

What is at the HEART of a HEARTFELT Apology?
Rabbi Allison Lee Poirier
Kol Nidre 5783/2022

“I’m sorry.” (plain). “I’m sorry” (roll eyes and sigh). “I’m sorry!” (sincere). There are a lot of ways to apologize, some obviously more meaningful than others. There are just as many ways to accept, or decline to accept, an apology from another person. During this season of atonement, offering and accepting apologies can be a tremendous challenge. But it is a challenge we must face as we move through the holiday cycle each year, as it is a fundamental piece of who we are as Jews. As Rabbi Alan Lew writes, “Spiritually the only questions worth asking about any conflict...is this: What is my responsibility for it? How am I complicit in it? How can I prevent it from happening again?”¹ Each year we reflect on these questions and set out to offer answers to ourselves and others as we prepare to renew ourselves for the year ahead. To complete this task successfully, we must understand what is at the **heart** of a **heartfelt** apology.

Fortunately, we have lots of examples and counterexamples in our sacred texts. The Talmud is full of stories, some upstanding and some downright immature, of how the ancient sages approached each other with apologies in preparation for this sacred day. First, the Talmud gives us the ingredients for a basic apology:

Anyone who asks forgiveness of his friend should not ask more than three times, as it is stated (in the story of Joseph forgiving his brothers):

אָנָּא שָׂא נָא פִּשְׁעֵי אַחֵיךָ וְחַטָּאתָם כִּי-רָעָה גְּמִלוּךְ, וְעַתָּה שָׂא נָא, לְפִשְׁעֵי עַבְדֵי אֶלְהֵי אָבִיךָ;
וַיִּבְרַךְ יוֹסֵף, בְּדַבְרָם אֱלֹהֵי

¹ *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared* 45.

“Please, please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did evil to you. And now, please forgive.”² The verse uses the word “please” three times, which shows that one need not ask more than three times, after which the insulted friend must be appeased and offer forgiveness.³

The Talmud makes an apology sound simple enough, but we all know that in reality an apology can get quite complicated. Our sages offer several examples, and counter-examples, of how to carry out their advice in real life. First the Talmud tells us about a time when Rabbi Yirmeya insulted Rabbi Abba. In advance of Yom Kippur, Rabbi Yirmeya did the right thing by going to sit outside of Rabbi Abba’s house to apologize. He chose a rather unfortunate place to sit, and while he was waiting Rabbi Abba’s maid poured out the dirty bathroom water right onto Rabbi Yirmeya’s head. He was so insulted! When Rabbi Abba heard what happened he went out to apologize for this insult, and the two were reconciled.⁴

I like this example because both parties take sincere responsibility for their actions, and do not let the other person’s wrongdoing get in the way of taking responsibility for themselves. Rabbi Yirmeya knows he owes Rabbi Abba an apology for his insulting words, and he goes out of his way to find his friend. He is patient, and he waits for Abba to be ready to accept an apology. Rabbi Abba is also a real mensch, because despite whatever offense he has taken at Rabbi Yirmeya’s words, he is quick to apologize for the accident involving the dirty water, and his hard feelings don’t make

² Genesis 50:17

³ Bavli Yoma 87a

⁴ Adapted from Bavli Yoma 87a

him feel spiteful or happy for Yirmeya's misfortune. Yirmeya and Abba show us that hurt feelings are a natural part of the relationship between friends, but sincere efforts to reestablish a good relationship can be effective.

The Talmud then offers a story about how to approach someone who you believe owes an apology to you. Rabbi Zeira was a very pious sage, and he didn't want anyone to be punished on Yom Kippur on his account. But he was still a person who sometimes had hurt feelings. So each year as Yom Kippur approached, if he had a complaint against a person who insulted him, he would be sure to keep running into that person and make himself available so that it would be easy for the other person to apologize to him.⁵

The first thing I like about this story is the validation that everyone, even very holy pious people, have hurt feelings, and we should never dismiss or diminish our own feelings. However, even when those feelings are completely valid, the other person might sincerely not know we are hurt. This often happens when people try to live by the Golden Rule - do unto others as you would have done to you. I don't like this rule very much at all. I prefer the Platinum Rule - do unto others as **they** would have done to **themselves**. People are different. What you want in a certain situation might not be what I want in that very same scenario. So even if you've done your best to treat me the way you think is right, I might not have appreciated it. But how would you know?! The point is, it is normal for people who love and trust each other to still hurt each other's feelings, and when you care about the relationship it is important to let someone know that you're upset if you think they are not aware. Rabbi Zeira would sometimes have his feelings hurt by someone who didn't know they had made a mistake. In all of his piety,

⁵ Adapted from Bavli Yoma 87a

he gave himself the gift of acknowledging his own hurt feelings **and** gave the other person the benefit of the doubt by assuming they would want to know and apologize for their mistake.

