Yom Kippur Morning Sermon – 2023-5784
It's Hard for Me to Say "I'm Sorry"
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One day a former congregant posted a meme on facebook, you know one of those funny captioned pictures or videos, like grumpy cat, or the lady from the Real Housewives of Beverly Hills yelling at the cat, or the most interesting man in the world. This particular meme was about the hardest things to say. The five things were:

1. I love you.
2. I was wrong, I'm sorry.
3. I need help.
4. I appreciate you.
5. Worcestershire Sauce

Of course, I responded with the laughing emoji, but then, I took another look and thought about the other items on the list. "Worcestershire Sauce" is the one thing that isn't like the other four. "Worcestershire Sauce" is difficult to **pronounce**, which is quite different from difficult to **say** or to **express**.

Why do many of us find expressing the most profound of feelings so very difficult? Perhaps that's why there are any number of song lyrics that lament how challenging these conversations can be: "It's hard for me to say I'm sorry," "Sorry seems to be the hardest word," "I think I love you, so what am I so afraid of," "No words to say," "I don't wanna talk about it," etc.

Our faith tradition says that during these Ten Days of Repentance, we are to seek forgiveness in three ways: by doing *t'shuvah* – a return to ourselves and who we are meant to be, with *t'filah* – seeking forgiveness from God through prayer, and with *tzedakah* – turning away from ourselves and turning to others with care and love. Doing so requires tackling some of the items on that meme. Any of these tasks – *t'shuvah*, *t'filah*, and *tzedakah* can be tough for many of us, not to mention trying to do all of them in a period of ten days. For the purposes of Yom Kippur, let's look more deeply at perhaps the most difficult item that the meme included – saying "I was wrong…I'm sorry."

We all appreciate a sincere, heartfelt apology, so why is it so hard for US to GIVE one? The reason? We are just so human. Who likes to admit they were wrong and not as right as they thought? Anyone here? Nope. That's a hard one, with all kinds of feelings and perceptions involved. Perhaps it's because something we truly believed to be true turned out not to be. We may question our intelligence or what we have been taught. We may feel vulnerable to losing respect, status, or power or fear exposing our inadequacy or incompetence, which makes admitting our mistakes that much more difficult. Some of us may find saying we're sorry humiliating because doing so brings back memories of overly critical parents, teachers, co-workers, or supervisors.

Some of us prefer to stay in denial. We may justify our reasoning like this: If I don't admit I've done anything wrong, then it's almost like I didn't do anything wrong at all; therefore, there is no need to take responsibility. Woo hoo!

Also, for some of us, the one giving an apology is the loser in the situation, and the one to whom you apologize is the winner. Dr. Roberta Babb, a Clinical Psychologist in London says, "They think that by taking responsibility for an action, it absolves the other person from any role or culpability, so naturally, they can't bring themselves to apologize."

When psychologist Karina Schumann, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, began studying apologies, she realized that most of the research of the subject had been done on those who had received apologies, not those who offered the apologies. She proposes that if we can understand what makes (or breaks) a good apology, we might offer more of them, leading to more healing, more forgiveness, and stronger relationships. Here is some of what she found:

One of the reasons why we may not apologize is the view of our behavior. One who committed a offense is more likely to justify what they did, describe it as an accident, or minimize the pain or hurt that resulted. We may believe the offense was just a slip-up, certainly understandable because of the circumstances, or even the victim's own fault. These thoughts may reduce the emotional and cognitive impetus to apologize.

Another reason cites Schumann is narcissism. Some commonalities among narcissistic individuals are a lack of empathy and an inability to recognize personal shortcomings. These personality traits make narcissistic people less likely to apologize than those who aren't as self-absorbed.

People who don't or can't see things from another's perspective tend to apologize less, as do those who do not see their personality as capable of change.

Schumann notes that if a wrongdoing does not reflect upon our morality, character, or sense of self, it is much easier to apologize, accidentally bumping into someone on the street, for example. Failing to help a friend, causing someone to get hurt, insulting a loved one, or falling short of expectations, however, DO reflect poorly upon our sense of self, making us question ourselves, and saddening us that we are not the person we thought we could be. "To the extent that something you did threatens your self-image, especially as a moral person or a good partner, apologizing puts you in a tough situation," Schumann says. "It calls additional attention to negative aspects of your behavior." It's bad enough that WE are recalling the wrong that we did, but we are also reminding the OTHER PERSON of what we did. It can make us convince ourselves that we really are a bad person.

Apologies bring us *panim el panim* – face-to-face – with the fact that we have something to apologize for, triggering within us horrible guilt and often, shame. While we usually feel better after apologizing, the prospect of doing it undermines our sense of being a good person, a terrifying and humiliating prospect. Making an apology puts our shameful behavior on display for all to see and to judge. "That's why transgressors often view an apology as threatening to their self-image and consequently hesitate to offer one," Schumann says.

