



Temple Rodef Shalom

Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein

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Apologizing is Hard to Do

My cousin Eileen, age 4, is visiting our grandfather's house. She is playing outside. Grandpa David is watching Eileen from inside the house, through a window. He sees Eileen pull several of his prized tulips from the garden. Eileen comes into the house holding the tulips, roots included.

"Eileen," he says. "Did you pull those tulips out of the ground?"

"No," replies Eileen.

"Well," says Grandpa David, "I was watching through the window, and I saw you."

Eileen: "Which window?"

Whether we are 4 or 40, admitting that we have done something wrong is difficult. We are good people, people who know right from wrong and who—most of the time—live according to the rules. We try to do the right thing and we try to be sensitive to the feelings of others. It is tough to admit when we've done something wrong - even to ourselves - let alone to the people we have wronged. We don't like to make mistakes...we don't like to admit that we've messed up. Our pride gets in the way of apologizing.¹ We feel embarrassed.

Here's news: We are human! Human beings are not perfect. Sometimes we do the wrong thing. This includes all of us: Moms and dads, spouses, children, grandparents, teachers, rabbis and cantors.

How lucky we are to be part of a religious tradition that **understands** we are not perfect, gives us the tools to repair our relationships, **AND** encourages us to change for the better. Thinking about our behavior and about how we can grow to be better people is an important part of the High Holy Days.

¹ <http://www.realsimple.com/work-life/life-strategies/marjorie-ingall-apologies>

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, although separated by 10 days on the calendar, are a unit: a time when we're supposed to think about how we have gotten off of the path on which we should be walking, and about how we can and will return to that path in the coming year. Judaism teaches us that *teshuvah* is the way we return to the right path.

Teshuvah reminds me of the message on a sign outside a church: "If you are headed in the wrong direction, God allows U-turns."² Judaism teaches that, when we are going the wrong way, *teshuvah* helps us to change our direction.

Teshuvah is so important that the Rabbis say it was one of the seven things created **before** God created the world!³ *Teshuvah* not only guides us in repairing our relationships with others, it helps sustain our world!

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg teaches⁴ that each of us should consider herself or himself to be evenly balanced between good and bad, just as the world is evenly balanced between good and bad. The next thing we do, the next action we take - **no matter how small it seems to us** - can tilt us and the whole world toward the side of good and life -- or to the side of bad. Rabbi Greenberg teaches that *teshuvah* can help "tilt the world to the side of good."

What are the steps involved in *teshuvah*?

- 1) We must admit to ourselves that we have done something wrong.
- 2) We should feel upset with ourselves for doing wrong.
- 3) We should tell the person we have wronged that we are sorry.
- 4) We should offer to make things right.
- 5) We should think about how we can avoid behaving the same way in the future.
- 6) We should try hard, when in the same or similar situation in the future, not to do the same wrong.

Tonight I'd like to focus on step three in the process of *teshuvah*: telling the person we have wronged that we are sorry. I'd like us to think about what I call the "art of apologizing."

Let's get started!

² "Teshuvah: Making a U-turn," by Rabbi Shama Kanter, in "Rosh HaShanah Readings," edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006.

³ *Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer*, Chapter 2; Babylonian Talmud, *Pesachim* 54a

⁴ "Teshuvah: Tilt the World to the Side of Good," by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, in "Rosh HaShanah Readings," edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006.

"If you took offense at what I said, I am sorry."

"I'm sorry, but....."

"I'm *sorry!*"

How many of us have heard these, or similar words? How many of us have **said** these - or similar - words?

Although these are meant to be apologies, they are really not.

An apology, by definition, is: "a written or spoken expression of one's regret, remorse, or sorrow for having insulted, failed, injured, or wronged another."⁵

These so-called "apologies" don't quite fit the definition.

"If you took offense at what I said, I am sorry," or its close cousin, "I'm sorry that you feel that way" imply that the other person is too sensitive and that, somehow, it is **their** fault that your actions or words hurt.

"I'm sorry, but...." is like giving a gift and taking it back at the same time!

"I'm *sorry!*" The person we wronged is upset, hurt, or angry. We are uncomfortable with the other person's feelings. Rather than try to understand **why** the other person is upset with us, we issue a blanket, insincere, and grudging apology - hoping that this will magically make things better.

These so-called apologies are doomed to failure because they are not real: they sound like apologies, but they are not. This is because when we say these words we are not truly admitting that we have **done** something wrong. When we say these words, we are not acknowledging that we made a mistake. When we say these words we are not admitting that we have been unfair, insensitive, thoughtless, or even dishonest.⁶

⁵ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/apology>

⁶ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200909/go-ahead-say-youre-sorry>

So, how do we apologize the right way?

The first steps happen **before** we actually apologize.

1) We must understand (and admit to ourselves) that we did something wrong. We must be honest with ourselves about what we did wrong and about the impact it had on the other person.⁷ Think about which specific actions made that person upset with you. For example, a mother feels badly because she yelled at her son. She might think to herself: “I was irritable and I yelled at my son, and I feel terrible about it.”

