

A Jewish Response to “Never Say ‘I’m Sorry!’”

Rabbi Todd A. Markley – *Kol Nidre 5783*

Just last week, our daughter, Mia, received her driving learner’s permit, and we are now in the process of training her on the rules of the road. As such, I’ve been spending time recalling some of the lessons that really stuck with me from my own days in driver’s ed.: when to start turning the wheel while parallel parking, the multiple blind spots to check before backing up, and so on.

Yet, this moment stands out most starkly to me from my own driver’s ed. days: Our instructor was discussing what we should do if we should ever – heaven forbid – get into an accident. One might logically presume that his to-do list would have begun with, “Make sure everyone in your vehicle is OK,” or “Call 911 to get support from emergency personnel.” Rather, he shared: “Never, under any circumstances should you say, ‘I’m sorry’ to the person in the other car. You don’t want to admit responsibility and liability for the accident by doing so.”

Even the 15-year-olds in the room found this morally dubious. “But what if it was my fault?”

“Like I said...never say ‘I’m sorry.’”

He was speaking, specifically, about the aftermath of a fender-bender, but why wouldn’t his pupils extrapolate that logic to the rest of our lives? When we say, “I’m sorry,” it is implicitly, if not explicitly, an admission of guilt – a confession that I’ve messed up and that I need to own responsibility for my actions. None of that feels great. So, why not – instead – distance ourselves from the regret, pain, and remorse that an apology might make us feel?

Well, this day of Yom Kippur is Judaism’s loud, clear response to that question, reminding us annually that we need to face our past mistakes, misdeeds, and malicious acts head on, own them fully, make good on them, and seek the forgiveness of those whom we’ve harmed. We have to put away the vision of ourselves that we like to hold onto...that we are good through-and-through, that there’s not a mean bone in our bodies, that we do no harm to others through our words and deeds and, instead, admit that each of us is a fallible human being and that we are – sometimes, knowingly or unknowingly – in the wrong.

I fear, however, that our societal culture is often standing between us and this goal by leaving us only with misguided lessons: that to admit wrong-doing is a risk not worth taking, or that apologizing for harm we’ve caused makes us weak.

I first heard the words “Never say ‘I’m sorry’” from a driver’s ed. instructor, but that lesson was reinforced by others over the years...from politicians to entertainers, from business leaders to medical staff, many of whom seemed to have received their public relations coaching straight from my drivers ed. teacher.

And when visible public apologies do happen, how many times have we heard words implying that the perpetrator's actions weren't actually wrong, and that the victim is overreacting. So too, we see "apologies" that do not acknowledge the actual damage done, do not take victims' needs into account, and which shortcut the actual repentance process of which they are supposed to be a part. In fact, all too often we jump to the apology phase without having done the preparatory work that makes an authentic apology possible.

Maimonides, one of the greatest thinkers in Jewish history, laid out the steps to repentance in his legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*. Notably, the first step is not apologizing. This may seem counterintuitive to those of us who were commanded from an early age to immediately offer an apology to a classmate, friend, or sibling the moment we were caught in the wrong. Such demands almost invariably result in an apology that looks something like, "Ugh...sorry!" and I've never known them to make the aggrieved party feel better about the situation. Even now – as adults – we often rush to offer a half-hearted apology because we have been taught that this is what will lead to being forgiven, and that is what we seek – sweet release from needing to grapple any further with our destructive actions. Yet such apologies ring hollow and do not earn one forgiveness. Worse yet, they put undue pressure on the party who has been hurt to forgive prematurely without any evidence of remorse or willingness to change from the offender.

Which is why – in Jewish tradition – forgiveness is secondary to the process of *teshuva* – of repentance – a process which focuses on what is demanded not of the victim but of the perpetrator of harmful acts. And this day of Yom Kippur serves as a reminder to us that...we're all that person. We have all done wrong and inflicted harm. Now, what are we to do about it?

