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For All the Wrong Reasons

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In May, our Port Washington Starbucks, along with all other Starbucks in the United States, shut down for an intensive day of racial bias training. Every employee in every location participated—over 175,000 people in more than 8,000 stores. It was a drastic move, spurred by an April incident at one of its Philadelphia stores.

Two people, African-American men, were waiting in the store for a friend to arrive. They asked to use the bathroom, but the manager refused because they hadn't bought anything. She asked them to leave, and when they wouldn't leave because they were still waiting for their friend, she called the police. And as other customers stood around asking why, the police arrested the two men.

Within days, Starbucks issued statements apologizing for what happened and affirming its stance against racial profiling. But instead of doing what most companies do in similar circumstances—fire the manager and try to move on—Starbucks announced the day of training around unconscious bias and conscious inclusion.¹ It would cost tens of millions of dollars.² It would also invite speculation as to why Starbucks would take this approach: was this a genuine expression of *teshuvah*, of making amends and forging a better way forward, or was this an eccentric marketing ploy?

During the 2008 presidential election, Starbucks ran a get-out-the-vote promotion: vote and get a free cup of coffee. Howard Schultz, who built Starbucks into the company we know today and who was still an executive chairperson at the time of the Philadelphia incident, said the 2008 promotion was *both* about serving an important cause *and* intended to make the company look good. He called it a “brand spark.”³

Schultz is adamant, however, that the day of training in response to the Philadelphia incident was *not* a brand spark, that it was *not* about marketing. In an interview with NPR's *This American Life*, he said that the company as a whole owned the mistake, that it was a systemic policy issue, and that

¹ “Statement from Starbucks and Attorney Stewart Cohen.” *Starbucks Newsroom*, 1 May 2018, news.starbucks.com/press-releases/statement-from-starbucks-and-attorney-stewart-cohen.

² “Unteachable Moment.” *This American Life*, episode 648, WBEZ, 8 June 2018.

³ *Ibid.*

it was the company's responsibility to move the conversation around race forward.⁴ Not because it would make Starbucks look good, but because it was the right thing to do.

So what if it make Starbucks look good? Is there really anything wrong with doing the right thing because it improves one's reputation?

The company's actions were, quite literally, textbook. Dr. Americus Reed, professor of marketing and brand identity at the Wharton School of business, teaches that there are three best practices for crisis response in situations like Starbucks': validate concerns, show action, and control the narrative. Starbucks hit all three; Reed called it the gold-standard of brand management.⁵

The fear of losing the esteem of others—of losing customers—is a powerful motivator. Our great teacher Maimonides says that this sort of fear and rebuke is *precisely* what induces repentance.⁶

At the end of the day, Starbucks *has* apparently engaged in a process of *teshuvah*. The question of why is, in some sense, irrelevant.

Yom Kippur is the time at which we consider our own *teshuvah*. We contemplate the ways we have harmed others and our world, the ways we have not lived up to our ideals, the ways we want to do better. This is hard work. It is made all the more difficult by the burden many of us carry into the task: the expectation that our remorse, our apologies, our *teshuvah* be pure and perfectly sincere.

It's true that that may be the ideal. "*Or zarua latzaddik u-l'yishrei lev simchah*. Light is sown for the righteous, joy for the upright of heart."⁷ So we sang at the opening of this evening's service.

But real life is messier than that. We are not perfect *tzaddikim*, perfect righteous individuals, and the burden that our hearts be nothing but upright leads often to frustration. When we worry our motives are less than pure, we stop short, afraid to take the first step. When we think others might *view* us as having less-than-pure motives, we become defensive. And we're bound to be disappointed if we expect to be on the receiving end of nothing but the sincerest apologies.

The expectation of perfect sincerity ignores reality: the starting point of *teshuvah* is often far from perfectly righteous. Freedom lies in accepting that there are many ways to do the right thing.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "What Brands Can Learn from Starbucks' Crisis Response." *Knowledge@Wharton*, 20 Apr. 2018, knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/starbucks-arrest-response/.

⁶ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 4:2

⁷ Psalm 97:11

Later in his discussion of *teshuvab*, Maimonides invokes an important Jewish principle from the Talmud: *Ideally*, one should study Torah and perform *mitzvot* for their own sake. But, one should study Torah and perform *mitzvot* at all times anyway, even if not for their own sake, for that leads to doing them for their own sake.⁸

It's okay to start the process of *teshuvab* for the so-called “wrong reasons.” We've still done something holy, and we've still made the world a little more righteous.