2) Understand why you behaved the way you did.⁸ We must understand **why** we did what we did so that we can take responsibility for our actions when we apologize **and** so that we can try to prevent ourselves from behaving in the same way in the future. This is **NOT** an excuse for our wrong behavior. It is a way of reminding the other person—and ourselves—that this is not the way we really are, or that we like to behave with others.⁹ In our example, the mother might think: “I yelled at my son because I didn’t get enough sleep the night before, and when I don’t get enough sleep I can be cranky.”

3) Empathize with the person we wronged. Try to understand why the other person was upset by what you did. Imagine how you would feel in a similar situation.¹⁰ In our example, the mother might reflect: “If my son yelled at me for no reason, I would feel hurt and angry.”

Some words of caution: We have to remind ourselves that, although we try to put ourselves in the “shoes” of the person we offended, it can be difficult to do this. None of us experiences things the same way. What bothers or offends someone else may not bother or offend you. We can’t really know how the other person feels...yet, when we’ve hurt someone, we need to apologize—even if **we** wouldn’t be upset if the same thing was done to us.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <http://www.wikihow.com/Ask-for-Forgiveness>

⁹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200909/go-ahead-say-youre-sorry>

¹⁰ <http://www.wikihow.com/Ask-for-Forgiveness>

4) As you prepare for to apologize, remember that making a mistake does NOT make you a bad person!¹¹

5) Think about writing out your apology in advance, especially if there are several points that you want to make. Although it is preferable to apologize in person, if this is not possible, you may need to mail or e-mail your apology.

Now that we have done our homework, it is time for the actual apology!¹²

1) Express deep regret for the specific actions that hurt the other person and tell the person that you feel sorry for what you did . South African President F.W. de Klerk, in an apology to his people for the system of apartheid said:

“Deep regret goes further than just saying you are sorry. Deep regret says that if I could turn the clock back, and if I could do anything about it, I would have liked to have avoided it.”¹³

Here’s how this might sound in our example of the mom who yelled at her son: “I know that I hurt you when I yelled at you, and I am so sorry.”¹⁴

2) Speak from your heart! There is nothing worse than an apology that is not sincere.

3) Tell the person you hurt why you behaved the way that you did, without using this an excuse for your actions. Show the person that you understand, to the best of your ability, why your actions upset them. The mom in our example might say: “I know how much it hurts your feelings when I yell at you. I stayed up too late last night, and not getting enough sleep makes me cranky.”

4) Tell the other person how you plan to make things right. Our mom might say: “I can’t change the fact that I yelled at you. Could we spend some time together today, just the two of us?”

5) Tell the other person how you are trying to change so that, in the future, you won’t act the same way. “In the future I’m going to try hard not to stay up late so that I can make sure to get enough sleep, so I won’t be cranky.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200909/go-ahead-say-youre-sorry>

¹⁴ Ibid.

Remember that the other person doesn't "owe us" forgiveness.¹⁵ Listen to what the person has to say - if anything -- about your actions and your apology. This may be hard, yet it is part of learning how to be a better person.¹⁶ Try to be understanding if the other person doesn't forgive you, and try not to be mad at the other person for not forgiving you. You might say: "It's okay if you can't forgive me. I know that I really hurt you."¹⁷

Maimonides, the great 12th century Jewish scholar, taught that if the person we wronged does not accept our first apology, we should try three more times. We have then done everything in our power to make amends.¹⁸

Remember: it takes a lot of character and strength to apologize! It is not a sign of weakness. Apologizing shows we are strong enough to admit when we are wrong. It shows that we want to change and that we want to become better people. Like any real personal change, this starts from deep inside us.

A story:

The town of Chelm was a magical place where the people were very pious and very Jewish - but not necessarily very smart. Two people were having a lively argument about how people grow. One person was convinced that people grow from the ground up; the other was just as sure that people grow from the head down.

Each was able to cite proof to support his opinion. The person who believed that people grow from the ground up said:

"Just look at the army as it marches by, and you'll see that I am right! None of the soldiers' heads is at the same level, but all the soldiers have their feet on the ground. This proves that people grow from the ground up!"

¹⁵ <http://www.xojane.com/diy/but-what-if-youre-wrong-5-rules-for-apologizing-like-a-grownup>

¹⁶ <http://www.realsimple.com/work-life/life-strategies/marjorie-ingall-apologies>

¹⁷ <http://www.wikihow.com/Ask-for-Forgiveness>

¹⁸ *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:9.* http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/911891/jewish/Teshuvah-Chapter-Two.htm

The other person argued:

“If you look at members of the marching band as they march by, you’ll see that the pants of their uniforms don’t all reach their shoes. Some of the pants are a little too long, and some are a little too short. This surely proves that people grow from the head down!”

Since they were unable to resolve their disagreement, the two went to the rabbi. Each explained his point of view. The rabbi listened to them both, stroked his beard, and said:

“Friends: it is not that humans grow from the top down or from the bottom up. Human beings grow from the inside out.”¹⁹

This year, as we get better at the art of apologizing, may we, too, grow from the inside out.

Amein

¹⁹Adapted from: “How We Grow,” by Rabbi Adam Wohlberg, in “Three Times Chai: 54 Rabbis Tell Their Favorite Stories,” edited by Laney Katz Becker. Behrman House, 2007.