

We Are All Responsible for Each Other

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I hate apologizing. I just hate it. Ask my husband. He'll be more than happy to confirm this. Maybe a little too happy to confirm it.

Apologizing is not something that comes easily to me. It makes me uncomfortable and embarrassed. On any given day I tend to be filled with self-reproach, making mental lists of the things I forgot to do, or the things I *shouldn't* have done or said. And each night I tend to dwell on the things I wish I had done differently during the course of the day.

So when I actually do need to look someone in the face and apologize, I often feel so paralyzed by my self-recrimination that I'd rather sit in my own shame than allow myself the possibility of forgiveness.

It is very easy to study and to teach about Jewish values, practices and principles, but it is another thing entirely to try to live up to them.

And for me, one of the hardest values to practice is the one that we are supposed to be focusing on at this time of year; *teshuva*.

“*Teshuva*” literally means “return,” but we usually translate it as repentance. *Teshuva* is the act, or more accurately the process, of returning to the place we were before we sinned or before we acted in a way that we regret.

Teshuva is central to Jewish theology. It is the belief that people are not inherently good or bad, but that we *are* inherently human. And to be human is to make mistakes, *and* to be human means having the ability to correct our mistakes. *Teshuva* is something that can be asked for and something that can be given to others.

Our faith teaches us that when we make mistakes we must make *teshuva* – this requires that we first recognize that we have done something wrong, then unequivocally apologize to the person whom we have hurt, explaining to them what we have done wrong (so they know that we actually understand what we did), and then try to make amends for the mistake, if at all possible.

We know that *teshuva* has been achieved when we are in the same position to make the same mistake as we did before, but this time we refrain from repeating the negative behavior.

Judaism teaches us that to believe in the possibility of *teshuva* is not only to understand that people make mistakes, but to believe that we are capable of learning and growing from our mistakes, and that we are capable of forgiving others for their mistakes as well.

As I said, *teshuva* is not only something we ask for, it also something that we can give to others. When we accept someone's apology, when we open our hearts and give *them* the space to show us that *they* have changed, we are granting them *teshuva*, the possibility of a new beginning.

This is what the High Holidays are about, a belief that human beings are capable of change, of growth, and of giving and receiving forgiveness.

In an academic setting, this sounds great. But in real life...in real life, this is exceedingly hard. I am not alone in my discomfort with apologizing. For most of us publicly admitting that we have done wrong and asking for forgiveness is embarrassing, sometimes even humiliating. To look at someone you have hurt, and to acknowledge that *you* are the source of that pain, that is hard.

It is equally hard to forgive someone who has hurt us, to trust them again, to let down our defenses, and say "I'll give you another chance."

And yet, I do believe in the power of *teshuva*. I not only believe that to err is human, but I believe that to forgive is human.

But last July, my belief in *teshuva* was put to a real life test.

While I was spending time in the beautiful hills of Santa Rosa, living in my happy little bubble known as Jewish summer camp, real life came crashing through, courtesy of Facebook. I read on a friend's post that the Imam in Davis had given a sermon, full of anti-Semitic imagery and violent teachings. It was filled with words that stung and words that shocked. Words that hurt and created a sense of fear for many of us.

After years of the Jewish and Muslim communities of the greater Sacramento area working hard to build bridges, and to create a peaceful relationship, this felt like someone had just uncovered a mine field that we were unaware lay just beneath our feet. Everyone was holding their breath, waiting to see what would happen next.

During the week after the Imam's sermon went public, there was a voluminous amount of phone calls, emails and meetings between leaders in the Jewish and Muslim communities. The Imam's co-religionists here in the greater Sacramento area were angry at him, upset at the damage he had done between our communities, as well as the hurt and fear his words had inflicted on the local Jewish community.

Many Muslim leaders reached out to the leadership of the Jewish community. They were apologetic for the Imam's sermon, embarrassed by what he had said, and they were asking how could they fix this breach of trust.

And for an entire week, Jewish community leaders were publicly silent. We listened. We wanted explanations. We wanted a sincere apology. And we wanted to be able to believe that this would not happen again.