I refer to Rabbi Zeira's actions as a gift, inspired by the words of Dr. Harriet Lerner and her book "Why Won't You Apologize?!" Dr. Lerner believes that a sincere apology can provide the gift of restoration to both parties. First, "An apology is a gift to the injured party because it releases them from obsession, validates their sense of reality, and lets them know that their anger and pain affects us."⁶ When someone is angry, their anger often grows to encompass more than just the inciting incident. Every moment that passes without an apology is a moment they feel the offender does not understand or care about them. The injured party might even begin to look for or notice additional actions that offend them, thus creating a snowball effect. A successful apology acknowledges the hurt of the incident and releases the injured party from the burden of carrying that grudge into the future.

Still, accepting an apology is a difficult task. In order to accept an apology, you have to be vulnerable enough to admit that you were hurt in the first place. Dr Lerner is emphatic that "that's ok" or "don't worry about it" are not optimal responses when someone offers you an apology that you really needed or deserved. Whatever they did to hurt your feelings **was not** okay! And now that they've gone to the trouble of apologizing, it is good to accept their apology, rather than dismissing it by saying the apology wasn't needed. Dr Lerner suggests it might be preferable to say "thank you" or "I appreciate that" when someone offers an apology because that acknowledges the

⁶*I'm Sorry: How to Apologize and Why It Matters, with Dr. Harriet Lerner*

really difficult thing they did in apologizing and demonstrates how much it means to you. Dismissing the apology as unnecessary is like rejecting a gift, while accepting the apology is accepting the gift this person has offered you.

That's not to say that you must accept an apology you feel is insincere. Nor are you required to offer forgiveness as part of the apology. You might acknowledge how much you appreciate the apology or how meaningful you find it, but you are not obligated to forgive the person in return.

Finally, "an apology is a gift to the person who committed the wrong because it grows their maturity and self worth." We are all human. We are not perfect. We will all make mistakes, and when we do we can choose constructive ways to respond. The Talmud offers us one final story on this subject: Rav had an ongoing argument with a certain butcher, who knew that Rav was upset with him. On the day before Yom Kippur the butcher had still not approached Rav to make amends, so Rav went to see him. When Rav showed up at the shop, the butcher told him, "go away, I have nothing to say to you!" and at that very moment, cut his hand with the knife he was wielding. An apt metaphor for how stubbornness and spite keep us from achieving spiritual wholeness.

Reflecting on behavior, attempting to make amends, and committing to better behavior in the future demonstrate our belief in our own ability to improve. These steps are all required for growth. That's why we have this holiday every year, so we are reminded and required to go through this process! In this sense, the process of teshuvah surrounding Yom Kippur is empowering and uplifting. Every year during the Yamim Noraim we bring our mistakes into the light, look at them, show them to God, and talk about them with other people not to shame or humiliate ourselves, but to affirm and empower ourselves for the future. As Jonathan Van Ness unabashedly teaches us,

“Shame says I’m a bad person, acknowledging (mistakes) says I can do better.”⁷

Reflecting on our past mistakes is how we tell ourselves that we are fundamentally more than our past, and apologizing tells others that we will in fact act better in the future.

These past ten days we have been reflecting together on the very powerful phrase, “Chadeish Yameinu K’Kedem, Renew us as in Days of Old,” and how this renewal affects each individual, our TBS community, and the global community to which we all belong. Yom Kippur is our annual pause for reflection, our chance to renew our own personal days and bring ourselves back to a fresh start. In order to renew our days as of old, we need to be honest about those days. It doesn’t mean we feel bad about ourselves. But to admit the dark parts of one’s past is the only way to begin to overcome them. I invite you to take the next 24 hours to reflect on your year. Think about something you know you could or should have apologized for in the past year, but chose not to. Investigate why you chose not to do that. Were you like Rav’s butcher, cutting off your own hand to spite someone else? How would your life or relationship be different if you had given the gift of that apology? How might this next year look for you and your loved ones if you are more generous with the gifts of apology?

When we renew ourselves, we can renew our commitment and contribution to the community and that in turn deepens our ability to positively impact the world. May we all offer and accept the gifts of apology so that we can go forward into this new year 5783 renewed, as in days of old.

⁷ Jonathan Van Ness, *Love That Story*

How to Apologize

Opening anecdote with Max from Parenthood? Other famous apology examples?
Talmud apology examples?

Preparing defense instead of apology?

Is forgiveness always warranted?

Pop Culture Resources

Breneee episode “why won’t you apologize?!”

- Accountable requires vulnerable
- If you don’t own the story, it owns you. If you own the story, you can write a new ending (why we tell and retell Torah, Haggadah, etc)
- What is the HEART of a HEARTFELT apology?
- Nine ingredients to heartfelt apology
 - You can tell someone they’re an asshole, but don’t pretend it’s an apology
 - You need to know what your intention is!
- An apology is not the end, it is the beginning of conversation. It moves past hurt toward progress.
- An apology is a gift to the injured party because it releases them from obsession, validates their sense of reality, and lets them know that their anger and pain affects us.
- An apology is a gift to the person who committed the wrong because it grows your maturity and self worth.

Big Mood Little Mood episode 10/26/21 about public apologies.

