

## How to apologize effectively

Kol Nidre 5784 – September 24, 2023

Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker, Mount Zion Temple, St. Paul

---

I had a fight with a friend this past year. I gave some feedback on something he did that I thought would be helpful. He took it in a way I didn't intend. What I said offended him. He didn't talk to me for a while and when we did, wow, I heard a lot of honest critique. There were things I didn't understand about how my words were heard, what incidents from the past related in ways I didn't imagine. I so wanted to apologize for the hurt I had caused in a way that would heal the relationship, but I knew it had to be done in a way that demonstrated what I learned and would focus on my friend's needs not mine.

In any relationship, we have the potential of doing harm in small and large ways. We all cause harm and we all have been harmed. Sometimes the harm can be repaired. Sometimes it can't. Some offenses are so serious they require significant repentance and repair. Sometimes what we have done might be less ok or very much not ok based on power differences in the relationship. Some things we've done might be invisible to us and we are not aware of the impact of our words or actions. Then there are the kinds of harms we forget about, or compartmentalize and don't deal with, and life moves on, perhaps with a tinge of regret here and there and the years pass. Some harms we've done are not so easy to put aside and they keep us up at night as they did for me with my friend.

A few years ago on this Kol Nidre night, I spoke about forgiveness and how our tradition guides us when someone has wronged us.

Tonight, I want to speak about when we are the ones who have done the wrong, and what we're supposed to do.

Let's be honest. There are reasons we don't always make things right on our own. We too often don't come clean until we're called out in some way. And this is true even for what we perceive to be small wrongs. We see a situation from only our perspective. We rationalize, focus on what the other person has done, and that helps us feel fine. Or we feel embarrassed or shame and avoid dealing with the situation. We make excuses.

We fear the consequences. And there might be real consequences.

However, when we do make amends and apologize effectively, we have, in the process, helped to make ourselves better. This is teshuvah. Literally it means "return" and is translated as "repentance." It is the process of turning or returning to who we are supposed to be, purely in the image of God with fewer blemishes. With so many opportunities for harm in any relationship, the possibility of return is redemptive. It is so necessary for relationships to work that we teach in the midrash, "*Teshuvah* was created [even] before the creation of the world."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Bereshit (Genesis) Rabbah 1:4

As I mentioned, teshuvah is separate from forgiveness, but when there is forgiveness from the person or people we harmed, we might even experience atonement, at-one-ment, as it says in Psalm 51, as if we have a new spirit, a clean slate. The psalmist says, “Create a pure heart in me, O God. Renew a true soul within me.” We feel a sense of shalom, wholeness.

That is what we desire, but the focus of teshuvah involves hard work. It is sensitive to the person who was hurt and centers their needs. We, as the ones who did the harm, need to do our own work first. As Nachman of Bratzlav said, “If you believe you can damage, believe that you can fix. If you believe that you can harm, believe that you can heal.”<sup>2</sup>

In fact, in the five traditional steps of teshuvah, making an apology doesn’t happen until step four. Introspection and change are needed before asking the person harmed for forgiveness.

And to be clear, this shouldn’t always happen. A victim’s needs are paramount. When the harm is beyond the pale, the perpetrator may cause more harm by apologizing even after teshuvah. The wronged person may have gone through enough therapy or self-work and might need separation. Discerning whether a harm is unforgivable is not easy and tonight, that is not the kind of situation I am addressing, though my heart breaks for all who have suffered from such trauma.

What I want to speak about is the fact that too often relationships are not repaired because we don’t have the tools to make things better or take the time to do so. The process of teshuvah affirms that most relationships can be mended or at least ameliorated with the right steps.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg wrote a book last year called “*Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*.” She based it on the wisdom of Judaism and specifically Maimonides’ steps of teshuvah which are still the gold standard eight centuries after he penned them. For anyone going through the 12 steps of recovery, these sequences of deep change and making amends will sound familiar. In Ruttenberg’s words, our tradition lays out five steps of teshuvah. These steps are for harms between people which I’m focusing on, but they also work for institutions and even countries.

1. Naming and owning harm
2. Starting to change the behavior that caused the harm
3. Restitution
4. Apologies
5. Making different choices

The first step is being aware that we have done harm. In Hebrew this is *vidui*, a confession. It can be done privately, with a therapist or rabbi, or with a friend. It can be while chanting *Ashamnu* in Kol Nidre services or the *Al Chet(s)*. As one’s hand beats on the chest, we recount sins that are purposefully in the plural to account for our whole community but can awaken our personal failings. It is about owning the harm that we have done without excuses or the need to make other points. As poet Yehuda Amichai puts it, “From the place we are right, flowers will

---

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Ruttenberg’s book, page 46.

never grow.” It can be an emotionally vulnerable and risky step to say what I did without deflecting or showing natural defensiveness. It begins with real regret, remorse, and sorrow for the harm done. It begins with a *cheshbon hanefesh*, a soul accounting, that opens up new possibilities for growth.

