

Yom Kippur 2014

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The most important things in life aren't easy. To become good at anything takes work. It takes hours, months, years of practice to become proficient, let alone excellent at something. The great athletes, the great musicians, the great artists make it look easy, but that's an illusion. They make it look easy because they have honed their skill through practice so it looks natural, but if we think about our own lives, the things we are good at, we know its not. Mastering a skill is hard. Learning a new language is hard. Learning to play a musical instrument is hard. Being Jewish is hard. Much of it is in a foreign language. There are rituals that are thousands of years old and alien to modern sensibilities. There are volumes of sacred texts. It takes an investment of time and work to develop fluency.

During these High Holy Days amidst all the prayers and the pageantry, the music and the fast, all of us coming together, all the planning, and all the weight of the day we can lose sight of the most important things; of what this day and this season is really about. They are two things: apologizing

and forgiving. Both are simple and both are hard to do well. Both require practice to develop as skills.

I'd like to focus my last talk of these High Holy days on apology, because it is central to this day and, according to the Jewish tradition, it central to being a decent human being. Next year, God willing, I'll talk about forgiveness. Also, as a society, we seem to be getting worse at apologizing, which we all know to be true because we read cringe inducing apologies all the time in the paper. So let's begin by looking at how not to apologize. Because there are so many good examples of what not to say. By way of credit, I was inspired to explore this topic by an article in Tablet Magazine by Marjorie Ingall, who co-writes a blog called Sorry Watch, that dissects bad apologies. So here are some apologies, commonly used, that are not, in fact apologies:

The "I'm Sorry if" apology goes like this, "I'm sorry if my words (or actions) hurt anyone." This apology is extremely popular among professional athletes and celebrities right after they have said something they shouldn't, racist, sexist, throwing a coach or teammate under the bus. It usually follows them saying that their words were "taken out of context."

The reason this isn't an apology is because it avoids responsibility and puts the blame on the offended party. In other words, if you are so sensitive that my words hurt you, then I'm sorry. The right thing to say if you have said something nasty is, "I'm sorry I said those nasty things. I am sorry I hurt you." That is owning your sin.

The "Sorry but" apology goes like this, "I'm sorry I sent you an angry email, but I'm so stressed out right now I can't control my emotions." That is not an apology, it is an excuse. We are asking the injured party to have sympathy for our problems, rather than taking ownership of the harm we caused. It doesn't matter why we do something that hurts someone. If we hurt someone we need to own it.

The _____ made me do it apology. This one was used by Mel Gibson after he went on his anti-Semitic rant after being arrested for driving under the influence. He blamed his anti-Semitic screed on the alcohol, that he would never say such a thing if he were sober. In the Talmud it says, כנסו תוֹא אֶצִי, (*nichnas yayin, yotzei sod*) "when wine goes in, secrets come out." (Tractate Eruvin 65a) In other words, alcohol removes our inhibitions and makes us more likely to say what we really believe. Something we wouldn't say when sober, because our social filters are functioning. By the

way this is related to the, **“this is not who I am”** apology. You here this one a lot from politicians when they get caught using a racial slur, or defaming some group. They usually respond with, “Anyone who knows me, knows I am not a racist.” Well, they weren’t accused of being a racist. They insulted a group of people by using a racial slur. If we act cruelly or say hateful things, we may not be racist but we are being cruel and hateful.

The “I was just being funny” apology. This is really popular among adolescent boys. I hear it frequently from my male high school students when I confront them about saying something mean to another kid, like, “Your so gay.” They respond, “I was just being funny.” I say, “look, I’ve got a pretty good sense of humor, explain the joke to me.” As soon as I do that, the excuse collapses for the cop-out it is. Insulting people is never funny. In fact when a student calls another student gay as a put down they have hit the daily-double of cruelty because first, they have negatively categorized a group of people and then second, they have used that categorization to hurt someone else. But this so-called apology is just a way of avoiding responsibility.

