

Who's Sorry Now?
Yom Kippur Morning Alternative Service

If you're not a fan of high drama, stay away from college campuses, especially on move in day. They are cauldrons of intense and raw emotions and there's no telling when things are going to boil over. As a parent of two college grads, I was a veteran of this rite of passage when, on Thursday, August 24 at precisely 10:32 AM, I drove onto the CU Boulder campus for Jakob's appointed drop off. Kudos to CU Boulder for making this year's freshman move in as stress free as possible. Thanks to CU's timed entrance, color coded maps and army of traffic managers, we sailed through Boulder onto the main campus effortlessly. In order to expedite the schlepping of those "can't live without it" possessions from car to cubicle, CU provided the students with industrial sized, wheeled laundry carts. Awesome, except for the fact that it's really hard to steer a cart that's filled beyond its weight capacity. The dorm's narrow hallways became bumper car arenas as students banged into each other and scuffed the freshly painted walls. Most of the students were good humored about these mishaps, but one encounter caught my attention. Apologizing for accidentally running over someone's foot with a heavy cart, the remorseful student's "I'm sorry" was met with a curt "No you're not."

How many times a day do you say "I'm sorry"? Most of us say it countless times, sometimes in reaction to the most trivial slights and

sometimes just as a manner of speech. *I'm sorry to bother you. I'm sorry to hear that. I'm sorry you feel that way. My bad; I'm sorry.* These bland apologies are readily accepted, often with a response like "No problem." That's why I was taken aback when "No you're not" came flying out of that coed's mouth. I was tempted to ask her name and room number so I could warn Jakob to keep his distance, but I didn't. An important part of the college experience is learning to navigate the minefields of challenging personalities and social situations. Besides which, maybe there was some truth in her reply. Perhaps her underlying message was, "Save 'I'm sorry' for when you really are remorseful, for a situation in which a genuine apology is called for. Running into me with a laundry cart that you can't maneuver because it's overloaded with stuff? How about an 'oops' and a smile, since we're all in the same boat."

On Yom Kippur, we are commanded to turn to those whom we have wronged. We are expected to express regret. We are required to accept responsibility for the pain we have caused. We are instructed to repent wholeheartedly. Some of us will mumble "I'm sorry," and some of us will feel that this clichéd expression just doesn't cut it. So what's the trick to offering a sincere apology?

The Torah provides some guidance. Think back to the narratives about Esau and Jacob, the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Esau, you'll recall, is the first born and by far his father's favorite. The Torah describes Esau as a man of the field, a hunter-gatherer type. The Torah depicts Jacob as a docile homebody who, without a doubt, is Rebekah's favorite son. One day, arriving home after a grueling excursion, Esau sells his birthright to Jacob in exchange for a bowl of hot lentil stew. (Am I sorry for talking about food on Yom Kippur? No, I'm not. It's an essential part of the narrative and there's no stirring around it.) The brothers' exchange of commodities exacerbates the already dysfunctional family dynamics. Wisely, Rebekah advises Jacob to leave home for a while until Esau stops stewing and things simmer down. Fast forward twenty years. Esau and Jacob are about to meet as Jacob and his family pass through Esau's land on their way home to the land of Canaan. The text in Genesis 33 describes this encounter:

Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by four hundred men. He divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two maids, putting the maids and their children first, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph last. He himself went on ahead and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his

brother. **Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept.** *Genesis 33:1-4*

During our *slichot* discussion two weeks ago, we unpacked this text, especially the last verse: **Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept.** The *peshat*, or most literal reading of the verse, implies an amicable reconciliation, an “all is forgiven” and “they lived happily ever after” conclusion to the brothers’ prolonged estrangement. And that might very well be what happened. Unfortunately, the Hebrew text is ambiguous. It is written in such a way that it screams *Darsheini!* Interpret me! How so? The penultimate word in the verse is comprised of the Hebrew consonants *vav*, *yod*, *shin* or *sin*, *kuf*, *hey* and *vav*. The Masorites, who added vowels to the Biblical texts so everyone would read the words alike, instructed us to read this word as **וַיִּשָׁקֵהוּ** (*vayishakeihu*) meaning: **he kissed him**. In Hebrew, vowels often are interchangeable, but replacing one vowel with another can dramatically alter the meaning of the word. For example, consider the English letters **s**, **n**, and **g**, in that order. If you add vowels, what word do you get? (Sing, sang, song, sung, snug, snag.) Which word is correct? They all are, but there’s a huge difference between sung and snug and snag. Sometimes

the context can help us figure out which word is correct. Other times, not so much, especially when more than one word makes sense. For example, the Masorites could have chosen to vocalize the *vav*, *yod*, *shin* or *sin*, *kuf*, *hey* and *vav* with different vowels, thereby creating the Hebrew word *vayoshko*, meaning **he bit him**.

