

Rosh Hashanah 5784
How to Say Sorry
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Shanah Tovah.

My favorite comic strip has always been Calvin and Hobbes. Much of it involves introspective conversations between Calvin, a frequently mischievous first grader, and his stuffed tiger best friend Hobbes. Frequently these refer to shenanigans between Calvin and a classmate he doesn't like, a girl named Susie. Let me share with you an example:

Calvin and Hobbes are walking outside together. Calvin tells Hobbs, "I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry I did it."

Hobbes responds, "Maybe you should apologize to her."

Calvin dismisses the suggestion, saying, "I keep hoping there is a less obvious solution."

Calvin speaks for so many of us, right? We know apologizing is the right thing to do, and we are often quick to point out to our kids and grandkids that the appropriate thing to do is to say sorry. But when it comes to us, we'd often rather not apologize. It's really hard to do, I know. But saying sorry - the obvious solution - is usually the best course of action.

The core theme of the High Holiday season is Teshuvah, repentance, and one key to that is apologizing to the injured party. Saying sorry is paramount to that process.

In shul we spend hours saying, "We're sorry, G-d," again and again. And that works for our transgressions between us and G-d. But what about our mistakes toward other people? All our time in shul does not exempt us from apologizing directly to other people we have wronged. That has to be done outside of services. And in many ways, apologizing to G-d is easier than to other people. Saying sorry is a critical part of restoring relationships with family and friends. In short, it's a crucial skill for life.

Apologizing to another person can be really, really hard. First, we must acknowledge that we fell short, and that's uncomfortable. Then we must encounter another person in their pain, which is challenging. It may seem easier to walk away, especially when the error was completely unintentional. But in all these cases, the relationship suffers when we don't say sorry. An authentic apology is hard – but it is medicine for an injured relationship.

What's the best way to apologize? Jews living in the past 800 years have turned to Maimonides as the authority, author of the influential Laws of Teshuvah. He really provides the map that we still consult for direction. He writes that the model apology is to say this:

"Though I sinned against so and so, committing the following misdeeds [then he specifies them] behold, I repent and express my regret." He goes on to say that anyone who hides his sins - out of pride - will not achieve complete repentance. Additionally, anyone who verbalizes their confession without resolving in their heart to not commit the sin again achieves nothing. The apology doesn't count for a moment because a sincere apology must come from the heart. Merely paying lip service is not a true apology.

The Rambam's wisdom is timeless. His model apology doesn't allow for "I'm sorry if I made you feel..." Or, "I'm sorry to all the people I may have hurt." It doesn't allow for justifications or explanations. It specifies the people, specifies the actions. It actually says "I'm sorry."

But not everybody knows about Maimonides, and the curious today might seek wisdom from another authority: the internet. Here too we learn important insights. I want to share some pointers from an article on NPR earlier this year:

"The new book, *Sorry, Sorry, Sorry: The Case for Good Apologies*, (available in the Beth El library) draws from a broad range of research to explain the power of apologies, why we don't always get good ones, and the best way to tell someone you're sorry.

Co-authors Marjorie Ingall and Susan McCarthy break down the six (and a half) steps to great apologies. They are:

1. Say you're sorry. Not that you "regret," not that you are "devastated." Say you're "sorry."
2. Say what it is that you're apologizing for. Be specific.
3. Show you understand why it was bad, take ownership, and show that you understand why you caused hurt.
4. Don't make excuses.
5. Say why it won't happen again. What steps are you taking?
6. If it's relevant, make reparations: "I'm going to pay for the dry cleaning. Just send the bill to me. I'm going to do my best to fix what I did."

"These six steps are relevant for adults, for children, for corporations, for institutions, for governments," Ingall said. "And six-and-a-half is 'listen.' People want to be heard, and don't jump over them. Let the person that you hurt have their say."

Ingall said saying the word "sorry" may seem obvious, but it didn't always happen. Instead, people say things like they're "regretful," and this isn't the same thing.

"Regret is about how I feel," Ingall said. "We're all regretful. 'Sorry' is about how the other person feels. And when you apologize, you have to keep the other person's feelings at top of mind."

Time is the true test of an apology's sincerity. One can never be sure of the apology's merit in the moment. Only one week, two weeks, or one month later can we look back and know for sure if the person was truly sorry because then we can judge their subsequent *actions*, not just their words.

Maimonides asks a related question: When has one reached complete Teshuvah? He answers: It's when a person confronts the same situation in which he previously sinned and he has the potential to commit the same sin again. Nevertheless, if he does *not* commit the same sin because of Teshuvah, *that* is true repentance. For example, if one person badmouthed a friend behind her back and later said they were sorry, the real test is when someone else asks for some gossip about that friend, or when he is in the same company as the first gossip. When the first person *doesn't* share because he remembers the pain he caused and the commitment he made, *that's* true repentance.

So we see a lot of the spiritual work of the High Holidays must be done at home, away from the synagogue. It's our homework this season.

Maimonides adds: "Teshuvah and Yom Kippur only atone for sins between people and G-d; for example, a person who ate a forbidden food and the like. However, sins between people - for example, someone who injures a colleague, curses a colleague, steals from him, or the like - will never be forgiven until he gives his colleague what he owes him and appeases him. Even though repentance and calling out [to G-d] are desirable at all times, during the ten days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, they are even more desirable and will be accepted immediately."

I've had to apologize many, many times to people I love for my mistakes and shortcomings. It's always uncomfortable, even if my errors in judgment have been unintentional, which they almost always are. And I've fallen short in my apologies many times too, by offering an explanation of my actions - not helpful. Or saying it was unintentional - not sufficient. Or saying I'm sorry if I upset you - putting the responsibility on them and not me. Or not saying I won't do it again. A bad apology can be worse than no apology.

