You can get almost anything in China these days: appliances, toys, electronic equipment. Even apologies.

Yes, there is a company in China that specializes in apologies. All you have to do is go in and explain exactly what it is you want to apologize for, and to whom, and, for a modest fee, they will take care of the rest. It’s called the Tianjin Apology and Gift Center. According to an article in the *New York Times*, it has 20 employees, “all middle-aged men and women with college degrees who dress in somber suits” who deliver the apologies. “On behalf of clients, the apologizers write letters, deliver gifts and make explanations.” Their motto is, “We Say Sorry for You.” (Elisabeth Rosenthal, “Tianjin Journal; For a Fee, This Chinese Firm Will Beg Pardon for Anyone,” *New York Times*, January 3, 2001)

At first glance, this is quite appealing. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a nice, well-dressed and well-spoken person do it for us? As we know, it’s easy to feel that we have done something worth apologizing for. But to actually go ahead and apologize—that’s hard!

Nonetheless, I think it’s pretty clear that, to us, at least, there’s something not quite right about this picture. For an apology to be effective, it really must be conveyed personally, at least in our culture.

Today is Yom Kippur, the Day of “Atonement”—or “Reconciliation.” Our tradition recognizes that one of the key stumbling blocks to achieving reconciliation (*kapparah*, in Hebrew) is apologizing. It’s by now so well-known to us all that it seems superfluous to say it, but I’ll say it anyway: Yom Kippur is an opportunity for atonement for offenses between us and God. As far as offenses between human beings are concerned, “*ein yom ha-kippurim m’chaper ad she-y’ ratzeh et haver*”—“Yom Kippur cannot atone until one has successfully apologized to the person offended.” But what makes for a successful apology?
Dr. Aaron Lazare, Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester, is the author of a recent book on apologies (*On Apology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Dr. Lazare lists four elements that are absolutely necessary for an apology to be effective: one must acknowledge the offense to the offended person, one must experience and display remorse, one must offer a satisfactory explanation of the offensive behavior, and one must offer reparations. Dr. Lazare could just as well have quoted Maimonides. In his Mishneh Torah (Laws of Repentence), Maimonides writes about the necessary steps to achieve teshuvah, or repentence, whether for sins between us and God or sins between us and other human beings. *Teshuvah* requires *vidui*, confession. It also requires *haratah*, regret, together with a resolution to desist from the undesirable behavior in the future. In the event that someone has harmed another human being, one must make restitution. Only after all that has occurred may one ask for, and expect to receive, forgiveness from the person who has been harmed.

Sometimes people think they’re apologizing, but they’re really not. For example, someone might say, “I’m sorry,” without really intending to apologize. “I’m sorry” can be an expression of empathy, as in “I’m sorry you’re upset;” it doesn’t mean that the speaker feels or is expressing any responsibility for that emotional state. A classic example is a Blondie comic strip in which Mr. Dithers, Dagwood’s boss, tells Dagwood: “You’re a dimwit!” Afterwards, he feels bad about saying that, so he calls Dagwood in and says, “I’m sorry you’re a dimwit!”

Many apologies fail because they are pseudo-apologies, in which there is no true acknowledgement of wrongdoing. It’s very common to use the passive voice in a pseudo-apology. Various presidents of the United States have employed this location, dating all the way back to Ulysses S. Grant. In his last annual address to Congress, responding to criticism regarding corruption during his second term, President Grant stated that “errors of judgment must have occurred” and “Mistakes have been made.” He went on to say that “History shows that no Administration… has been free from these mistakes.” Is this an adequate apology? As Dr. Lazare puts it:

Nowhere does [Grant] “own” the offense; instead, he tries to give the blame to others. … [H]e tries to “normalize” his actions by suggesting that presidential administrations have always made mistakes and that his is no exception. Finally, he justifies his choices by claiming that ‘in every instance’ he had acted from ‘conscientious desire to do what was right, … for the best interests of the whole people.’ … Grant’s speech is not an apology at all but is rather an *apologia*—a justification or defense of his administration’s actions and decisions.” (p. 90)
Another problem is the so-called conditional apology. During the recent clergy abuse scandal, a church official in New York said the following, “If in hindsight we … discover that mistakes may have been made, … I am deeply sorry.” (p. 90). By the time he had made that statement, it was already obvious to everyone that mistakes had indeed been made!

Yet another way to avoid responsibility while seeming to acknowledge it is to question whether the offended person was or should have been damaged in the first place. “Saying things like, ‘If you were offended,’ says, in effect, ‘Not everyone would be offended by my behavior. If you [are so sensitive], I will apologize to you because of your need (your weakness) and my generosity. I hope this makes you happy.’”

