

APOLOGY SERMON –ROSH HASHANAH 5778

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When I lived in Washington, DC, I shared a Victorian townhouse with a friend. Everything was fine until it snowed badly one winter, because the snow started seeping through the back wall into the dining room. We contacted our landlord – I'll call him Bill. He gave us the hardest time about fixing this breach. He was mostly unreachable and, when we were able to get a hold of him, he was nasty. After many months, I had to finally call the city which cited and fined him before he would call in the repairmen. Then, a few months later, in what was clearly an act of revenge, he raised the rent significantly. I kept wondering what we had done to cause Bill to treat us so shabbily. Had we offended him in some way? Now fast forward ten years later. I was attending a conference in San Francisco and, as I was going up an escalator, who should be going down opposite me but Bill, my former landlord. He signaled that he wanted to speak to me, so I followed him down to the next level, and lo and behold, he apologized for the way he behaved when I was his tenant ten years earlier. "I was going through a divorce," he explained, "and things were very bad. I am really sorry I acted like a jerk." I was stunned, but grateful for this recognition that it was him, not I, who had misbehaved.

Three of the hardest words to say are "I am sorry."

Yet a lot of what is required of us during the High Holy Days is apologizing for our wrongdoings. Why is it so difficult? There are many reasons. For one, we don't like being wrong. We don't want to lose face, appear weak, feel ashamed, or maybe even show emotion. Maybe we're afraid of how the other person will react. Will they accept our apology? Will they rub it in? Or maybe we have been accumulating a record of grudges against the other person, so when we need to make amends, we feel justified in our bad behavior.

Psychologist Robert Gordon explains that, too often, we apologize in order to get something¹: avoid punishment, for example. But a true apology is about giving something and the real goal is to repair a relationship.

Indeed, most of us don't really know how to apologize properly. As hard as it is to apologize, though, I'm not sure we want to follow China's example. Apparently, apologizing in China has become easier of late. According to Aaron Lazare, the author of *On Apology*, China has created "several apology companies, as well as apology 'call-in' shows on state radio. The Tianjin Apology and Gift Center, part of a psychological stress reduction center, has a staff of 20 who write letters, deliver gifts, and offer explanations."² I agree with author Lazare when he expresses doubts that this sort of business would be successful here.

We expect our apologies to be just a bit more personal! Although, because you can find just about anything on the Internet, I discovered several web sites right here in the US that feature sample apology letters for a whole range of offenses. But you do have to fill in the blanks yourself.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in most cultures, it seems to be easier for women than for men to apologize. Lazare, who is Chancellor and Dean of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, was invited by a female physician to speak about apology at an annual meeting of Indian physicians. He noticed that the women doctors and the wives of physicians were very responsive. The men, on the other hand, were silent. It turns out that the invitation's hidden agenda was to help men learn to apologize to their wives!

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7vP01U8qr4>; <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/liking-the-child-you-love/201412/the-three-parts-meaningful-heartfelt-apology>

² Pp.7-8

But seriously, we should consider what makes a proper apology. According to a Chassidic story, Rabbi **Elimelech** of Lizhensk was a righteous man. On the eve of Yom Kippur, he told his students: "If you want to know how a Jew should make atonement, go observe the tailor who lives in town." So his students went to the tailor's house and looked through the window. The tailor and his children recited the afternoon prayers, then, putting on their best clothes, they sat down to the pre-fast meal and ate with great joy. Once the meal was over, the tailor went to his closet and took out a notebook. "Master of the Universe," he said, addressing God, "now is the time for You and I to make amends for the sins of the past year." The tailor proceeded to read all the sins he had committed which were written down in his notebook. When he was done, he went back to the closet, pulling out a much thicker notebook. "Now that I have recited my sins, dear God," he said, "it is time for me to list Yours." He began to enumerate all the suffering, troubles, illnesses, and financial problems he and his family had experienced during the year. When he was done, he said: "Master of the Universe, to tell You the truth, You owe me more than I owe You. But you know what? Since it's the eve of Yom Kippur, I'd just as soon not keep a strict accounting. We are commanded to forgive the wrong that is done to us so I will forgive you for Your sins against me and You can forgive me for all my sins against You, OK?" And with that, the tailor poured a cup of wine, blessed it, and announced: "To Your health, Master of the Universe! All is forgiven and forgotten between us!"

Now this is an odd story because it actually does not illustrate how one should atone. The tailor in our story actually violates almost all the rules for apologizing correctly. First of all, though he admits his failings, in a real chutzpadik move, he turns around and accuses God for being the greater offender. That sort of gets him off the hook, right? Second, doesn't the Torah tell us not to bear a grudge? This tailor has accumulated a giant book filled with grudges against God.

In that frame of mind, is the tailor really in a position to sincerely cop to his mistakes and ask for forgiveness? And third of all, the tailor is making a deal here: I'll forgive you, God, if you forgive me. That's not the way it works! It is up to the one who is offended to forgive or not.