Even this first step is not easy. Naming the harm means figuring out what one did. It might mean learning about the different ways women and men feel or act, or about how power dynamics affect situations, or about one’s own psychological make up, or how bias in all kinds of realms impacts attitudes and actions.

This first step of confession overlaps with the learning that is in the second: “Starting to change the behavior that caused the harm.”

It’s not a linear process. A younger contemporary and literal opponent of Maimonides, Rabbi Yonah Gerondi outlines 20 steps not five and he places confession as principle 14 of his 20 principles of teshuvah<sup>3</sup>. Confession is preceded by regret, shame, fear over an incomplete repentance, suffering, worry, and more.

Shame, by the way, is not bad, but a tool for change, and unfortunately, we’re seeing a lot less of it in our society today. Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, President of Hebrew College, shared an insight from the Hebrew language about how necessary it is. The word for shame, *busha*, has the root letters Bet – Vav – Shin, which when written backwards, spells *shuv*, return, the root of teshuvah. We need our faces to flush so we will want to change.

Afterall, the goal of teshuvah is transformation. When we do the work of step two, starting to change the behavior that caused the harm, we imagine the final and fifth step, that is when you find yourself in the same kind of situation where you once caused harm, and you choose not to repeat it.

Two popular television series finished their runs this year, *Succession* a fictionalized show about the Murdoch media family and *Ted Lasso* about an American coach who goes to England to take over a soccer team knowing nothing about the game. No one in *Succession* did teshuvah. In *Ted Lasso*, nearly all did. Lasso himself, a truly good-hearted character says what we all desire: “I hope that ... none of us are judged by the actions of our weakest moments. But rather, by the strength we show when, and if, we’re ever given a second chance.”

And yet we know that we don’t always get a second chance. When King David was forbidden from building the Temple in Jerusalem, it was the consequence of sending Uriah to be killed in battle so that he could take his wife Bathsheba. It was David and Bathsheba’s son Solomon, not David, who merited building the House of God. Remarkably it is David who is considered our tradition’s model of teshuvah. He went through the five steps. Our tradition says that David wrote Psalm 51 as he regretted his sin, recognized that not everything turned out as he wanted,

---

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Yonah Gerondi, a cousin of Nachmanides, who so disagreed with Maimonides that he agreed to burn his philosophical books publicly only to be dismayed later by what he unleashed. He wrote an extended letter of teshuvah, then a book, *Shaarei Teshuvah, Gates of Repentance*.

and how he yearned for atonement: “Create a pure heart in me, O God. Renew a true soul within me.” (Psalm 51:12) לֵב טָהוֹר בְּרֹא-לִי אֱלֹהִים וְרוּחַ נְכוֹן חַדֵּשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי:

A pure heart and true soul. This can't be achieved alone. We need to think about the people who were harmed. The third step does so. It is restitution -- learning or asking what amends are necessary.

It might be paying for therapy, making a donation to an appropriate charity, covering lost wages, taking someone out for a meal, or sending flowers. This of course depends on the offense.

These first three steps involve introspection, learning, and when appropriate, talking to the person harmed to find out what they need. This prepares us for the apology, step four. Aaron Lazare, a professor of psychiatry, spent his entire career studying apologies. His most important insight: you can apologize too soon. Often when one apologizes too soon it's to manipulate the situation. It's to keep the anger of those offended at bay. And most of all, the offender has not done the internal work to understand what they have done and hasn't thought of the repair that might be needed.

So, parents and teachers out there, when we tell kids to say, “I'm sorry” immediately after the wrong, that's not the Jewish way. And by the way, guilty as charged. To my now adult kids, Eiden, Mirit, and Liam, I'm sorry. Whoops, just did it again, skipping steps 1-3.

The better way is to ask a kid using the right developmental level: “What happened? Was there anything you did wrong? What was it? Who was hurt in this situation? Anyone else? Maybe your parents who don't feel good seeing their kids fight? What needs to be done to make things better? And only after a few minutes: Is there anything you now want to say to your sibling or anyone else?”

Aaron Lazare said an apology can come too soon, but he also said it can never come too late.

There is often a possibility of healing even years or decades later. This does not mean that delay of an apology is good. Without an apology, the wronged person has to figure out things on their own. The harm may linger in the recesses of their memory, and they just move on. Or if the wrong was significant, they may choose to forgive without an apology to help their mental or spiritual state, often after therapy or years of reflection. This of course is not ideal.

Rabbi Ruttenberg gives an example in her book of a delayed apology that did work. Christina was the work supervisor of Eva. Most of their interactions were not in person. They talked on the phone and met through online conferencing. In one particular online meeting, Christina shared a document with key information highlighted in red and green color-coding. Eva raised her virtual hand and asked what this distinction referred to because she was color-blind and couldn't see Christina's point. Christina didn't know this but was flustered and wanted to keep the momentum of the meeting going and said, “It's not that important. Let's move on.”