A few years ago, Tiger Woods, as defending golf champion in the Masters Tournament, had the privilege of selecting the menu for the following year’s Champions Dinner. One of the other golfers in the tournament made the following observation during a CNN interview: ‘That little boy is driving well and he’s putting well. … [P]at him on the back and say ‘congratulations and enjoy it’ and tell him not to serve fried chicken next year … or collard greens or whatever [it is] they serve.” (p. 95)

In response to the public outrage at this overt racism, the speaker “apologized” as follows: “My comments were not intended to be racially derogatory, and I apologize for the fact that they were misconstrued in that fashion. … It’s too bad that something I said in jest was turned into something it’s not, but I didn’t mean anything by it and I’m sorry if I offended anybody. If Tiger is offended by it, I apologize to him, too.” (p. 95)

There are multiple problems here. One is that the speaker is apologizing not for what he said but for the fact that his words were misconstrued. He could have said, “I am sorry for my insensitive (or thoughtless, or hurtful) remarks. I was wrong. It will not happen again.”

Even if an apology does acknowledge responsibility, it may still fail. For one thing, not all apologizers express remorse. Remorse means regret, coupled with a commitment to refrain from the offensive behavior in the future. Without that, it’s not a true apology.

Take, for instance, the classic case of the husband sitting down on the couch with the T.V. clicker in his hand: “I want to apologize,” he says to his wife, “for the fact that I am going to ignore you for the rest of the evening.” Now, is that an apology?
It is an acknowledgement of offensive behavior! That it is! But the husband really means to say, “I’m sorry that I’m going to ignore you,” in the sense that, maybe, he feels badly for his wife. There’s no true regret, in the sense that he is committed to doing things differently in the future, because in fact he’s not.

An apology also requires an explanation for the offensive behavior, and this can be a problem as well. Some people will say things like, “I wasn’t myself.” Which just raises the question, “Well, who were you at the time?” And some people will just lie.

A few years ago, a North Carolina state legislator forwarded an e-mail to every member of his state House and Senate that said, “Two things made this country great: White men and Christianity.” There was, understandably, an uproar. And so a few days later he issued a statement that said the following: “I humbly want to apologize if the e-mail forwarded from my office on Monday night was offensive or disrespectful to anyone in this General Assembly, state or nation.”

Note again that conditional “if”. That’s bad enough. But then the representative went on to try to explain himself. “The only reason,” he wrote, that “the document was forwarded to each of you was for information and to show the type of messages that come across the Internet. My purpose in sending out the e-mail was for no other reason and was not intended to be indicative of my personal views.” Unfortunately, one day earlier, he had said of the e-mail, “There’s a lot of it that’s truth, the way I see it. Who came to this country first—the white man, didn’t he? That’s who made this country great.” Can an incredible explanation be part of a successful apology?

Finally, apologies can fail if the reparations offered are inadequate. For what the injured party often craves is not financial compensation per se, as much as it is a restoration of hurt feelings or self-esteem. People need assurance that their suffering matters to the offender. Reasonable compensation can sometimes express that sentiment.

Given how hard it is to “get it right,” how easy it is to fail at an apology, that might seem to explain why people sometimes don’t apologize at all, or not for a long time. But there’s also a deeper reason. We don’t want to apologize because we don’t really want to look deeply at ourselves and see the ways we hurt others. It hurts us to do that. We don’t want to admit that we’re not who we’d like to be.
But that’s why we’re here in shul right now. That’s why we’re going through the motions of confessing to all manner of sins. If we can do it here in shul, perhaps we can do it in the presence of those whom we’ve hurt.

Our tradition recognizes two kinds of *teshuvah*, two ways in which people are motivated to alter their behavior. The first is *teshuvah me-*ahavah: teshuvah that arises out of the love of God. This is *teshuvah* that arises from our desire to be better people. Because we feel empathy for other human beings, we seek to apologize to them when it is necessary. The other kind of *teshuvah* is *teshuvah me-*yirah: *teshuvah* that arises out of fear. Once we realize that various negative consequences (such as feelings of guilt or shame) will continue so long as we continue to behave the way we have, we feel motivated, eventually, to apologize in order to lessen those feelings.

I say, “eventually,” because it can take some people an awfully long time to come to that realization.