The Imam seemed both apologetic and confused. He honestly seemed surprised by the way his words were received, and the attention they got. He felt that his words had been taken out of

context and misunderstood. He wanted not only to apologize, but also to explain himself to the local rabbis.

Now I know that many doubt the sincerity of the Imam's apology. So let me share with you what was not included in his public apology. At the same time the apology was issued, the Imam requested to meet with the Rabbis of the greater Sacramento area with a desire to apologize and explain himself to us personally, face to face.

Now for anyone to come to a meeting with eight rabbis from three different movements can be very daunting, but for an Imam who was at the center of a firestorm of hurt and anger because of his sermon, I imagine he must have been somewhat scared about what to expect. And yet, he asked for the meeting anyway.

We met with him for an hour and half. And after that meeting, I still can't tell you definitively what the Imam believes. The only thing I can tell you is that he seems to be trying to make amends, even if he does not fully understand how or why we felt scared and upset by his sermon.

Part of what makes *teshuva* so difficult and so scary is that we can't know what is in someone else's heart, we can only see and experience their words and their deeds, and pray that they are sincere.

As I said earlier, for *teshuva* to be achieved means that we have to be in the same position as we were before and see if that person behaves differently given the same temptations. This means to forgive someone makes us vulnerable, and that is very scary.

In addition to the Imam's public apology, the Muslim community came out with at least two more public apologies, as well as many private and personal ones.

I want to share with you one of the apologies that was sent to the rabbis and published in the Davis Vanguard, but did not receive any other coverage. It was by a group called "Davis Muslim Hands." It is a group of Muslims who live in Davis, some belong to the mosque, some belong to mosques in Sacramento. They wrote:

"Davis Muslim Hands publicly states that we strongly repudiate the hurtful and inexcusable anti-Semitic words that were delivered July 21 in the sermon at the Islamic Center of Davis. Our hearts go out to the Jewish community here and worldwide for the deep pain this sermon has caused you, your family, and your friends. We can only imagine how terrifying it must feel for a community that faced genocide to hear such vitriolic and dangerous words.

Brothers and sisters of the Jewish community of Davis and beyond, as soon as this distressing crisis broke out a week ago, many Jewish and Muslim community leaders actively came together to work behind the scenes to contain and correct the situation, and restore peace and harmony to our precious hometown. We are grateful that their diligent efforts bore fruit last Friday July 28 with the public and unequivocal apology of the Imam of the Islamic Center of Davis. We are even *more* grateful that Davis and Sacramento Jewish community leaders have accepted his apology as a first step, to be followed by actions in the weeks and months to come.

We are truly blessed to live in Davis where we have amazing community organizations like the Celebration of Abraham and the Phoenix Coalition, as well as political leaders who promote understanding and peaceful co-existence. When the Islamic Center of Davis was vandalized, you were all there to support the Center. In light of that support, to say that we have been ashamed and disgraced by this sad crisis is an understatement.

These past several days have been dark, but let us use this as a pivotal moment to be a shining beacon to the world, such that when anti-Semitic or other violent words or actions occur, we do not stay silent, but rather speak up and stand for what is right, correct what is wrong, and reach out to each other to heal and strengthen the solid unity of our beloved Davis and its beautiful citizens.

Shalom/Salam/Peace,
Davis Muslim Hands”

Several of the leaders from Davis Muslim Hands are people that I have been proud to know and work with for well over a decade. I know from their past actions that this letter was heartfelt and sincere.

Their letter also illustrates exactly what this time of year on the Jewish calendar is supposed to remind us to do, and what our responsibilities are.

Because Judaism teaches us that *teshuvah* is not only something we are supposed to do for our own personal mistakes and misdeeds, but for our *communities*’ mistakes, misdeeds, and sins as well.

If you pay careful attention to our *machzor*, our High Holiday prayer book, you will notice that every single time we apologize, we are apologizing for OUR sins, not each of our sins, but OUR collective wrong doings.

The prayers we say and again and again throughout this holy day are not “forgive ME God,” no, we say “forgive US.”

S'lach LANU!
M'chal LANU!
Kaper LANU!
Forgive US!
Pardon US!
Grant US atonement!