After all, we have to start somewhere. We can't ascend from the ground to the roof without climbing a ladder rung by rung.

Once, a friend and mentor of mine—her name is Barbara—was out at a restaurant with a dear friend of hers, of blessed memory. As the evening wore on and it was time to head home for the night, Barbara, who had driven her own car to the restaurant, offered her friend a ride home. The friend politely declined, saying she would just hop on the bus and quickly be home herself. So they parted for the evening, Barbara to her car and her friend to the bus stop.

At 11:30 that night, as Barbara was falling asleep, her friend called. The bus never came; she'd waited for hours. Would Barbara please come pick her up and take her home?

Being the kind person that she is, Barbara of course would not leave her friend alone at the dark bus stop. But that didn't mean she was eager to climb back out of bed, especially since she'd already offered her friend a ride earlier. In that moment, Barbara had an epiphany: she *would* go pick up her friend, but that didn't mean she had to be happy about it.

Her feelings weren't “right,” but it was still the right thing to do.

In this world, in human life, it is impossible to engage in even the holiest of activities without some “wrong reason” creeping in. That's how the 19th century commentary *Nefesh HaChaim* understands the principle of studying Torah and performing *mitzvot* even if not for their own sake because it leads to doing them for their own sake. It's natural to hope that we'll become wiser, that we'll gain satisfaction, that we'll be held in higher regard by others. These are all ulterior motives, but a little bit of ego is okay. The burden of insisting on pure intention forces us stop ourselves until we have cultivated the elusive, perfect sincerity. The *Nefesh HaChaim* offers us comfort: “Don't be too hard on yourself. You're a human being. Acknowledge your own sense pride and push forward anyway.”⁹

⁸ Babylonian Talmud, *Pesachim* 50b

⁹ *Nefesh HaChaim*, ch. 3

We're all human. Recognizing the messiness of our motives and feelings is often just what we need to rouse ourselves, get dressed, and drive to get our friends in the middle of the night.

This is not to say that the ends always justify the means. That we should do something righteous even if not for its own sake is *not* a license to be duplicitous or manipulative, nor is it a license to create a pretext of doing a smaller good to enable a larger bad.

In another part of the Talmud, Rabbi Bena'ah warns that, for one who engages with Torah not for its own sake, Torah becomes a deadly poison.¹⁰ It's okay to have *some* ego involved in our good deeds, but if ego is our sole motivator, we destroy whatever good we otherwise might have done. And we hurt ourselves in the process.

The antidote to the poison is the second half of the principle: we do something not for its own sake because *it leads to* doing it for its own sake. If we lose sight of the righteous goal at the end of the journey, we trap ourselves at the beginning. But if we keep our eye on the overall project—living in ever more holy ways—we can forgive ourselves of our imperfections. We can be both inconsistent and whole.

Author Anne Lamott has a close relationship with her son. She says they “know each other as deeply as is humanly possible without knowing every single secret about each other’s lives.” This is, she says, both exhilarating and awful.¹¹

Lamott is known for her reflective writing on everything from current affairs to the human condition to the art of writing itself. Her views tend toward liberal, and she often speaks from a spiritual perspective—which, for her, is rooted in Christianity.

In her book *Hallelujah Anyway*, Lamott recounts when she once made a snarky public comment about a transgender person, the only transgender person in the world she claims to dislike. “Regrettably,” she recalls, “it was also the world’s most famous transgender person.” The backlash “stunned” her: “it was swift, huge, [and] ugly.” Attackers came after her “like a mob with pitchforks.” Moreover, one of Lamott’s son’s best friends happened to be a transgender person. Her son “was mortified.”

¹⁰ Babylonian Talmud, *Taanit* 7a

¹¹ All quotes from this story are from: *Lamott, Anne. Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy. Random House Large Print, 2017, pp. 40–42.*

In her one comment, Lamott betrayed her own values, angered the public, and hurt one of the dearest people in her life, her son.

Her son asked her to apologize publicly. She didn't want to. Her attackers were vicious, and in her words, sometimes "stupid." That was not the point, her son said. She had "done something beneath [her] that had hurt a lot of people."

In one phone conversation, her son said, "I love you, but you were wrong. You did an awful thing. Please apologize. I'm not going to let this go. And I won't let you go, either." And in an email later: "You need to do the right thing, Mom. I love you."

