

Many of us saw it this past March -- “The Slap Heard Round the World.” In front of a live, star-studded Oscars audience, with millions watching worldwide, actor Will Smith left his seat in the audience, approached the stage, and slapped presenter Chris Rock across the face. Following the Oscars, Will Smith made a few attempts to apologize. The mea culpas were deemed insufficient, not enough. Months later, Smith released a public, six-minute YouTube apology to Chris Rock in which he explicitly addressed his behavior and his regret for letting down his friends and fans in front of the world. This video apology received mixed reviews. If Will Smith were Jewish, he would have a productive Yom Kippur this year.

As you may have noticed, the High Holy Day we call Yom Kippur, and its Biblical name Yom HaKippurim is derived from the Hebrew word *kapparah*. Let’s explore a few of the different meanings of the word Kapparah – for some clues as to how Jews have thought about this word and the concept of forgiveness over the generations.

Some suggest that the Hebrew word *kapparah* is like the word *kapporet* – meaning “to cover.” If we think about it, we could consider *kapparah* as a form of forgiveness in which one “covers up”

one's sin. This would mean that on the surface, at least, it is no longer "visible." However, this kind of kapparah does not entirely remove or wipe away the sin. This connotation makes me think of Smith's six-minute apology video...

It also reminds me of an interview on NPR's program *StoryCorps* with a man named Fred Taylor Jr. He called himself *The Sorry Man* because he apologized for a living. Let me say that again; he apologized for a living.

You see, Mr. Taylor worked in customer relations at Southwest Airlines for 15 years, and it was his job to apologize to frustrated passengers who had experienced flight delays throughout the country. "Dear Traveler...On behalf of Southwest Airlines, I am sorry. I cannot provide a rational explanation for the myriad of frustrating delays that occurred with your flight... In hindsight, I know that no matter what I say cannot make up for the poor service you were given on that exhausting day..." He tells this story: "Once, there was a nervous flyer on a cross-country flight who tried to self-medicate on board. White wine, her prescription medication, and the change in cabin pressure did not mix well. And so, this woman began taking her clothes off and then started chewing on her seat bottom cushion. She became unruly. Of course, it was my job

to follow up and apologize to the other 137 passengers on that flight.” Mr. Taylor had all kinds of ways of apologizing, in this case: “We are sorry. We know that assessing the amount of each person's inconvenience is impossible. But I ask you to please accept our apology and give us another chance.” Mr. Taylor “covered” for the Airline, but in no way could he make the travel experience – the “sin” of those on the plane – go away.

Sometimes our apologies only cover our mistakes on the surface of things. We make mistakes; we resent being caught or called out for misdeeds and know that our words can only superficially cover our wrongdoings.

A second way to interpret the word *kapparah* is to associate it with the word *kofer*, meaning “to redeem” or “ransom.” In this sense, *kapparah* involves “paying a price” for forgiveness that usually takes the form of a personal sacrifice. In Israel, *kapparah* is used today as a Hebrew slang word to say cutie, sweetie, or my love. *Kapara alekha* - Wait, what? Well, it is like saying I love you so much I'd sacrifice myself, take a bullet, for you. If we think about it, this type of apology forces us to pay the price and feel the pain, perhaps repeatedly, of a

hurtful act that we committed against another. In this way, apologizing takes us back to the moment of discomfort. This is a more challenging and painful apology than simply covering ourselves.

Two men once met at the door of the community rabbi. They had gone to seek counsel from her. Both men were getting on in years and seeking forgiveness for past actions to clear their guilt.

The rabbi asked the first man to tell him of his wrongdoings. He replied, 'I have committed a great and significant sin.' 'Hmm,' replied the rabbi in thought. 'You must find a stone whose size and weight represent your sin and bring it back to me.' So, the man set off in search of his stone. The rabbi then asked the second man to tell him of his wrongdoing. 'Well, though many, my sins are small and insignificant. The rabbi paused and then told the man also to go and bring back stones that he felt represented his sins.

Eventually, the first man returned, staggering under the weight of a large boulder so heavy he struggled to walk and had to keep resting along the way. Exhausted, he placed the boulder at the feet of the

rabbi. A short time later, the second man returned with a bag containing many small pebbles, which he also laid at the rabbi's feet.

'Well done, both of you,' she said.

'Now, to complete your task, you must return your stones to where you found them and pray for forgiveness for your sin.' The first man again picked up his large boulder and staggered back to the place from which he had found it and placed it back in the exact spot, recalling his sin and praying earnestly for forgiveness. However, the second man could only remember where some of the pebbles he had found along the way had come from and the reasons he had chosen to take them.