On Yom Kippur we do not stand before God as individuals praying for forgiveness for our own sake, we stand before our Creator asking for our *community* to be forgiven for the sins *we* have committed either personally, or by association, or by our silence, and therefore with our complicity.

Because before we even get to Kol Nidre we are supposed to atone for our personal sins, because once we step in here on the eve of Yom Kippur we are to remember that we are not being judged

by ourselves, but we are being judged for our collective actions – *Kol Yisrael aravim zeh l'zeh* – all of Israel is responsible one for the other.

On Yom Kippur we are forced to acknowledge that our personal fate is wrapped up in the deeds *and* misdeeds of those around us.

The prayer book asks us to recognize that when *I* do something wrong it affects each of *you*. And when *one* of *you* does something wrong, it affects all of *us*.

And this also works in the positive. The converse for “*s’lach lanu, m’chal lanu, kaper lanu* – forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement” is “*siman tov u’mazal tov y’hey lanu, u’vchol Yisrael*” – this is the song we sing when something good happens for someone - “It is a good sign, a good omen for us and for all the Jewish people.”

In other words, your blessing is my blessing, and my curse is your curse. Jews learned long ago, that for good and for bad, our personal fates are intertwined with the fate of our community.

As we learn in the Talmud, “If one can protest the misdeeds of his or her household, yet does not, the person becomes guilty with them. If a person can protest the misdeeds of one’s townspeople and does not, the person is guilty with them. If one can protest the misdeeds of the entire world and does not, that person is guilty with them” (Shabbat 54b).

From this we learn that we must speak out against injustices wherever they occur, at all levels of society and in the many different communities in which we all operate. Because if we see someone doing something wrong and *we* are silent, then *we* are complicit and *we* are guilty.

We know too well from our own history as Jews, and as Americans, the harm that can be done when we allow ourselves to be silent bystanders in the face of injustice.

In Elie Wiesel’s Nobel Prize Acceptance speech he expressed it beautifully, when he said:
“I swore never to be silent whenever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Whenever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must--at that moment--become the center of the universe. . . . There is much to be done, there is much that can be done. One person...of integrity can make a difference, a difference between life and death. As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame.”

OUR lives will be filled with anguish and shame. WE are each responsible, one for the other. This is the essence of what it means to be a Jew, it is to believe that we must at least *try* to make a positive difference for each other’s sake.

We must each try to repair what is broken, even if we weren’t the ones who broke it.

When the local Muslim community issued three separate apologies for the Imam’s sermon, they were saying that they did not want to be complicit with anti-Semitism. They were saying that

even if only one amongst them said the words, they wanted to make a collective statement that those words, those ideas, those beliefs, were not acceptable to their community.

Being Jewish is not easy. In part because there is not one clear way to be Jewish. And being Jewish is hard because we are often faced with external challenges *and* internal road blocks.

Being Jewish is challenging, because to live a Jewish life is to choose to live an *intentional* life, a *meaningful* life. Not twice a year, not just while in synagogue, but every day, wherever we are, with whomever we encounter.

Living a Jewish life is choosing to live with mindfulness and compassion, purpose and responsibility, it is about translating your beliefs into action, into deeds, every - single - day.

This morning I am asking you, and asking me, to try to practice one of the hardest things Judaism demands of us – to live with an open mind and a forgiving heart, to believe that all people are created with an inherent goodness, a spark of the Holy within them, a belief that we are all capable of growth and change.

I am asking that we try to live with the belief that we have the power to heal the world, if only we begin by healing our own hearts and our relationships with one another first. I truly believe that we have the power to fix the world if we live each day with a sense of responsibility for each other's well being that is as strong as the sense of responsibility we have for ourselves.

Mi sheberach avoteinu – Avraham, Yitzchak, v'Ya'akov, v'imoteinu – Sara, Rivka, Rachel v'Leah – May the One who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless us with courage, with *teshuva*, and with strength - the courage to learn and grow from our mistakes, the capacity to engage in *teshuva* by offering and receiving forgiveness from those whom we have hurt, and those who have hurt us, and grant us the strength to be responsible for the actions of the many communities in which we live.

Ken yehi ratzon – May this be God's will.