

APOLOGY, FORGIVING AND TESHUVAH¹

Clifford S. Fishman

I. APOLOGY AND FORGIVING IN POPULAR CULTURE

In Erich Segal's best-selling novel *Love Story* (1970), and in the movie made from the novel, Oliver apologizes to Jennifer for losing his temper; Jennifer replies: "Love means never having to say you're sorry." Do you agree?

II. APOLOGY AND ATONEMENT

Rebbe Eliezer taught: "Repent one day before your death." Pirkei Avot 2:15.

"The Day of Atonement atones for sins against God, not for sins against man, unless the injured party has been appeased." (Mishna Yoma 8:9).

III. TO WHOM SHOULD WE APOLOGIZE AND ATONE?

- 1, Clearly a person ("X") is required to apologize and atone to those whom X knows he or she has wronged or hurt.
2. Some halakhic authorities recommend that a person apologize to all his or her friends, relatives, associates, etc., before Yom Kippur, just in case he or she has hurt or wronged someone unknowingly. (Rema 606:2; Arukh Hashulhan, 4). Is doing this via a mass email or Facebook message halakhically permissible? If permissible, is it wise? Have you sent or received such an email or Facebook posting? If so, what was your reaction? What reaction did you receive?
3. You have wronged a person in a serious and significant way. Is it ever appropriate *not* to apologize? If so, what should you nevertheless attempt to do?

IV. HOW (not?) TO WORD AN APOLOGY

1. Consider the following:

I'm sorry you were offended by what I said/did.

I'm sorry I upset you.

I'm sorry if anyone was offended by what I said/did.

2. If you decide to apologize to people generally (Part III-2, above), how might you best word that "conditional apology?"

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3. Putting together several sources² about how to apologize, the following principles emerge.

- a. Be specific about what you're sorry for ("I'm sorry I forgot our anniversary.") Do not offer any kind of excuse. Do not attempt to shift or share the blame. Do not let the word *but* come out of your mouth.
- b. Acknowledge the other person's pain. Acknowledge that your actions were hurtful. Where appropriate, promise not to do it again.
- c. Explain that you value your relationship with the person you have wronged.
- d.. Ask how you can make it up to the person.

4. Should you ask the other person to forgive you? *Halachah* says yes (see part V) and some experts/commentators agree, but others say, absolutely not;³ the offended party may accept a sincere apology but still be unready to forgive the transgression; to ask for one may seem to the wronged person that the apology was really a bait-and-switch—"I said I'm sorry, so now you have to say 'I forgive you.'")

Thoughts? Comments?.

5. If you do plan to apologize to someone for something, the experts agree, you should plan out in advance what to say, and rehearse it; otherwise you may botch it. The first step is for the offender to acknowledge that what he did was wrong. "I'm sorry you were offended" or "I'm sorry I upset you" doesn't cut it, because it subtly shifts the focus to the victim's reaction, not to the offender's wrongdoing.

V. RESPONDING TO AN APOLOGY

1. Prof. Prof. Everett L. Worthington says there are basically four ways people respond to requests for forgiveness:

- 1) Yes, I forgive you.
- 2) I need more time.
- 3) I can forgive you, but I'm still very hurt.
- 4) No, there's nothing you can do to ever make it right. I don't forgive you.

"The second and third responses are the most common.. Don't assume that after you make your apology everything is going to be reconciled. Reconciliation is not something that's granted--it's earned. You should expect to have to prove you're sincere."

² Available on request.

³ Psychologist Harriet Lerner, in her book *Why Won't You Apologize* (2017), says that a request for forgiveness should never be part of an apology. Forgiveness, should it come, may depend on a demonstration going forward that the offense will not be repeated.

2. According to Maimonides and the *Shulhan Arukh* (OH 606:1), when you ask someone for forgiveness, he or she is allowed to turn you down. If this happens, you should return a second and third time, with three witnesses, and try apologizing again. If the victim won't forgive you after three tries, then you're considered to have atoned, even if you haven't been granted forgiveness. Thoughts? Reactions?

3. Maimonides also says that the way to tell if a person has made real *teshuvah* is if he or she encounters another opportunity to commit the sin again, but this time does not, because he or she has undergone an internal change, so that in a real sense he or she is no longer the same person who committed the sin in the past. In that case, Rambam teaches, we *should* forgive.

4. So it is clear that *Halakha* empowers the offended person to refuse to forgive, if not convinced the offender's *teshuvah* is sincere. But our tradition places a great deal of pressure on the victim to forgive. The Talmud says: "All who act mercifully (i.e. forgivingly) toward [others] will be treated mercifully by Heaven; and all those who do not act mercifully toward [others] will not be treated mercifully by heaven."⁴

5. Rav Velvel Litalteil-Khanit, in Tractate *Hasoter m'Venice*, makes the same point:

The quality of mercy is not strained;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
...
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. ...
Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.⁵

6, And consider:

- a. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us";⁶ "
- b. "To err is human, to forgive, divine."⁷

7. In *the Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (1976), Simon Wiesenthal describes an incident late in World War II. Wiesenthal was a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. He was plucked one morning from his work detail by a nurse and

⁴ Shab. 151b, as quoted in 6 Encyclopaedia Judaica 1437.

⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, scene 1.

⁶ Morning Prayer, *Book of Common Prayer*, based on lines from "the Lord's Prayer," Matthew 6:12: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

⁷ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism* Part II (1711).

taken to the bedside of a dying Nazi soldier. The soldier told Wiesel that as a member of the SS, during the invasion of Poland, he had rounded up Jews: In one town, he had herded the local Jewish community into a building, which was then set on fire. Lying in bed waiting to die, he realized the awful thing he had done and needed to know that a Jew forgave him. What should Wiesel have done?

8. Often it is not possible to undo the harm. Examples: (1) perpetrating a fraud on a large group of people, and (2) *Lashon ha-Ra*. As to the first, it may be impossible to undo the harm to all of the victims—even assuming the perpetrator had the funds to do so—because it may be impossible to identify them all. As to the second, it may be impossible to track down everyone who heard the defamatory remarks and explain that they were untrue. In this regard, consider two Charles Dickens’ characters: Fagin and Riah.

VI. LETTING GO

Whether or not you forgive X for the wrong he or she is done, it is important not to let it eat away at you., (Two fables: the monks at the river, and the bird’s nest.)

VII. SCENARIO

There is someone special in your life—a parent, a mentor, sibling, close friend. Let’s call that person Cameron. Cameron is a good person in most respects, but with a blind spot: a prejudice against people of a certain religion, nationality, race or ethnic group—the “Zees.” You’ve tried to talk Cameron out of this attitude, without success—Cameron’s response is, “I know what I know.”

You and Cameron go to a get-together. Everybody pretty much knows each other, and everyone there knows your relationship to Cameron. During the event, Cameron tells a mean joke about the “Zees.” A few people laugh; others sort of giggle in embarrassment; others simply look away. (Or suppose he says something mean-minded about someone the group knows, who happens not to be present.) Should you say anything? If so, what?

In answering, consider Leviticus chapter 19: “[18] You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him. [19] ... Love your kinsman as yourself: I am the Lord.”⁸

Suppose you do “reprove” Cameron, who is deeply hurt and offended; within a few days it is obvious to you that the relationship is in serious jeopardy. What if anything should you say to Cameron?

⁸ This verse is often translated “Love your neighbor as yourself,” but the context makes it clear that it relates to fellow Israelites. No matter. Leviticus 19:34 instructs, “You shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt.” That’s even universal than “love your neighbor.”