After some time, the second man returned to the rabbi and said the task was too difficult. The rabbi replied, 'You must know, my son, that mistakes are like these stones. If you commit a great sin, it is always obvious to the wrongdoer and lies heavy on their conscience; but if the sinner is truly sorry, forgiveness is possible, and the burden can be released. But if one is constantly doing small wrong things and the person does not feel any great load of guilt or shame for their actions and is not truly sorry, this sinner will continue to carry and accumulate

wrongdoings. That person will have no idea about the nature or the breadth of the transgressions done. So, you see, it is as important to avoid little sins as well as big ones.”

We need to own our mistakes and pay some price for them when we apologize. And we need to understand how little transgressions add up and become difficult to keep track of. This pain of realization is the first step in moving toward apology, atonement, and ultimately unburdening ourselves of our weight.

Finally, some say that “*kapparah*” means atonement – which I like to think of as “at-one-ment.” This means that Yom Kippur promises an inner experience of return or a sense of wholeness. As we are taught, the power of Yom Kippur is that it carries with it the possibility of becoming one, whole once again.

The Japanese have been restoring ceramics and celebrating imperfection for over 500 years... Kintsugi is Japanese ceramic art in which broken ceramics are repaired. However, the cracks are still apparent. People in the old country used to go with a wheelbarrow house to house, collecting everyone’s broken items. People mistook

these artists for garbage collectors. But Kintsugi artists invest love and care into things that are broken and take pride in hearing people say: ‘This piece is more beautiful now than it was before – when it was whole.’ People use these artistic people to help them make apologies because Kintsugi is honest and does not hide damages. The Japanese believe people can overcome trauma and suffering when they realize beauty can be found in imperfection. As one artist said, “Kintsugi teaches us how to forgive ourselves and others and make a better world by applying the Kintsugi philosophy to everyday life. We can find beauty in what is broken.”

Yom Kippur is a little like the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, repairing cracks in pottery with gold ceramic glue. The cracks are still there. We still see them. But they become part of a new, robust, and beautiful vessel. The fact that the piece has been broken becomes part of the object’s story—it still has value.

We are those pieces of mended pottery. We collect cracks as we grow. We do our best to fix them. We try to repair breaks between ourselves and others. Authentic apologies have the power to heal. Not the kind of healing that rids us of our imperfections but incorporates our flaws and

enables us to come to terms and even embrace our shortcomings. Yom Kippur is not about the healing that covers over or causes pain from our misdeeds. It is about healing that finds wholeness in our brokenness.

Some of you may remember the TV series aired in 2016 and ran for four seasons, "*The Good Place*." If ever there was a metaphor that captures the spirit of Yom Kippur – a metaphor filled with humor, wisdom, and truth – it is this show. Created by Michael Schur, *The Good Place* begins with the character Eleanor Shellstrop who opens her eyes and is welcomed by a man named Michael into a bright office. She's informed that she has died, but thanks to her incredibly selfless life on Earth, she's been granted eternity in a utopian neighborhood called *The Good Place*.

The hiccup is that Eleanor is an incredibly mean and self-centered person who, deep down, knows she doesn't belong in *The Good Place*. She tries to blend into life in *The Good Place* with help from her assigned soulmate Chidi, who teaches her how to be a good person. But then, there is a twist: Eleanor and her new friends in *The Good Place* learn that they are not in *The Good Place* after all. In fact, Michael is a demonic being from The Bad Place, deceiving them all along. With

humor and irreverence, the series explores the questions that make Yom Kippur and the process of atonement so challenging for us each year. What do we owe each other in life? Why do bad things happen to good people? What do we do when we mess up?

Much like Judaism, *The Good Place* poses more questions than answers. Nothing is resolved by the end of the 50 episodes, but the characters emerge as better people than they were when the series began. And that is the lesson for us as well.

Ultimately, *The Good Place* and this day of Yom Kippur teach that humans cannot be perfect during our time on Earth. It's too messy. Occasionally, we make the wrong moral choice no matter how hard we want to be good and practice goodness. The important thing is that we *try*. And we try with optimism and courage in our minds and apologies and kind words in our hearts.

Sometimes we cover up our sins, sometimes our sins cause us to pay a price, and sometimes we learn to live with them as a part of us. Yom Kippur comes around every year to remind us that forgiveness or Teshuvah is a process, and we can practice Teshuvah right up to the

final hour of our lives. Yom Kippur teaches us that it is never too late for atonement – for wholeness – and it is never too late to be gentler and kinder because we humans, we Jews, are forward-thinking, people-focused, and life-affirming.

Yom Kippur does not demand that we be perfect; what matters is that as the sun sets tomorrow, we walk away feeling better, more at one with ourselves, each other, and the world. Eleanor summarizes it well during the series finale of *The Good Life*: “Life’s true joy is in the mystery.” May we embrace the mystery, our perfections, and our permutations, and may that cause us to move toward one another and closer to our better selves.