Unfortunately, our Biblical stories don't offer us many good models either. Let's take a look, for example, at two stories we read on Rosh Hashanah. In our Haftarah, Elkanah has two wives, Peninah and Hannah. Peninah is fertile and has several children; Hannah is barren, which causes her great distress. Hannah goes alone to the Temple. Weeping, she prays to God with great fervor, asking for a child. The High Priest, Eli, thinks she is drunk and admonishes her: "Enough of this drunken behavior," he says to her. "Leave off until the effects of the wine are gone."

Hannah replies: "Oh sir! I am a heart-broken woman; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my feelings to God." Eli responds: Then "Go in peace, and may God grant you what you have asked for." No admission of an error on his part, no apology either.

The traditional Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah involves Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, Sarah's handmaid. Sarah, just like Hannah in the Haftarah, is also barren, so she suggests that Hagar sleep with Abraham. Hagar and Abraham have a son named Ishmael. Eventually, though, Sarah has her own child with Abraham, a boy named Isaac. Sarah becomes suspicious of both Hagar and her son Ishmael when she sees Ishmael playing with Isaac. So she demands that Abraham banish both Ishmael and Hagar, sending them out into the desert with only a skein of water. The two almost die. No remorse is ever expressed by either our matriarch or our patriarch. The rabbis of the tradition, on the other hand, seem disturbed about this. They imagine that, after Sarah's death, Abraham marries Hagar, in an act of restoration.

But it is not really until after the Bible that the rabbis in the Talmud and, particularly, the 12th century rabbi, Maimonides, tell us the steps involved in apologizing appropriately. There are 4 important steps.

First, one must confess one's mistake verbally and ask for forgiveness. In other words, we have to acknowledge the offense we committed, recognizing the impact of our actions on the other person. Trying to excuse what we have done because of circumstances, or minimizing our behavior, only serves to justify ourselves and does not constitute a true apology.

How often have you heard an apology along the lines of: "I offer my sincere apologies if I hurt your feelings?"

This kind of statement puts the blame on the person who has been hurt rather than on the offender. It maintains that the person we have offended is overly sensitive, not that we have done anything wrong. We are supposed to apologize, not to get ourselves off the hook, but rather, to try to rectify the pain we have caused.

In a proper apology, we also have to be fully cognizant of what we are apologizing for which apparently was not the case in the following story from our tradition. On a regular basis, a scholarly rabbi used to come late to a lecture at the Academy. His teacher, who was the head of the Academy, was greatly troubled by this, especially when he had a dream in which the offending student had replaced him as head of the Academy. He realized that his student came in late, not by accident but, perhaps unconsciously, to show disrespect for, and ambition to, replace his master. So when the student apologized for his tardiness, his teacher did not accept the apology because the student was apologizing for the wrong thing.

The second component of a real apology is expressing sincere remorse and resolving not to make the same mistake again. As University of Massachusetts dean Aaron Lazare explains, "To feel remorse for an action is to accept responsibility for the harm caused by it. Thomas Moore, a psychotherapist ...describes remorse as a necessary...experience..."

‘Remorse is an attack of conscience’...[It is] an internal scolding that says, “Don’t ever do that again.”³ It means that if you had to go back in time and do it all over again, you would not act in the same way.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveichik explains that an apology is the result of a serious internal reckoning: "Confession is not something that comes about suddenly, and it is certainly not the mechanical recitation of a set formula -- it is, rather, part and parcel of repentance, the climactic finale of a drawn-out, exhausting process. And just as repentance cannot be considered complete until it has brought a man to confess, so too, confession is not valid unless it bursts forth from within the fiery depths of the furnace of repentance."⁴ Of course, this involves serious introspection and ruthless honesty with oneself.

The third component of a sincere apology is doing everything possible to right the wrong. This can take many forms, including restoring someone’s self-esteem or taking concrete action to make the other party whole through, say, monetary compensation or a public declaration of *mea culpa*. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation effort, set up following the end of apartheid, was a beautiful example of this. Perpetrators of gross human rights violations during apartheid could request amnesty if they publicly confessed to their actions. These confessions helped those Blacks who had suffered horrible abuse to forgive and to heal.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, an apology is sincere if, when faced with the same situation again, one acts differently the next time. An abusive spouse who apologizes but then is abusive again has not actually done *teshuvah* – that is, return to the right path. Apologizing in circumstances of abuse just sets up the person being abused for more abuse.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov teaches that the Hebrew letters of the word for repentance (*teshuvah*) are the same as the letters for Shabbat. Just as we make time and space on Shabbat to think about our behavior over the past week, so too, at this time of year, we should take an inventory of our soul – a *cheshbon ha-nefesh* -- to figure out how we can become a better person.

³ P. 108.

⁴ From “On Repentance.”

Apology, p. 7

So, let us consider to whom we owe an apology – even if it's 10 years later -- and let us endeavor to say "I am sorry" without expecting a *quid pro quo* and with true intention. Let us try to repair all those broken relationships.