Maimonides' first step in the process flies directly in the face of my driver's ed. instructor's counsel: Once we are aware that we have harmed another – either through our own reflections or because someone has given us the gift of making us aware of the damage we have caused – we must first confess to the wrong we have done.¹ That confession must be aloud...to ourselves, to the victim of our actions, and – when appropriate – to the public. Maimonides is clear that a public confession of wrongdoing – when it won't cause further harm to the victim - is admirable because it models such behavior for others and because the wrong committed was often done in the presence of many...at the very least, those who witnessed it should be privy to the confession.

As Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg writes in her new book entitled, [On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World](#): "Starting the process with a confession of harm goes against many of our cultural and often individual instincts — to shift blame, to minimize the problem, to focus on our excellent and pure intentions, [or] to put off an uncomfortable conversation to another day...[That is why f]or so many people, this work

¹ *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 1:1

can trigger defensiveness — the desire to justify one’s actions in order to stave off shame, guilt, humiliation, or loss of reputation or power.”²

Why couldn’t Maimonides have begun this process with a leisurely multi-month-long quiet personal reflection period mixed with some light sadness about the wrong that we’ve done? Because such half-hearted introspection will not get us to the next step in the *teshuvah* process...actually beginning to change so we don’t repeat this act again in the future.

I once worked with a supervisor who seemed to be operating on a loop. From time to time, a team member would cause him frustration – or outright anger – and he would unleash a torrent of hostility towards them. Having made his very loud and intimidating points, he would depart, only to – often times – later regret his behavior and go back to apologize. I wondered how those apologies were heard by staff members who could see plenty of evidence that they were just the most recent victim of these uncontrolled and terrifying outbursts, and they surely would not be the last. How meaningful could that apology be if he kept repeating the behavior?

The ultimate goal of *teshuvah* is transformation...to become a person who no longer engages in the actions that have done harm. The larger our infractions, the more those we’ve harmed want to know – before any forgiveness is offered – that we are on the path to such change. How might we demonstrate a true effort at change to those we’ve wronged? Needless to say, there will be different possibilities in different circumstances, but Rabbi Ruttenberg helps to get us started:

“...[T]he work of transformation might include tearful grappling with one’s behavior in prayer [or] meditation...; making financial sacrifices that have meaningful impact both on one’s own wallet and the world; [or] changing one’s self-conception and self-identity in appropriate ways... These days this process of change might also involve therapy, or rehab, or educating oneself rigorously on an issue about which one had been ignorant or held toxic opinions...It might involve a request to spend time with the victim to better understand the nature of the impact and the problem it caused, or seeking out others not directly involved in the situation who can help unpack the issue.”³

Beginning this transformative work is not only a signal to the person we’ve harmed that we are taking them seriously, it is also a way of centering their needs instead of focusing solely on our own good intentions or on how hard this is for us - details not likely relevant to those whom we’ve harmed.

Which brings us to Maimonides’ next step in the *teshuvah* process. He writes: “*Teshuvah* and Yom Kippur only atone for sins between a person and God...However,

² On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World by Danya Ruttenberg, Beacon Press, Boston, 2022, pp. 26-28

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34

sins between two people...will never be forgiven until [the wrong-doer] gives his colleague what he owes [her] and appeases [her].”⁴

How do we know what is owed? Maimonides indicates that we are responsible “for damages to self or property, for the pain suffered, for medical treatment, for loss of employment or wages and for the embarrassment suffered.”⁵

Sometimes it may be simple to determine what restitution looks like, and in other cases, that may be more complicated. In either scenario, it likely involves hearing from the person we’ve harmed about what will help them to feel whole – and then – accepting the consequences of our actions by seeking to be responsive to those needs. Even if we have repaid them monetarily in full, Maimonides notes, we must still appease the person we’ve wronged – focusing on their needs, not our own – and only then can we ask their forgiveness.

Now, having confessed openly – perhaps publicly, having begun the work of personal change, having sought to make restitution to the ones we’ve hurt, only now can we make a whole-hearted apology – one that is the result of this sacred work, not a precursor to it. For Maimonides – and for us - “Tell your sister you’re sorry!” was a doomed strategy from the get-go.

The process I’ve described is daunting. It is a wonder that any human being has ever accused another of being weak for offering a heartfelt apology. Doing so requires courage, humility, an openness to vulnerability, and the profound strength to bear the weight of what we might learn about ourselves. And that is just on the interpersonal level.