If we look at it the other way, withholding our apology is an effective way to assuage the threat to our identity as a good and well-meaning person. In Jewish terms, we could say that this is the work of our *yetzer ha-ra*, the base, animalistic, yet self-preserving side of ourselves. The potential damage to our self-image explains why people with a fragile sense of their own worth are less likely to apologize. When we don't have much self-esteem to begin with, we are much less likely to do something that will cause us even more pain and possibly cause irrevocable damage to our relationships.

In a study that Schumann did in 2014, she wanted to explore what happens when individuals are asked to list and focus on their core values. Would this activity change their behavior? Would doing so affect one's self worth, and more importantly, would doing so influence how the participants offered apologies? She had participants write down their values, such as justice, love, honesty, and compassion, and rank them in order of importance. The participants in the study were then asked to write why the personal value they ranked highest was so important to them. This simple exercise had previously been shown to boost one's self-image as an ethical person by verifying their commitment to a cherished value. When asked to write an apology for a wrongdoing they remembered, these participants wrote more sincere apologies compared to those individuals who did not write out their values.

By acknowledging the above listed obstacles to apology, we can get a glimpse into what may be holding us back from true repentance, doing real, authentic *t'shuvah*. According to Schumann, a good apology has three elements:

1. It acknowledges responsibility for the wrong that was done. PERIOD. We do not make excuses or blame any circumstance or person for our actions.

2. The apology can have no qualifiers, no conditions, no buts.

3. We must offer restitution AND assure the person we wronged that we will not repeat such behavior again.

In his work *Hilchot T'shuvah*, Maimonides, the Rambam, outlines the process of return and repentance this way:

> What is repentance? The sinner shall cease sinning, and remove sin from his thoughts, and wholeheartedly conclude not to revert back to it…and then shall he be remorseful on what was past… In addition, The Knower of all Secrets will testify about him that forever he will not turn to repeat that sin again. It is, moreover, essential that his confession shall be by spoken words of his lips, and all that which he concluded in his heart shall be formed in speech.

So the Rambam identifies three indispensable steps to the teshuva process:

1. *She'ya'azov ha'choteh chet'o … vi'yigmor b'libo she'lo ya'asehu od.* Leave the sin behind and resolve not to do it again.

2. *Yitnachem al she-avar.* Regret what you did in the past.

3. *L'hitvadot bi-s'fatav* Confess your sin with your lips. Say what you did out loud.

How does the Rambam's process compare to Karina Schumann's that I read earlier? …. Note what each list places first in the process…
The Schumann process for apology (as well as other lists I found with 4 steps, 5 steps, 6 steps, 7 steps…) begins with recognizing or acknowledging the wrongdoing, realizing that we have hurt someone in some way. Maimonides lays out the process differently. The Rambam says that the very first thing we should do is to leave that behavior behind us and resolve to never do it again. What are your thoughts about this? What do YOU think is the most important step when comparing these concepts? …

So, after listing his first requirement for *t'shuvah* to occur, Maimonides uses the word *v'chein* – and then (and I will add "and only then"). And then and only THEN shall a person regret the wrongdoing – after they have resolved to never repeat that behavior. The Rambam is saying that regret is what keeps us moving forward, maintaining our commitment to never repeat our wrongdoing. He writes: "*Acharei shuvi, nichamti.*" After I have completed *t'shuvah*, [then] I regret the sins that I did.

Maimonides believes that there is certainly room for regret and guilt, yes, but it must be constructive, providing an impetus for us to move forward. It must not be destructive guilt, which can create self-loathing, shame, depression, and distance, not only from our goal of behaving better, but distance from those we have harmed. Essentially, the Rambam is teaching us to leave the past behind and focus on improving things in the present and the future. If we continue to dwell in the past, obsessing about our sins, then we will lose hope that we can ever do *t'shuvah*. Author Brené Brown explains simply: "Shame is, 'I am bad.' Guilt is, 'I DID something bad.'"

What is wonderful about *t'shuvah* is that no matter how many times we have fallen short, we always have hope; and even if we feel we will never be able to change, we always have another opportunity… on this day…Yom Kippur… every year! So it is with God. There is no "three strikes you're out." We are not labeled as a hopeless sinner in the Book of Life. The Holy One yearns for our return and wants us to be our best selves. God doesn't see into the future to predict when we will miss the mark or relapse to our former behavior, only what we pour from our hearts on THIS day. On this Yom Kippur, *Avinu Malkeinu* is waiting for our return, our sincere repentance, our *t'shuvah*. God doesn't expect instant improvement or perfection – just that we are willing to sincerely try.

T'shuvah is difficult. It takes work. It takes commitment. It can be daunting and overwhelming. It requires *cheshbon ha-nefesh,* an accounting of our souls.

Repentance demands that we take risks, expose our flaws, reveal our vulnerability, and uncover our true essence. Rabbi Eliezer teaches us in *Pirkei Avot*: "Repent one day before your death," meaning that we should always live each day as if it is our last, remaining in a constant state of *t'shuvah*. In doing so, we are continually reminded of our worth as a good person, of our value to one another, and of the importance of strengthening our relationships with each other. On this Day of Atonement, may we find at-one-ment with God, with one another, and with ourselves. G'mar chatimah tovah!