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The Promise of Teshuvah and the Challenge of Apologies

I got in a fight with a friend last year. She wasn't there when I needed her. My dad had died, and all I got was two polite texts. It's not that I needed a lasagna or even much help. But I did want a short visit. I wanted her to ask me how I was doing. I wanted to tell her stories about the funeral.

There were missteps, missed cues, and misunderstandings. We stopped talking for six months.

Finally, a mutual friend suggested, gently, that I had also been a little unkind in response to my friend's texts.

I thought about that. I reviewed the events that transpired. I did some calculations. I figured out that I was 15 percent responsible. So, I decided to apologize for my 15 percent.

For better or for worse, I decided not to lead with, "I'm 15 percent responsible, so I want to apologize for my 15 percent." Instead, I just said that I was sorry that I had gotten so angry. I had made some assumptions that weren't right. My feelings had been pretty raw. I hadn't intended to be so stubborn.

Immediately, she told me that I didn't need to apologize.

And then there was a long pause. I waited for her to say more.

She asked me what my kids were up to.

I was so surprised by my friend's mid-apology dodge. She didn't give me an opportunity to express what I had been feeling. And she didn't take any responsibility for her part.

But I was glad that I apologized for my 15 percent. I do worry that she thought I was apologizing for 100 percent, but it seemed a little awkward to text her a post-apology clarification.

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On Kol Nidrei, we consider our actions of the past year. We consider whom we have harmed, or hurt, or betrayed. We consider how we could have acted better, where our actions fell short.

Some of us broke a promise or yelled at our parents in anger. We betrayed a spouse's trust or neglected our kids. We insulted a loved one who was vulnerable. We were mean. We were careless.

For others of us, it was more subtle. There was nothing egregious, but we didn't treat a colleague very well. We weren't honest with a friend. We didn't know how to navigate a difficult relationship. We couldn't figure out what our siblings needed from us.

Whatever we have done, we don't have to be stuck in shame, guilt, or anger. Jewish tradition gives us a process where we can forge a new path for ourselves, our relationships, and our future. The promise of *teshuvah*, literally turning back to our best selves, offers us the hope that where we are now is not where we forever must be.

We make mistakes, and sometimes they are serious ones. We are capable of creating real harm and deep hurt. But Yom Kippur offers us a space, every year, to review where we have been, to do *cheshbon hanefesh*, to take an accounting of our soul.

Teshuvah affirms that relationships can often be mended. Not always, but more often than we think. It requires that we grapple with our shortcomings, and it requires that we make real, durable change. *Teshuvah* does not promise forgiveness or reconciliation, though that's the hope, but it offers a way forward. We can't erase the past. Our deeds stand. But the process, at its best, can be transformative.

In a traditional *teshuvah* process, we first have to express regret for our actions, sincerely and not perfunctorily. Empty, thoughtless apologies aren't *teshuvah*. A quick sorry doesn't suffice.

Next, we have to not only renounce our actions, but stop doing the behavior that caused harm in the first place. If you yell at your partner, apologize, and continue the following week, you're not doing *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* requires meaningful, tangible change.

After that we confess our wrongdoings out loud. We face the people we've harmed, confront the consequences of our actions, and allow them to express their own emotions. Those of us who don't like to talk about our feelings, or hear other people's feelings, will find this particularly difficult. But it's important. The practice of restorative justice teaches us that being heard is a necessary component of forgiveness and healing.

Only after we take these steps do we offer an apology. Apologies, though, are not so straightforward.

Some of us under-apologize, and some of us over-apologize.

The under-apologizers among us shift the blame to someone else. We shirk responsibility for our actions. We rationalize. We avoid conflict. We hope the person we hurt will get over it.

I know some under-apologizers who are ill-equipped to handle another person's hurt feelings or harsh emotions. They do acts of kindness as a way to avoid difficult conversations. Some of us also fear that the person we hurt will not forgive us, so we avoid putting ourselves in a vulnerable position that will get us nowhere.

The difficulty, though, is that we can only solve a problem if we talk through what happened and take responsibility for our part. There is nothing easy about dealing with another person's hurt feelings. And again, sometimes it doesn't work out well. But we are obligated to try – that is what our tradition teaches us.

There's another issue, which is that our society shuns apology. When my partner, Renee, got in a bike accident, the person who opened her car door on her never apologized. We suspect that her lawyer told her not to, to avoid liability. But a heartfelt apology would have made a huge difference in our healing process.

Then there are the over-apologizers among us. Some among us say "I'm sorry" so frequently the words become meaningless. We apologize when someone bumps into us. We apologize for being too sensitive. We apologize for being hurt. Clearly, this kind of apologizing is not helpful.

"Sorry" also becomes a crutch or a hedge. We say "sorry" as a way to ask for something, but in a way that's deferential and not too demanding. We're uncomfortable saying no. We say "sorry" so much it becomes an ingrained habit. We don't even realize we're apologizing.