In the public sphere, some of us may be called upon to go through this process for an institution, business, or agency with which we are affiliated. Barbara Kellerman, an expert on public leadership, lauds the increase seen in recent years among business leaders and medical professionals in offering apologies when mistakes are made. Yet, all-too-often those appeals fall short of the goals she outlines, when she writes, “Above all, a good apology must be...genuine... an honest appeal for forgiveness. Such apologies are usually best offered in a timely manner, and they consist of the following four parts: an acknowledgment of the mistake or wrongdoing, the acceptance of responsibility, an expression of regret, and a promise that the offense will not be repeated.”⁶

I don’t know if Kellerman has studied Maimonides, but his wisdom is infused in her teachings. He, however, would go one step further...our repentance process is not complete with a mere promise not to repeat the harm we’ve inflicted. The process

⁴ *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 2:9

⁵ *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of One Who Injures a Person or Property, 1:1

⁶ **When Should a Leader Apologize—and When Not?** by Barbara Kellerman, Harvard Business Review, April 2006

concludes when we are presented with another opportunity to repeat our bad acts, and – the next time, having been transformed by our *teshuvah* – we behave differently.

How often we fall short of attaining this final step of the process, the one which most clearly demonstrates our sincere remorse and regret. We fail at this one interpersonally when we apologize for behavior in which we continue to engage. We fail at this one publicly when we put bottom line and self-interest ahead of common good. And we can fail at this one on a national or societal level as well.

We repeat the sins of our past when we apologize to the women of our nation for centuries of perpetuated patriarchy, mistreatment, and harassment while continuing to pay women less than men for the same work and stripping our mothers, sisters, and daughters of their rights to control their own bodies and make decisions about their own reproductive health.

We repeat our sins of the past when we seek to make amends with the GLBTQIA+ community for decades of physical, psychological, and emotional violence perpetrated against them while simultaneously denying them legal protections against discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, public education, federal funding, and credit access in many locales throughout the land.

Our nation repeats the sins of her past when she erects museums and monuments to the memory of the Holocaust but turns a blind eye to anti-Semitic acts increasing by double digits year-over-year in our nation and college campuses that feel outright hostile to many of their Jewish students.

And, of course, our nation has awakened anew to the debt owed to the victims of our nation's original sins...the indigenous peoples whose land was taken through colonization and whose cultures were systematically dismantled - and the Africans who were bound, enslaved, and brought to these shores to forcibly work a land in which they were allowed to share no stake. How does our country make amends or restitution for these acts? How can the generations of our day take responsibility for the acts of generations long past and bring healing to the descendants of their victims?

How can we demonstrate our commitment to not repeating the sins of our past by recognizing and addressing the ways in which racism is engrained into the very fibers that weave our nation together? There are models for such national healing, some better, some worse, none straightforward or easy. But practicing these skills in our interpersonal relationships will help us to be better advocates and allies when we need to do so on a societal or national scale as well.

And here's the kicker...after all that soul-searching, introspection, confession, amends-making, personal transformation, and apologizing...the person or people we've harmed are not necessarily required to forgive us. The Jerusalem Talmud⁷ notes that one is not obligated to forgive someone who has slandered them, presumably because it is

⁷ *Talmud Yerushalmi, Bava Kama, 8:7*

impossible to “take back” those words, and they can’t be unheard by all the people who were made privy to them. To apply this principle more broadly: If the impact of the harm done is long-lasting and irreversible, forgiveness is not required. Though, of course, the injured party may still choose to do so at any time.

Why go through all of this if we might not even be absolved of our guilt...if complete forgiveness is not necessarily in the cards? A parable envisions a rope connecting us with each soul with whom we are in relationship. When we do harm to that other, we cut the tie that binds us. But when we do the work of *teshuvah* - true repentance - we tie the severed rope back together again, the knot now bringing the two of us closer than we were before the rupture.

May this Yom Kippur not only help us to make amends with the Holy One...may it also inspire us to put in the heartfelt and challenging effort to draw closer to our loved ones, our colleagues and neighbors, our fellow citizens and to the selves we aspire to be so that we might inscribe and seal ourselves in the Book of Lives Well-Lived.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.