They did move on but years later that moment weighed on Christina. She knew she had brushed aside Eva's legitimate issue and it related to some patterns of how she treated Eva. She

so wished she had just apologized, but now it felt too late. She was worried if she apologized these years later, she might be making too much of something or that it might open the floodgates to Eva recounting other things that bothered her. As Ruttenberg notes, “Owning the harm we have caused involves risk.” But, as Ruttenberg also says, who wouldn’t want to hear an apology from a former boss who mistreated them no matter how many years had passed? The acknowledgment from the person who caused harm can make all the difference to not feeling gaslighted or having one’s concerns minimized.<sup>4</sup> An apology even years later can validate another person’s experience and that can be worth a whole lot.

Whenever an apology happens, it is important that step four be done well. We all have heard public apologies that make us cringe. Then there have to be apologies for those apologies.

A good apology is not, “I’m sorry that you were hurt by this perfectly reasonable thing that I did.” I’m reminded of a cartoon in the *New Yorker*. Someone rushes into a restaurant, where his date is sitting down already eating, saying, “Sorry! Traffic was awful – and I left so late!”

If you have gone through the first three steps of teshuvah, the apology will not be for show. It will not include the word “but” in the middle. It will focus on what the person confessing did wrong and how they have and will continue to make things right. It will allow for quiet and true listening to the person who was wronged to share whatever they choose. In the words of Maimonides, they must “appease and implore until (the harmed party) forgives them.”<sup>5</sup> Appear and implore requires sensitivity to the harmed person’s state of being. We might not succeed. Our tradition teaches that we shouldn’t think that if we tried to apologize once, we’re off the hook. If the apology was not accepted, we likely didn’t yet find the right language or setting. We are told to try again in a different way, even bringing witnesses to our apology to show how seriously we are taking it. And to show the high standard of teshuvah, we are supposed to try a third time. After this, we are freed from this step of apology, albeit not with a sense of wholeness and a pure heart.

The fifth step can happen with or without forgiveness. If the teshuvah is complete, it has transformed us. When we are confronted with the opportunity to commit the same harm, we do not do so.

These five steps of teshuvah articulated by Maimonides and brought into modernity by Rabbi Ruttenberg can be transformative and healing:

1. Naming and owning harm
2. Starting to change the behavior that caused the harm
3. Restitution
4. Apologies
5. Making different choices

---

<sup>4</sup> *On Repentance and Repair*, page 47-49.

<sup>5</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance*, 2:9

Before concluding, I want to acknowledge one other important point. This process of teshuvah has been about clear harms that one person has done. We know that in most relationships, things are more interrelated. There are day-to-day misunderstandings and harms which create patterns that require a different kind of turning.

Both people in the relationship contribute to these patterns. One of the major stumbling blocks that create this routine is what Terrence Real, a family therapist, calls “unconscious storytelling.” We assume what our partner, friend, or coworker is thinking and that story lives as fully real in our minds.<sup>6</sup> Unconscious storytelling stops teshuvah, any turning to our best selves. He offers a communication way out, several specific sentences to say to overcome perceived and experienced harms to get a fuller story. The key is brevity and not oversharing.

- “This is what I saw or heard.” And share only facts.
- “This is story I imagined about it.” Being vulnerable to say what your mind and emotions did with those facts which recognizes it may be inaccurate.
- “This is how I felt.” Feelings are real and here they are. And finally,
- “This is what would help me feel better.” You can’t complain if you don’t say what you need.

Again, “This is what I saw or heard.” “This is story I imagined about it.” “This is how I felt.” “This is what would help me feel better.”

These sentences to undo unconscious storytelling are woven into a successful teshuva process and can help heal relationships.

When I apologized to my friend for the hurt that I caused, I examined what I had done and what I needed to change. Together we also recognized how some of the hurt was from unconscious storytelling. We had a real and honest conversation. And I’m happy to say that my friend forgave me.

We are worthy and we have done wrong. We need to own up to our mistakes, make amends, and apologize, and then not commit the same harm again. When we do, may we merit a pure heart and a true soul.

---

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/28/well/mind/make-up-fight-relationships.html?campaign\\_id=190&emc=edit\\_ufn\\_20230911&instance\\_id=102458&nl=from-the-times&regi\\_id=54761170&segment\\_id=144438&te=1&user\\_id=ee7d3516903b99297d83292ef2f043e4](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/28/well/mind/make-up-fight-relationships.html?campaign_id=190&emc=edit_ufn_20230911&instance_id=102458&nl=from-the-times&regi_id=54761170&segment_id=144438&te=1&user_id=ee7d3516903b99297d83292ef2f043e4)