Let's assume, for argument's sake, that the Masorites vocalized the word *vayishakeihu* correctly and that the proper understanding of the text is that Esau and Jacob reunited with a hug and a kiss. Problem solved. After all, "a kiss is just a kiss" (a sigh is just a sigh ♪)." Or is it? Some Biblical commentators aren't satisfied with this "happy ever after" ending. Instead, they ask, "What kind of a kiss was it?" Was the kiss a sincere act of brotherly reconciliation or was the kiss an empty gesture, a bland, social convention used to fill an awkward moment, sort of an ancient air kiss? Quoting Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai, Rashi states: *It is a well-known tradition that Esau hated Jacob, but Esau's compassion was aroused at that moment and he kissed Jacob with all his heart.*

Other commentators disagree. They picture a more contentious reunion. According to the Midrash *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*,

When Jacob came to the land on Canaan, Esau came to meet him from Mount Seir full of fury, bent on killing Esau said: I shall not

slay Jacob with bow and arrows, but I shall rather slay him with my mouth and suck his blood, as it is said: "Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept." Read not he kissed him but he bit him!"

Why all this focus on whether Esau kissed Jacob or bit him? It has to do with the way the word in question is written in the Torah. A large dot appears over each Hebrew consonant. Only 15 words in the *TaNaKh*, the entire Hebrew Bible, have such dots. Some exegetes contend that the dots were inserted to call attention to an important homiletical teaching in connection with the word. Others contend that the dots indicate a scribal error and insist that the word or some of its letter be ignored. A dot over each of the consonants in our word is why scholars are fixated on whether Esau kissed Jacob or bit him. Is it a coincidence that the extraneous dots look like teeth marks? Some think not and point to the dots as visual support that the word must be read as *vayoshko*, **he bit him**, rather than as *vayishakeihu*, **he kissed him**.

Which brings us back to the discussion about how to say "I'm sorry." Even when a sincere apology is offered, it can be undermined: by our tone of voice, by our facial expression, by body language, or by the way it's

worded. So what's the right way to say "I'm sorry"? Self-help experts provide some suggestions.

First, be specific about what it is that you're sorry, such as, "I'm sorry I ran over your foot with this overloaded cart of stuff for my dorm room." This indicates that you understand what you did wrong.

Second, avoid using the word "but." "I'm sorry I ran over your foot with this heavy cart, but you were in my way." The word "but" voids any sense of self remorse and puts the blame on the injured party, in effect saying, "It's your own fault that I even owe you an apology!" So save the excuses and be honest about your actions.

Third, don't mitigate inappropriate behavior with intimations of best intentions. "It never was my intention to run over your foot with this heavy cart." The fact is, actions count and you ran over someone's foot. Instead of trying to shirk responsibility by copping to best intentions, go back to the first suggestion and be specific about what you did.

Finally, ask what you can do to make amends. "I'm sorry I ran over your foot with this heavy cart. Can I get you some ice or help you in some other way?" Try to heal the hurt and ask the other party for suggestions because simply saying I'm sorry usually isn't good enough.

These textbook strategies for offering a sincere apology are instructive and in many settings highly effective. But the world is full of abusive bullies whose words don't mitigate their actions. We all know toxic people who cause tumult, whose morals and values are vastly different than ours, who thrive on inciting drama and instigating commotion. We don't have to pretend that their professions of remorse are genuine because we've been hurt by them before. *Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.* It's okay to be wary of these individuals and it's smart to be defensive when we're not sure if their apology is a kiss or a bite.

And what about those instances when we feel unjustly accused, when someone thinks we've done something wrong and that they're entitled to an apology? Some self-help experts suggest that there's no harm in apologizing, that saying "I'm sorry" isn't an admittance of guilt or regret. Rather, it's a way of keeping the peace, of saying "I care about your feelings and about our relationship." Others strongly disagree. "Why should I apologize for something you accuse me of doing but that I haven't done? How can I apologize for something that isn't my fault?" In these situations, saying "I'm sorry" won't make anyone feel better.

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It takes courage to apologize and perception to do it wisely and when appropriate. We'll never know what really transpired between Esau and Jacob and truly it doesn't matter. The dots over the letters of *vayishakeihu* or *vayoshko*, remind us to be careful. A kiss can turn into a bite if we're not sensitive and thoughtful and understanding and aware. On this holy day, think about how your words and your actions impact others. On this Day of Atonement, take the time and make the effort to say: "I'm sorry. I was wrong. How can I make it right?" Each of us has the ability to bring healing to those we have hurt, to mitigate the pain we have caused. Now would be a good time to begin this process.