Shame says I’m a bad person, acknowledging says I can do better. (Jvn)

Talmud & Jewish Text Examples:

Rabbi Yosei bar Hanina said: Anyone who asks forgiveness of his friend should not ask more than three times, as it is stated: “Please, please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, for they did evil to you. And now, please forgive” (Genesis 50:17). The verse uses the word please three times, which shows that one need not ask more than three times, after which the insulted friend must be appeased and forgive. And if the insulted friend dies before he can be appeased, one brings ten people, and stands them at the grave of the insulted friend,

Commented [1]: <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/harriet-lerner-and-brene-im-sorry-how-to-apologize-why-it-matters-part-1-of-2/>

Commented [2]: <https://brenebrown.com/art/harriet-lerner-and-brene-im-sorry-how-to-apologize-why-it-matters/>

and says in front of them: I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel, and against so-and-so whom I wounded. (Yoma 87a)

The Gemara relates that Rabbi Yirmeya insulted Rabbi Abba, causing the latter to have a complaint against him. Rabbi Yirmeya went and sat at the threshold of Rabbi Abba's house to beg him for forgiveness. When Rabbi Abba's maid poured out the dirty water from the house, the stream of water landed on Rabbi Yirmeya's head. He said about himself: They have made me into a trash heap, as they are pouring dirty water on me. He recited this verse about himself: "Who lifts up the needy out of the trash heap" (Psalms 113:7). Rabbi Abba heard what happened and went out to greet him. Rabbi Abba said to him: Now I must go out to appease you for this insult,(Yoma 87a)

It is related that when Rabbi Zeira had a complaint against a person who insulted him, he would pace back and forth before him and present himself, so that the person could come and appease him. Rabbi Zeira made himself available so that it would be easy for the other person to apologize to him. (Yoma 87a)

It is further related that Rav had a complaint against a certain butcher who insulted him. The butcher did not come before him to apologize. On Yom Kippur eve, Rav said: I will go and appease him. He met his student Rav Huna, who said to him: Where is my Master going? He said to him: I am going to appease so-and-so. Rav Huna called Rav by his name and said: Abba is going to kill a person, for surely that person's end will not be good. Rav went and stood by him. He found the butcher sitting and splitting the head of an animal. The butcher raised his eyes and saw him. He said to him: Are you Abba? Go, I have nothing to say to you. While he was splitting the head, one of the bones of the head flew out and struck him in the throat and killed him, thereby fulfilling Rav Huna's prediction. (Yoma 87a)

Maimonides teaches us that repentance requires "confession, humility, remorse, forbearance, and reparation, behaviors that also apply to apology." (On Apology, by A. Lazare, p. 230, referring to Mishneh Torah, Sefer HaMada, Hilchot Teshuva.)

One must not show himself cruel by not accepting an apology; he should be easily pacified, and provoked with difficulty. When an offender asks his forgiveness, he should forgive wholeheartedly and with a willing spirit. Even if he has caused him much trouble wrongfully, he must not avenge himself, he must not bear a grudge. This is the way of the stock of Israel and their upright hearts. (Mishneh Torah Teshuvah 2:10)

Find Dara Horn citation on how long God remains angry each day (p226)

Origins of Kol Nidre

Kol Nidrei has an interesting if somewhat cloudy history. It seems to have been composed during the reign of Reccared I, a sixth-century Visigoth king of Spain who ordered the Jews to convert on pain of death. So Kol Nidrei was originally a cry of pain, an expression of grief at having had to commit apostasy. Spanish Jews chanted it when they gathered secretly to observe Yom Kippur. They did the same later under the Byzantine persecution of the ninth century, and again during the Papal and Spanish Inquisitions of the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. But I use the word *seems* advisedly. We're not really sure of any of this. The dates fit nicely, but there is no historical corroboration for this theory.

Commented [3]: Alan Lew, this is real and you are completely unprepared

Saadia Gaon (882-942) accepted the text, and in 1000 CE Hai, another of the Geonim, approved a revised text, making it clear that it was to be understood as a plea for mercy rather than a legal annulment of vows. Gradually, the custom of reciting Kol Nidrei spread both to the Land of Israel and to Europe. There, too, it encountered opposition and was regarded as an invalid practice that made light of vows. The opposition was overcome when Rabbi Meir ben Rabbi Samuel (the son-in-law of Rashi) implemented the Talmudic concept of permitting the cancellation of vows in advance and changed the tenses in the prayer to the future. This change was endorsed by the great authority Rabbenu Tam, but the required changes were never officially made in the generally accepted text. The traditional text of Kol Nidrei therefore speaks of annulling vows from now until next Yom Kippur but uses the past tense in speaking about them.

Commented [4]: Entering the High Holidays by Reven Hammer

How to ACCEPT an apology

- We are inclined to say “that’s okay” or “don’t worry about it”
- Really we can say thank you or I appreciate it

I know from my own personal experience that I can be quick to be offended and I can get myself very worked up.

On the other hand, I am also very quick to accept an apology, and I often think so highly of the other person because of the effort they have gone through to acknowledge my feelings. And,