Dr. Lazare tells the story of a 71 year old man named Manny Zax from Worcester who attended one of his lectures on apologies. Manny was so struck by what he heard that, then and there, he decided to apologize to a childhood friend of his named Eddie whom he had let down many, many years earlier. Both of them were schoolboys at the time, living in Dorchester. Everybody was standing around in a circle taunting and humiliating Eddie. Eddie looked toward Manny, imploring him to stand by him, but Manny didn’t do that. He backed away and joined the other boys. Manny never forgot having done that and never stopped feeling ashamed of himself his entire life, until he decided to do something about it.

He wrote a letter to Eddie and hand-delivered it. “I’m apologizing for my behavior [back] then on Wildwood Street,” he wrote. “Though I wanted to say these words to you, I felt that I couldn’t. Typing these words has been difficult enough for me. . . . Your loving friend, Manny.” Their reconciliation, 61 years after the event that led to it, was tearful and heartfelt. Finally, Manny later wrote, “I have been released from that haunting image of hurting Eddie.” (p.4)

Needless to say, one need not wait that long. An apology, delivered in a timely manner, can even play an important role in matters of life and death.

Some years ago, a healthy woman was admitted to the Beth Israel—Deaconess Medical Center at midnight to deliver her first baby. At first things seemed to be going well, then, tragically, they didn’t. By 6:45 a.m., the woman was being rushed into the operating room for an emergency Cesarean section. The baby was
stillborn and the woman required an emergency hysterectomy. Her tsuris didn’t end there. During the next several weeks, she had several life-threatening problems requiring a lengthy hospitalization and a long, slow recovery.

This was a terrible situation. Ordinarily, it would most likely have resulted in a lawsuit, ice-cold communication between the two sides, and bad feeling all around. Instead, the head of obstetrics and gynecology at the hospital, Dr. Benjamin Sachs, became personally involved. He and his colleagues investigated the event, determined quickly that the hospital was at fault, and swiftly proposed a financial settlement. Moreover, he met with the family daily as part of the process of determining just what had happened.

It wasn’t easy. “I saw great suffering in this case,” said Dr. Sachs. “I met with the family on a daily basis as they sat outside the ICU. I was the recipient of their anger, their appropriate anger.”

As a result of the investigation, new procedures were put into place to diminish the chances of this ever happening again. Such procedures have already arguably saved lives. (“Since 2000, the proportion of mothers who experienced an adverse event, either avoidable or unavoidable, dropped to 5.3 percent from 6.3 percent.” Liz Kowalczyk, “A Baby’s Death Prompts Reforms in Care: Rare Article Recounts Errors and Response,” Boston Globe, August 17, 2005)

Why did Dr. Sachs and his department do what they did? Given the enormous risks to the hospital and to its reputation, to staff morale, why do it? I called up Dr. Sachs and I put that question to him. The answer he gave me was quite simple. “As I sat there with the family outside the ICU,” he said, “I vowed that I would do everything I could to try to prevent this from happening again.”

The department’s investigation resulted in an extraordinary collaboration. Physicians as well as members of the family took part in a Grand Rounds discussion, which resulted in an article that was just published in the Journal of the American Medical Association. In it, Dr. Sachs is unflinching. In the presence of the patient and her family, he offers an unqualified apology, with no passive language. There are no false explanations. Moreover, he and his colleagues had already demonstrated clear remorse in the most convincing way possible: through putting into place new procedures to try to prevent such an event from happening again.
There were, of course, reparations. It is worthy of note that, included in the financial settlement was a commitment by the hospital to sponsor an annual lecture devoted to enhancing patient safety in memory of the baby who had been lost.

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Apologies can do more than to set the crooked straight. As here, they can heal—when they encourage and allow meaningful dialogue to take place. “A true apology,” according to Dr. Lazare, “is among the most graceful and profound of all human exchanges. When it is sincere, it is not an end, but a new beginning.”

As we begin the New Year of 5766, let’s take time on this holy day to begin again.

We all have a choice. We can add to the U.S. trade deficit and purchase apologies in China. Or we can do what we know we should, must, and can do, namely, to overcome our resistance, look honestly at our behavior, acknowledge our faults, and reach out, personally, to seek reconciliation with the people we’ve hurt and offended.

We don’t need to wait sixty years to apologize. In fact, we shouldn’t. Manny Zax was lucky. He got to apologize to his boyhood friend from Dorchester. Only eighteen months later, his friend passed away. What if Manny had waited another couple of years? He would never have had the chance to achieve kapparah—attonement.

Let’s use this day the way it was intended to be used. Let us decide when, where, how and to whom to apologize, and let’s make this a true Day of Atonement. Amen.