

Rabbi Michael Beals

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Why is it so hard to apologize – and what to do about it?

*Gut yontev.*

From the Mishnah:

*Yom Kippur atones for transgressions between a person and God, but for a transgression against one's neighbor, Yom Kippur cannot atone, until he appeases his neighbor."*

This last year of COVID19 self-seclusion, followed by a gradual opening, and now a potential new seclusion brought on by the Delta variant, has created such disruptions in our social lives. Nowhere is this MORE true than in our interpersonal communications. Virtual technologies replaced larger classroom and meeting spaces, everything is far more INTENSE, and MAGNIFIED. There is no escaping to the back of the room. With Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Go to Meeting, Google Groups, Adobe Connect, BlueJeans (the App, not the pants), everyone has orchestra seats.

This means the opportunity to make mistakes, where everything is heard and seen, becomes much greater. And the need to apologize becomes that much greater, too.

Imagine my delight, when in late June, I heard this introduction to one of my favorite NPR shows, *The Hidden Brain*:

*I'm Shankar Vedantam. I'm sorry. It's one of the simplest things to say, and also one of the hardest. This week on Hidden Brain, the psychology of apologizing. We look at the mental barriers that make it hard for us to acknowledge when we've done something wrong, the changing cultural expectations around apologies, and why it may be useful to think of an apology as a gift.*

You don't have to be a pulpit rabbi to know when NPR has identified a perfect High Holy Day sermon topic...but in my case, it helped. Here are some of the insights I picked up from that program.

University of Queensland in Australia's Dr. Tyler Okimoto studies the psychology of apologies. He examines what happens in our minds when we apologize, when we don't, and the transformative power of apologies.

Here's my favorite horrible apology which you should never repeat: "I'm sorry that you felt that way."

Okimoto uses failed apologies as case examples of what's going on in the brain which limits the ability to apologize. With the Tokyo Olympics just behind us, Okimoto reminds us of the Rio Olympics of 2016 with his first example. The star U.S. swimmer Ryan Lochte and one other athlete said they had been robbed at night by armed men. It turned out the story was only a cover for what really happened and that this is a classic example of how we often react when we're accused of doing something bad. First reaction is deny, come up with an excuse, trying to paint yourself in the best possible picture. And it turned out what had actually happened is that Lochte had been drinking, been partying, had thrown a tantrum in the store, had done some property damage. The security guard had tried to intervene and stop the behavior. Lochte, realizing that this was going to be a PR problem for him, invented the robbery story.

It was only with hindsight and time that he was able to step up and own up to the fact that he had blatantly lied. No real apology – denial and lie.

In the second story of an apology gone wrong, we go back to April 2010, when an oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico. It killed 11 workers. It ignited a fireball that was visible 40 miles away. This was British Petroleum's infamous Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

On May 13, 2010, BP Chairman Tony Hayward, speaking to the *Guardian* newspaper, said: "The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The volume of oil and dispersant we're putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume." Five days later, Hayward said to Britain's *Sky News*, "I think the environmental impact of this disaster is likely to be very modest."

Psychologist Tyler Okimoto observed that BP Chairman Hayward's response was a bit of a Ryan Lochte on the bigger scale. It sounded like the initial responses seemed to be about minimizing the damage. For BP's Hayward it didn't work. Three months after his initial responses, he was sacked.

From a very early age, kids are taught by their parents to say: "I'm sorry." So why couldn't grownups like Olympic swimmer Ryan Lochte and BP's Tony Hayward apologize?

Dr. Okimoto suggests one of the things that happens when you apologize is relinquishing a bit of power and control in that situation. By admitting that you've done something wrong, by saying that you're sorry, you are handing over the opportunity for forgiveness to the other person.

Another psychological obstacle to apologizing is a surprising short-term boost non-apologizers receive in their reported self-esteem. They actually felt better about themselves following a refusal to apologize. Okimoto's studies revealed that when you refuse to apologize, it gives you a feeling of increased power and control in that situation. At the same time, by digging in and saying, "No, no, I've done the right thing," it gives a bit of a boost to your feelings of integrity as well. Integrity is walking your talk. When you apologize, you're saying, "The way that I acted is not consistent with my values." However, Okimoto reveals that any self-esteem boost that comes from a refusal to apologize is short-lived.

A huge barrier to apologizing has to do with the toll it takes on self-esteem. TV talk show host Ellen DeGeneres came under fire some time ago for presiding over what some employees called a toxic workplace. Do you remember this?

During an interview on The Today Show, Ellen said: "I am a kind person. I am a person who likes to make people happy. I am a people pleaser. This is who I am. And so, when I started hearing, reading ridiculous things, and then it just kept going and going and going and going, that made me think, 'Someone's trying to really hurt me.'" Her response leads us to conclude that our positive self-concept itself can become yet another barrier to apologizing.

Thus far, I've covered some internal obstacles to apologizing, why not apologizing can sometimes feel good, and how admitting that we have done someone wrong can threaten our positive view of ourselves.

However, psychologist Okimoto also says apologies work, if we do them better.

It might be helpful to hear, what Okimoto and others have labeled one of the world's ten best apologies so we can have an example of what to shoot for.

First, by way of background: On January 30th, 1972, British paratroopers opened fire on protestors in Northern Ireland and they killed 13. The event came to be known as Bloody Sunday. Thirty-eight years later, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, offered the following apology:

*I never want to believe anything bad about our country. I never want to call into question the behavior of our soldiers and our army, who I believe to be the finest in the world. But the conclusions of this report are absolutely clear. What happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable. It was wrong. I know that some people wonder whether nearly 40 years on from an event, a prime minister needs to issue an apology. For someone of my generation, Bloody Sunday and the early 1970s are something we feel we have learned about rather than lived through, but what happened should never, ever have happened. The families of those who died should not have had to live with the pain and the hurt of that day and with a lifetime of loss. The government is ultimately responsible for the conduct of the armed forces and for that, on behalf of the government, indeed, on behalf of our country, I am deeply sorry.*

(((Pause)))

No minimization. No dodging. No hedging. You are also possibly hearing the real desire to create reconciliation between the British government of PM David Cameron and the Catholic community of Northern Ireland.

Reconciliation is such an important high holy day goal. Apologies have the power to create reconciliation between the victim and the transgressor.

Okimoto explains that “there are really two aspects to the reconciliation process. There's the backward-looking, trying to make sense and come to a shared understanding about what happened, and what my responsibility was in that. “

“The other half of it is the forward-thinking, the future-focused aspect of the apology, which is, really, what's going to happen from now on,” to evidence your willingness to move towards that future behavior.”

A Chasidic rabbinic master, Polish-born Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, who perished in the Holocaust, understood what needed to be done to help us bridge the gap between self-preservation and apology, to create a joining between people, and between people and God. In a sermon, he wrote: “we must make space for God, and Godly pursuits, like being able to apologize, we need to practice *tsimtzum*, the reduction of our own ego, and our need to be right, in order to let the Other in, and ultimately to let God in.”

To overcome the obstacles to apologize, we need to value the long-term benefit of being in relationship, more than the short-term benefit of being right. This ability to both apologize and to forgive, given without expectation of reciprocation, can be a gift both to the one we have offended, AND a gift to ourselves.

On this Yom Kippur, may we understand what gets in the way of apologizing. May we make our apologies more intentional and with empathy. May we craft our apologies in a way that strengthens our relationships, both with our fellow human beings and with our God.

*Tsom kal* – may your fast be an easy one, and a meaningful one.