

## Rosh Hashanah 5777 Sorry, not sorry

Shanah tovah.

When was the last time you said you were sorry?

Of course, being English, it was very recently for me. I normally say 'sorry' if somebody stepped on my foot, for example.

But when was the last time you *really* said you were sorry? And what was it like for you? It's an important question at this time of year, because our tradition teaches that the period starting tonight and ending with Yom Kippur is the one dedicated to our apologizing to each other, because Yom Kippur itself only deals with issues between us and God.

The formula is a relatively simple one (Rambam):

Fess up and ask for forgiveness (Mishneh Torah 1:1).

Show remorse and take steps to insure that you don't repeat the wrong (Mishneh Torah 2:2).

Do whatever you can to right matters and make things up to the person you've hurt (Mishneh Torah 2:9).

And interestingly, an article I found on Psychology Today (the author of this part of it is called Beverly Engel) identifies exactly the same three points and gives us a useful way to remember them. Apologizing is made up of:

Regret

Responsibility

Remedy

But making a proper apology - a real, heartfelt apology - is actually difficult. We live in a kind of culture of non-apology, actually; the website SorryWatch was set up by Susan McCarthy and Marjorie Ingall for analyzing apologies because so many of them, well, aren't. Quote:

*There are a lot of awful apologies out there. Apologies that make things worse, not better. Apologies that miss the point. Apologies that are really self-defense dressed up as an apology. Apologies that add insult to injury. Apologies that are worse than the original offense. Apologies so bad people should apologize for them. "I'm sorry if I offended you. But if you were so upset, you probably need to get professional help."*

A lot of this is encapsulated in a little phrase that's getting tossed around a lot right now - 'Sorry, not sorry.' But if we are to make it to Yom Kippur in the right frame of mind - not to mention, if we want to be part of a well-functioning holy community - our work for the next few days is to try to get ourselves past the pseudo-apology that so readily springs to our lips and to search inside ourselves for the real one. We have to *be* sorry.

Why are lousy apologies so much more prevalent than good ones? Why is apologizing so hard to do?

Because it begins with an admission that we were wrong.

In her book *Being Wrong*, Kathryn Schultz explores why we find it so gratifying to be right, and why it's so maddening to be mistaken.

- we do everything we can to avoid being wrong or thinking about being wrong
- we are fine with it in the abstract
- but when it comes down to us personally, we can't think of anything we are wrong about
- we go through life convinced we are right about (almost) everything

She writes, 'In our collective imagination, we associate error with shame, stupidity, ignorance, indolence, psychopathology and moral degeneracy' - sounds like the Ashamnu? Why yes, it does.

And often (Schultz again) we take one of two routes. We say 'I was wrong BUT...' Or we fall back on formulae like 'mistakes were made...' Both routes have in common that they distance us from what we did wrong. And so our apology doesn't even belong to us any more. Sorry, not sorry.

But to be wrong is to be human! - to err is human, to forgive divine.

If that's the case, then these ten days are an invitation to become more human.

And it turns out that psychologically speaking that holds true as well. The more I sat and researched the benefits of apologizing, the clearer it became that to put ourselves in a place where we are willing to say 'I'm sorry, I was wrong' and then following through, actually has a whole cluster of benefits.

First, there are the benefits to the person who we wronged. There are actual physical benefits to receiving an apology in terms of decreased blood pressure, a slower heart rate and steadier breathing. But also, when we apologize to the person we harmed, we recognize and acknowledge them more fully. Apologizing is an act of empathy. It stretches our souls.

Of course, being able to receive an apology can also be a stretch. I'm sure we can think of times when we have said 'thanks' or 'apology accepted' through gritted teeth, wishing the moment would pass so we could get back to the way we thought about the person apologizing before. It can be very rewarding to place someone else in the wrong and keep them there - because of course, if they are wrong, then we must be right, mustn't we? And we all know how good that feels. But if we can allow our anger to melt, then empathy starts to flow the other way as well as we acknowledge the fallibility and humanity of the person who did us wrong and their wish to make it good; we might not go so far as to like them again, but at least they are no longer a threat and a cause of distress to us. And who knows - perhaps we will understand them better next time we disagree with them over something.

And then there are the benefits we ourselves receive when we apologize wholeheartedly. Like the act of physically stretching our muscles, stretching our souls to make a proper apology helps us to grow, to be more flexible, more resilient, better able to get ourselves up again when we fall down. Apologizing helps us through the process of shame and remorse we may feel after being wrong. And it reinforces our connection to others as well. A community where people can apologize freely will be stronger than one where folk dig in, reinforcing their divisions and their estrangement from each other.

So how should we apologize? I say again, it isn't easy. Let's remind ourselves of those three steps: regret, responsibility and remedy. Let's find our own vocabulary and our own manner for saying, 'I am so sorry that I got things wrong; I am going to take steps to rein in whatever it was that drove me to behave towards you in that way; and here is how I want to make it up to you.' We might rehearse what we want to say and do this face to face; we might use email or a letter; we could apologize publicly or privately, loudly or quietly, but let's commit to being sincere.

I mentioned right at the beginning of this sermon that the Rabbis prescribe that Yom Kippur can only work as it is intended to work if we have apologized to each other beforehand. One piece of imagery they use is very striking. This is an extract from the ninth Mishnah of the eighth chapter of Yoma, the section dedicated to Yom Kippur:

*Yom Kippur atones for transgressions between a person and God, but for a transgression against one's neighbor, Yom Kippur cannot atone, until he appeases his neighbor...it is said, **mikveh Yisrael Adonai** - God is the mikveh of Israel. Even as a mikveh purifies what is not clean, so the Holy Blessing One purifies Israel.*

If we are able to undertake the task of apologizing - whether to others in this community or to those outside of it - in these next ten days, if we can embrace our fallibility and our humanity, if we can do our sincere best to put right what has gone wrong - then Yom Kippur really can be our *mikveh*, from which we can emerge shining and joyous to greet this new year. So, when we come together here in ten days' time, let's commit to having made at least one sincere apology in the meantime. However tough it is to do.

I wish us a happy, healthy and sweet New Year.  
Shanah tovah u'metukah.