As Lamott tells it, her son "was in tears[, and she] was sick to [her] stomach."

She "wrote to the public that [she] was deeply, unambiguously sorry, even though [she] secretly still felt misunderstood, as [she] had only quoted someone else's snarky comment."

It wasn't perfect, but it was the best she could do.

Each of us has moments like Anne Lamott's. There are times when we apologize or extend forgiveness even when we believe that our actions weren't that bad, that the other people misunderstood, that *they* are the ones who need some *teshuvah*. We get frustrated; it feels like we're doing *teshuvah* for all the wrong reasons. But we do *teshuvah* anyway. We do it because the greater context is more important.

20th century Philosopher Hannah Arendt helps us understand that greater context. Arendt, a German-American Jew, barely escaped Nazi Germany and became a refugee of the Holocaust, stateless for 18 years of her life.¹² She's famous for her coverage of the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Israel. That was when she coined the phrase "the banality of evil," which refers to the chilling mundanity in which those people who turned the machinery of the Holocaust worked. It's her warning that reminds us that no place or population is ever immune to committing atrocities.

Arendt knew well the potential for humans to do evil, but she also saw in us the great potential to build free societies. Key to it is our capacity to forgive, our capacity to release one another from perpetual guilt over our mistakes. Old actions don't vanish, but new realities are made possible. Forgiveness sets us free.¹³

¹² "The Moral World in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt for Now." *On Being*, created by Krista Tippett, performance by Lyndsey Stonebridge, The On Being Project, 21 June 2018.

¹³ Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 240.

That's not to say that every single action is forgivable; there are some evils so great and so radically destructive that they transcend even our ability to understand them, let alone forgive.¹⁴ Perhaps it was Arendt's own experience that taught her that. However, they are not the kind of situations we confront most often in our lives—thank God—so there is still great value in focusing on the rest of the time, the rest of the chances we have for erring, apologizing, and forgiving.

Here's what's so beautiful about Hannah Arendt's understanding of forgiveness: it is not only liberating, but intensely personal. Forgiveness builds relationship between the one apologizing and the one forgiving; it overlooks *what* was done, for the sake of *who* did it.¹⁵

As contemporary poet David Whyte says of human relationship, "All friendships of any length are based on a continued, mutual forgiveness. Without tolerance and mercy all friendships die."¹⁶

That's why Barbara forgave her friend and picked her up late at night. It's why Anne Lamott's son forgave his mother, too. After she issued her public apology, her son was "grateful, but distant for a time." *Teshuvah* had drained them both. Their relationship gasped but found fresh air. Lamott's son helped her heal.¹⁷

Teshuvah—the process of apology and forgiveness—matters, even if we don't begin the process for its own sake. Without it, everything falls apart. *Teshuvah* is what enables us to put down the weight of all our past deeds. *Teshuvah* is what sustains friendships. *Teshuvah* nurtures love.

One should study Torah and perform *mitzvot*, even if not for their own sake, for that leads to doing them for their own sake.

Starbucks was not the only large company recently to issue a public apology and portray themselves as undertaking a process of *teshuvah*. Wells Fargo, Facebook, and Uber, to name a few others, also have published advertisements in which they claim responsibility for mistakes and commit to better paths forward. Whether their *teshuvah* is for profit or for its own sake, it is heartening nonetheless. *Teshuvah* is in the air.

There will come a day when *we* seek forgiveness for something we've done, and it may be the case that we are not apologizing for its own sake. We need each other to keep moving forward.

¹⁴ Arendt, p. 241

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Whyte, David. *Consolations: the Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*. Many Rivers Press, 2015, p. 71.

¹⁷ Lamott, p. 42

None of us is a *tzaddik*, none of us is perfectly righteous. We are incoherently and beautifully human.

Practicing *teshuvah*—even if with messy motivations—cultivates the kind of respect on which friendship rests. It builds fellowship and strengthens social bonds, even across lines of difference. If we adopt a stance of openness to *teshuvah*, we afford the other the kind of respect we afford ourselves.

This is living from a place of *b'tzelem Elohim*, from a place of seeing all people as reflections of the Holy One of Being. This is living more love into the world.

This Yom Kippur, may we free ourselves of the burden of perfect sincerity and open ourselves to others through the process of *teshuvah*. May we act as if love and respect sustain all humans in fellowship. And may that one day be so.

G'mar chatimah tovah. May we be sealed for goodness in the book of life.