

Apologizing and Forgiving: How and When

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Attorneys often counsel clients not to admit wrongdoing. I'm told, though, that many lawyers have changed their thinking in recent years. The fear was that the confession would be fodder for a lawsuit. True enough, our society is overly litigious. However, in the case of medical errors, recent studies have shown the value of admitting the mistake. The result is a decline in medical malpractice suits. Appropriate apologies actually seem to work!

All too often, though, our apologies are woefully inadequate. A co-worker calls to our attention that we have been rude to another colleague. Upon reflection, we know we weren't as kind as we should have been. Or perhaps we're still caught up in whatever petty irritation led to our outburst in the first place. We go to the person whom we have harmed, and we say: "I apologize if you were offended."

Public figures offer these pseudo-apologies frequently. They say they are sorry if someone was offended. These utterances are entirely unsatisfactory. Susan G. Komen "Race for the Cure" issued a similarly insufficient apology about holding its annual Arkansas event on Yom Kippur. They do not admit any wrongdoing, so no actual apology has been offered.

A true apology must be accompanied by confession. When we say that we're sorry that somebody else felt hurt, we apologize for another person's feelings, not for our own actions. We have failed to place the burden where it actually belongs: upon ourselves. If this sermon achieves anything, my greatest hope is that we will stop saying that we're sorry for how somebody else feels! No circumstance whatsoever calls for those words.

On this *Shabbat Shuvah*, we prepare to utter these words on Yom Kippur Eve: "For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones; but for transgressions of one human being against another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another." Of course, this idea is not original to *Gates of Repentance*. Instead, those words were composed and recorded in the *Mishnah* by our sages, more than 1800 years ago. Tonight, let us focus on the sins between people.

At this season, we are acutely aware we should ask forgiveness from those we have hurt. We're aware of the requirement, but we have little idea about how we should go about seeking forgiveness.

By age-old custom, between the High Holy Days, many Jews will apologize to everyone with whom they have had significant interactions in the last year. The idea is that, however unintentionally, we are most likely to hurt the people we see regularly. Of course, going up to everyone, apologizing if we have hurt them in the last year, is relatively easy. We aren't admitting any specific wrongdoing. As far back as 1723, Rabbi Joseph Hahn of Frankfort feared that engaging in this rote act would lead many of us to "repudiate the essential, [which is] the forgiving and being forgiven by" the people with whom we really do have strained relationships.

The hard work is in going up to the person whom we have offended. Most of us are scared out of our wits. We avoid all confrontation, even one intended to make amends. Nobody likes to admit having been at fault. And yet, the commandments of this season require us to confess the wrongs we have done and to confess them directly. We must change our ways. We must pray that our forgiveness is accepted. When we have insulted another person publicly, even more difficult work is required: We must apologize in front of all who heard our improper words.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the repentance equation, though, is when we have been hurt and are asked to forgive.

We are all familiar with the Christian notion of “turning the other cheek.” We may hear our Christian friends speak of forgiving even those who have not apologized. That religious value doesn’t work for most Jews, though we must admit that offering forgiveness, even when it is not sought, is psychologically healthy in some cases.

Judaism focuses on forgiving those who do admit their wrongs, who do change their behavior, and who do apologize. Nobel Laureate S.Y. Agnon wrote the definitive volume on the laws and customs of the High Holy Days. Agnon insists that we should not forgive a person whose harmful behavior continues. The *Mishnah* teaches that Yom Kippur does not provide atonement for those who continue their wonted ways. When God does not forgive, Agnon instructs us not to grant pardon either.

But what of the truly penitent sinner? Agnon cites numerous ancient Jewish texts urging us to forgive. If we refuse, the person who has harmed us is instructed not to ask our pardon more than three times. For Agnon, we should accept another’s repentance as our part in making *shalom*, peace, for all humanity. Agnon reminds us that Torah instructs that the ancient Temple altar was to be constructed only of whole stones, which no metal object has touched. Metal is used to make the implements of war. The Temple must be a place of peace. In Agnon’s words, “Now, if stones that cannot hear and cannot see and cannot smell and cannot speak are saved by [Torah] from the sword, because they make peace between [people] through the sacrifices, which are offered upon them, . . . how much more is this true of [us], who can hear and see and smell and speak, when we make peace among [one another]!” Granting forgiveness where it is properly sought and deserved, making peace with one another, we do our part to bring the world to messianic redemption.

Steps toward ultimately repairing our broken world, toward *tikkun olam*, are our goal during these High Holy Days. We atone for our sins, individually and collectively, for the benefit of our own souls, but so much more, for the betterment of all creation. When we sincerely apologize to those we have harmed, we help bring peace to the world. When we improve our behavior, we do our part to build a better future. When we forgive those who deserve our pardon, God is our partner.

Let us do the hard work of this year’s days of repentance. Then, may our apologies and our forgiveness be pleasing in the sight of our God.

Amen.