The passive voice apology: This pseudo apology is very popular with politicians and corporate leaders. Who can ever forget Richard Nixon's Watergate apology, "Mistakes were made." Well, we knew that but what we really wanted to know was who made those mistakes. What's missing in this sentence is a pronoun, like "I made a mistake," or, "My minions committed a crime on my instructions." This apology is closely related to the **it was never our intention to...** apology, As in, "it was never our intention to create a product would kill or maim consumers." I think we can all safely say that we know this to be true. We assume that corporations are in business to make money, not kill people. However, as in all apologies, its not the intention that matters, it is the impact of the action, as in how a company's product or policy affects people. Like, covering up the knowledge that faulty ignition switches in GM cars led to at least thirteen deaths over a decade and a half, or denying necessary medical treatment by calling it experimental when it's not. The problem with this apology is that it does not specify what we did wrong and avoids taking responsibility. Government agencies and corporations always assure us that now, after they have been exposed, they are "laser focused" on fixing whatever the problem is. However, you can't fix something, whether an individual action,

a bad habit, a faulty product, a corporate policy, or a government procedure if you won't identify the problem, the process, or the culture that led to the problem in the first place.

The purpose of all these so-called apologies really is to not apologize at all, but rather to avoid responsibility, avoid consequences, and have one's life disrupted as little as possible. That is why, when we hear them it makes us cringe or laugh or both.

A genuine apology is different. Apologizing means we take responsibility for our actions and the impact our actions have on others. The purpose of a genuine apology is to attempt to repair the damage done and, if possible, to lay a foundation to repair the relationship that has been breached. There is another added benefit, if we own our actions and try to make things right, it actually makes us feel better. In general doing the right thing always makes us feel better.

It is also an essential step in T'shuvah. Maimonides summed up the Jewish way of apology in his Mishneh Torah, in the section Laws of

Repentance. Basically, there are four steps to a proper apology. First, we have to recognize we did something that harmed someone. The harm could be financial, or physical or emotional. Perhaps we cheated someone in business, or gossiped about someone, or said something cruel to someone. In other words we have to name our sin and the harm we did. No mitigating circumstances are allowed. We can't say, "well I said something cruel about so-and-so but she deserved it because she was mean to me." No, we have to own it. It was our deed. We caused the consequences. Also, intention is irrelevant. It doesn't matter if we were just trying to be funny, or meant no harm. If we hurt someone, we have hurt them (period). Our impact is what matters. Next, we must feel remorse. We must feel bad. No self-rationalization or justification allowed. I think this is designed to cultivate humility. Few things make us feel more humble than screwing up. It also cultivates empathy. To genuinely apologize we have to understand that the person we hurt feels bad and we have to feel bad about it too. Only after these first two steps are we in a position to apologize. We have to swallow our pride, make ourselves vulnerable, and go to the person we wronged. You have to specify what we did and specify the harm you think it caused. Then we have to say we are sorry.

The fourth step, this is actually after the apology, is that we must do the best we can to clean up the damage. If its financial, you are to pay the person back plus a 5% penalty. If you hurt someone's feelings there is really no compensation you can offer, except perhaps a genuine expression of regret. Finally, you must not repeat the behavior. This may be the most critical step. If you do the same thing again, it is as if you never apologized or made teshuvah in the first place. All your efforts are annulled.

I began by saying that apologizing is a rigorous process. It is. It is tough. It takes practice and some of our greatest sages, Maimonides, and The Hafetz Hayim, for example, spent a lot of time and thought on it. Perhaps the hardest part in the entire process, is admitting that we have done something wrong. The human capacity to rationalize knows no limits. But admitting we have done something wrong is a step on the path to humility and humility gives us the the capacity to heal relationships. When we truly apologize we lay ourselves open to the person we have harmed, we make ourselves vulnerable and we take responsibility for our actions. That is the purpose of this day. But if apologizing is hard, I think forgiving is even

harder. That is another purpose of this day. To remind us that forgiveness is always possible. But I'll save that for another drash.