but *working with them*. I've been teaching these ideas in live cohorts, guiding people step by step. If you'd like to take part in a group experience, you're welcome to reach out to me, I almost always have a new cohort starting soon.

But even if you're walking this road on your own, you can turn these pages into a personal workshop by using a journal.

## A Note About Journaling

If you choose the second way, you'll need a dedicated notebook (or journal). My experience has taught me that forgiveness isn't just an idea to think about, it's something you live into. Writing is one of the most powerful ways to uncover what's really happening inside. When you put words on paper, you move the weight of your thoughts out of your head and onto a page. That's where healing begins, when

you can see your own story in front of you, instead of endlessly replaying it in your mind.

Don't worry about grammar. Don't worry about spelling. Don't worry about being "spiritual" or "wise." This notebook is your laboratory. It's the safe space where raw honesty becomes the doorway to freedom. It's just for you to see and no one else, not even me.

I suggest getting yourself a really nice notebook. Pick a notebook and pen that *speaks to you*. It doesn't have to be fancy or expensive, but let it feel personal, something you'll actually look forward to opening. You can hop on Amazon right now and find one that calls your name, or wander into a local shop and see which one catches your eye. Pick something up. Feel its texture, its weight. See how it sits in your hand... and notice what it stirs in you. Sometimes, the object chooses *you*.

This notebook and pen will become your companions on this journey. Your secret keepers. Your trusted friends. And yes, it will almost certainly cost less than a single therapy session. Splurge a little. You'll thank yourself later.



### **Experiment: Your First Forgiveness Story**

We're not going to start with the heaviest pain in your life. That would be like trying to run a marathon without ever stretching your legs. Instead, we'll begin with something small or maybe even medium.

Think of a person who has wronged you in some way. Not the deepest betrayal of your life, just something that still lingers. Maybe a co-worker embarrassed you. A sibling

borrowed something and never returned it. A friend made a careless comment that stung.

Take that memory and do this:

**Journaling Prompt**

- Write out the entire story, exactly as you remember it.
- Don't edit. Don't polish. Don't censor yourself.
- Let it flow like you're telling me the story face-to-face, as if I asked you, "Is there someone you're having trouble forgiving?"
- Include what happened, what they did or said, how you felt in that moment, and how it has stayed with you since.

This isn't about judgment. It's about honesty. Imagine opening a valve and letting the bottled-up pressure flow out. That's what this exercise is.

When you're finished, close your notebook. Take a breath. You've just taken your first step in the forgiveness experiment.

**Remember:** You don't need to tackle everything at once. Just one small piece, one page, one story at a time. That's how freedom begins.