A few days ago, I learned that there is a Chrome extension you can put on your email called Just Not Sorry – which seems to be marketed primarily to women. It puts a red line under every "just" and "sorry" and "actually" you write. These words, apparently, undermine our authority and diminish our voice.

Maybe some over-apologizers need an app to reign in their apologies, but for what it's worth, I kind of like the words "just" and "sorry" and "actually" – and I don't think I'm an over-apologizer.

Over-apologizers also avoid conflict. We apologize in order to make the problem disappear. If we say "sorry" right away, we don't have to listen to how the person we hurt actually feels. "Sorry" is a preemptive strike used to deter real conversation.

I used to work with a guy who was always apologizing to his wife. He worked too much. He didn't take her needs into account. He was inconsiderate. His apologies were abundant and sincere. At first, I found his self-deprecating personality sort of appealing. But as time went on, I realized that his apologies were a substitute for making change.

There's another issue about apologies. Some of them are just so bad. We see these in the media all the time, but also in our personal relationships.

There's the apology that lacks a subject: "We acknowledge that unfortunate events transpired, and mistakes were made." What kind of apology is that? Who caused the unfortunate events to transpire? Who made the mistakes?

Even worse is when the apology blames the person from whom you're seeking forgiveness. "I'm sorry if you were hurt when I made that joke. I didn't mean anything by it." As if the problem is

that the recipient of the joke is so over-sensitive that they can't handle a little fun, rather than the teller of the joke taking responsibility for their insulting words.

There's also that vague Yom Kippur Facebook post: "I'm sorry to all my friends if there's anything I've done to hurt you." It makes you look like you're on top of your *teshuvah* game, but without specificity, there's no *teshuvah*. It's just another empty and meaningless apology.

A good apology is clear and unequivocal. We take responsibility for our actions, sincerely listen to the other person, and acknowledge the impact of our actions. We keep our explanations short, and we don't use them to justify our actions. We don't ask the other person to take care of us.

There is no *teshuvah* without apology, but an apology on its own is not sufficient. In the *teshuvah* process, there are two more steps. The first is to set things right. Sometimes it's not possible, but when it is, we should do it. We make restitution. We compensate for lost wages. We return what was stolen. We make a significant donation to an organization that addresses the issue around which we caused harm.

Second, we commit to change. The next time we're confronted with a similar situation, we decide to act differently. We take a break instead of yelling at our child. We speak up when we spot a racist policy. We treat our colleagues with more respect. We listen better. We act with more generosity.

It doesn't always work. The person we've hurt might not be ready to hear our apology. The hurt is too deep. More time needs to pass, and that's okay. *Teshuvah* can take a long time. Sometimes the person is too stubborn. They are not willing to forgive. Nothing we say or do matters. But still, we have to try – three times, say the Rabbis – before we can let it go.

An apology won't take us back to how things were before. The effects of the harm are still there. We can't force hurt feelings to dissolve, even if the person does accept our apology. It's not right to ask someone to forget the past. But it creates the possibility to forge a new path forward.

When we apologize, we are in control of the conversation. Sometimes, we take up a lot of space when we share our words and our thoughts. If we end there, or even continue with restitution and committing to change, it's still about us.

Somewhere in this process, perhaps right before or after the apology, we have to listen to the person we hurt. *Teshuvah*, when done well, can create a space where the person can talk about what happened, and they can share their feelings, not to lash out or dump or disparage, but to carefully describe their sore spots. To explain the contours and the impact of the hurt.

This only works if we really listen, and listen with curiosity. It's not a time to sit quietly while we craft our defense or plot our next move. When we really take in what the other person needs, we create an opening, and that opening leads to new possibilities.

I've thought a lot about the fight that I had with my friend. In offering an apology, I was sincere, and I was ready to listen to her perspective. But it didn't work. In retrospect, I had tried to set her up so that she would match my apology with one of her own. But we can't orchestrate reconciliations so easily.

Doing *teshuvah* is a risk, and it's difficult and uncomfortable to make ourselves vulnerable. We reach out, we follow the steps, we are remorseful, and we are ready to change. But doing *teshuvah* does not always produce happy endings. *Teshuvah* is only a process; it does not guarantee a particular outcome.

I still think that doing *teshuvah* is worth it. It changes us. It makes us more genuine and more compassionate. It whittles away at our certainty, which is the enemy of change. *Teshuvah* affirms that divergent perspectives can be valid and that relationships are complex.

Sometimes we will experience reconciliation. We will fix what is broken. That's certainly the hope. But even if it's not possible, doing *teshuvah* makes us better people.

And really, that's the point. We will make mistakes. And when we do, we have a choice: we can take responsibility, and we can change. We can open our hearts, act with sincerity, listen carefully, and generate deeper understanding.

Where we are is not forever where we must be.

May we create new possibilities in this next year, and forge a path forward with courage and hope.

Gmar chatimah tovah.