Interestingly, when I think of the Torah's examples of apologizing, what comes to mind first is a path *not* to follow. Adam and Eve are created in Genesis 1 with such unlimited promise, yet everything quickly falls apart. Merely two chapters later we read about them eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. Today I'm not interested in their sin but their response to it. G-d confronts them afterward, but not in a scary manner. G-d calls out to Adam and asks, "*Ayecha* - where are you? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?" (Gn. 3:9,11). Of course this cannot mean "Where are you physically?" because obviously G-d knows where Adam is standing and exactly what happened. G-d asks Adam, as it were, "Where are you spiritually? What is your response to eating the forbidden fruit?"

Does Adam acknowledge and apologize? No, he does the opposite. He replies, "the woman You put at my side - she gave me of the tree, and I ate" (Gn. 3:12).

Not only does Adam barely acknowledge his own sin, but even worse, he blames others. He blames Eve - "the woman" - and then he even has the chutzpah to blame G-d - "whom *You* put at my side."

G-d then turns to Eve and asks, "What is this you have done?" (Gn. 3:13). She replies, "The serpent duped me and I ate" (ibid.). Eve also fails to take responsibility, blaming another, the snake, before begrudgingly offering a minimal confession. Adam and Eve provide a model of *evading* responsibility and not owning up to and apologizing for something they should have. We are *not* to follow their lead.

Seen as a metaphor, the question G-d asks Adam - "*Ayecha* - where are you?" - is not just for Adam. Readers of every generation can imagine G-d asking them personally where *they* are today. Many generations later in the Torah, G-d's question is finally answered by Abraham. G-d calls Abraham prepared to instruct him to sacrifice Isaac, and Abraham responds: "*Hineni* - here I am," which means, "I'm ready to take responsibility" (Gn. 22:1). Abraham is the first person to respond "Here I am." We are to follow Abraham's lead here, not Adam's.

What about a positive example of an apology?

There is Torah everywhere, even sometimes on TV. (To my own children: no, saying that will *not* get you more TV time!) You may be familiar with the popular show "The Bear," which is about a dysfunctional Chicago restaurant.

Many of the characters have issues, and there is one in particular who really struggles to get along well with anybody. Richie is part of the family and has a role in the business, but

he is always making things difficult for others – calling them names, leveling personal attacks, everything you do not want in a co-worker.

But after a series of experiences and reflection, Richie realizes he has been in the wrong and wants to do better. He has dug himself a pretty deep hole and knows he has a long way to go to get out. But he is determined to start, so he finds his co-worker Natalie to apologize. Given that he has mistreated her in the past, she is deeply skeptical when he says he wants to say sorry, so she finds a witness. But then something convinces her that he means it. Let me share the script:

Richie: I, uh, want to apologize.

Natalie: For?

Everything, I guess.

Alright, I think for a long time I didn't really know where I fit, you know, and I would shove myself into places and things where I definitely did not fit. And I think that that probably – definitely- made things worse. And I'm sorry if I took anything out on you, and if I treated you like garbage. Because I actually do think that we could fit good together. I could be good at things that you don't really want to do. And you're obviously really great at a whole bunch of stuff that I don't know how to do, you know?

That's why you're wearing a suit.

I'm wearing a suit because it makes me feel better about myself. Look, Natalie, if there's anything I can do to make your life easier here, tell me. I will do it, because I need this place to work.

[Long sigh].

Baby steps

Deal

[Long Embrace].

Thank you for apologizing.

These two minutes restore their fractured relationship. In his apology, Richie doesn't even check all the 6 and 1/2 boxes of the perfect apology that I shared earlier. But he excels at one thing: he is 100% genuine, and that is enough. His eye contact, his tone, and his

presence make it clear he is serious about what he says. The sincere intent is there, and that matters even more than the words themselves. It's much more important to go off your heart instead of a how-to-apologize checklist. Like Richie, start with being sincere, as that's the most important ingredient of all. If you want to take your apology to the next level, which is more challenging, follow the Rambam's direction or that of the 6 ½ steps.

Richie wouldn't know the word, but he is doing real Teshuvah here. Richie possesses a lot of courage to apologize, a lot of inner strength. Because saying sorry, especially unprompted, is really hard.

It can be so hard to apologize once, and sometimes we do everything right and still the other person does not forgive. What are we supposed to do then? Rabbi Gil Student summarizes the Jewish answer: "The Talmud teaches that you should apologize at most three times (Yoma 87a). If your victim still does not forgive you, then you should move on because you have done all that you can. The Talmud deduces this [from a scene in the Joseph story, where the father Jacob says the word 'Na - please' three times in asking for forgiveness]. You do not become subservient to someone just because you harmed them. You must sincerely apologize and attempt to obtain their forgiveness, but there is a limit to your obligation to them — three apologies."

Being in shul all these hours over these holidays is difficult. Fasting for 25 hours on Yom Kippur is a grind. But confronting someone you hurt and apologizing directly and without justification is hardest of all. This is true no matter your age. But it's the foundation to forgiveness between people. For some relationships, it's a lifeline.

Every Tishrei we ask G-d to forgive our sins. That takes lots of energy, time, and focus. We also ask forgiveness from family, friends, and others we have hurt. That takes a little time but a lot of courage.

May these hours in shul fill us with such courage. May these holidays inspire us to take the difficult step to be better in the year ahead. May 5784 be a year of forgiveness for each of us from G-d and from people. And may we understand that the key to forgiveness from others is actually in our hands - or rather in our hearts and in our words.

Shanah Tovah.