

When Sorry Isn't Enough
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Something remarkable happened to me this summer. An experience unlike I've ever had before. I began to think about my High Holy Days sermons. . . in June! Let me tell you, for many Rabbis, this is really early. For me, it's unheard of. As one who prefers to focus on tomorrow's tasks first (although my wife calls it procrastination), to be thinking of the High Holy Days just weeks after Shavuot was unusual—for me at least. However, there I was, with a group of learners studying a chapter from Maimonides' seminal legal text, *Mishneh Torah*, and one revelation led to another. Our class met this summer to explore the laws related to *t'shuvah*—repentance. Every week provided a new insight. And as my students will attest, I had regular “aha” moments when someone said something that triggered the thought in my mind, “This will be great for the High Holy Days.” I scribbled a note and promised that I'd say something about it later.

Their willingness to share openly with one another was impressive as well. I learned things about them that I hadn't known before. Feelings of regret, remorse, even anger that they've had bottled up for a long time. Some were carrying their resentment against a family member for hurtful deeds done long ago, but never forgotten, that remain painful to this day. Maimonides' medieval legal text, written eight hundred years ago, brought to a boil their long simmering feelings. The text often surprised us, challenging our own views of forgiveness. It taught us as well of new possibilities for forgiveness. We wrestled with it, trying to figure out what an eight-hundred-year-old text could teach us about ourselves. Much, we learned. How long can we hold on to our resentment? What will it take to move beyond the hurt? Do we have the strength to forgive, or has that opportunity passed for good? Is it ever too late to do *t'shuvah*?

So tonight, at this the holiest time of the Jewish year, I'd like to talk about repentance; true and complete *t'shuvah*. How do we atone for the wrongs we have done? Can we forgive others for the wrongs done to us? How can we more easily say: “I am sorry”, and truly mean it? And what happens when saying “I'm sorry” just may not be enough?

Yom Kippur is our day for serious introspection. On Yom Kippur we deprive ourselves of the physical things we find most pleasurable. We recite litanies of communal confession. We share responsibility for the collective transgressions of our society. “For the sin *we* have committed against you. . .” We get back on the right path with God, as our liturgy states powerfully, “for transgressions between a person and God, God forgives.” Ah, but for transgressions between one person and another, God will not forgive until that person asks the other for forgiveness. That's the harder part of *t'shuvah*, isn't it?

If you're like me, you can think back on moments when you weren't at your best. Times when you snapped at your children, were rude to your spouse or a close friend, or upset a colleague. Times when you were indifferent, unprofessional, or just plain mean-spirited.

What was your response? Did you acknowledge your mistake and apologize immediately? Or did you find some excuse for your behavior? Or dismiss it? Are you aware of how your conduct affected others?

I share these questions for you to consider. However, I too can think of my less-than-stellar moments when I acted in these ways. I don't think it was a pattern—God I hope not. However, for reasons that matter little to the people I hurt, I wasn't always at my best. Those who know me well know that I can be impatient, right Cantor? Or that I can be moody, right Karen? Or irritable, right Debi? I just hope these episodes are momentary blips on what is, otherwise, mostly *mentschlikh* behavior.

Nevertheless, when we do or say something we wish we hadn't—the flippant remark, the raised voice, the sarcastic response—there's nothing we can do. Words, our sages teach, are like arrows. Once they are shot, you cannot stop them. However, what you do when you retrieve them after they've hit their target is what matters most. Arrow retrieval has another name; *t'shuvah*—repentance, returning to the essence of who you are.

T'shuvah requires several steps. Maimonides articulates five that lead to complete *t'shuvah*. I'll illustrate each step using occasional exchanges between my son Ezra and me as an example. For context, you must know that Ezra is a kind, creative, good natured and loving boy. Most of the time. His best qualities come from his mother. He gets his stubbornness and temperament from me, and at times, he and I are a combustible combination.

I attempt to discipline him calmly, however, sometimes it doesn't go the way I had envisioned. I get frustrated, raise my voice, and unintentionally hurt his feelings. What can I do? Apply Maimonides' five steps of *t'shuvah*.

Maimonides teaches that the first step is **recognition**—we admit to ourselves that what we did was wrong. “I shouldn't have yelled at Ezra. He's only five. He doesn't get it yet.” Then comes **renunciation**—we work hard to change our behavior. “Even though Ezra's behavior drives me crazy at times, I will try my very best to keep my voice down and my temper checked when I need to express my displeasure with him. Raising my voice only escalates the situation. It doesn't make it better.” Now we **confess**. We publicly admit our transgression to those closest to us, even to those not so close, as I'm doing now: “Karen, I yelled at Ezra today and he got upset. I feel very badly about it. I was wrong.” **Reconciliation** is the fourth step. Some say it's the hardest step. We confront the person we hurt and contritely ask for their forgiveness. “Ezra, I am so sorry that my words and my tone of voice upset you. I didn't mean to make you cry. I should've known before I opened my mouth that I was wrong to act in this way. Will you please forgive me?” If it all goes well, I get a “Yes, Daddy, that's okay. I still love you.” And a big hug. If not, he disowns me for a while. Nevertheless, we admit our mistake, and hope they accept our sincere apology. The last step is **resolution**—if we find ourselves in the same position again, with the opportunity to transgress, we resolve not to do so. “Ezra—please quit hitting your brother. Ezra, I said quit hitting your brother.” *Okay Chuck. Keep your voice down. Find that happy place. Calm yet firm. Big breath.* “Ezra—did you hear me? I asked you nicely twice already, please quit hitting your

brother.” I might burst a blood vessel trying to control my frustration; nevertheless, it’s for Ezra’s and my benefit.

Recognition, renunciation, confession, reconciliation, resolution. Taking any one of these steps is possible and important. However, how often do we climb all five steps, and do complete *t’shuvah*? Perhaps we encounter obstacles along the way that keep us from doing so. For example, we revert to the same behavior that sends us back to the first step.

What if we think we cannot be forgiven because our conduct was so wrong and cruel that saying “I’m sorry”, just may not be enough?” Can one who cheats on their spouse, or steals from their business or hits their child really do full *t’shuvah*?

According to Jewish tradition, believe it or not, many of the deeds you and I find most reprehensible, can in fact, be forgiven. If not by the person who was wronged, then by God. You see, the way Maimonides looks at it is different from the way we look at it. Our sages teach that the gates of repentance are never closed. If the opening for repentance is only just as wide as the eye of a needle, a rabbinic teaches tell us, God will open it wide enough for a camel to go through.

Many times the transgressor can do complete *t’shuvah*, even if the person she hurt doesn’t forgive her. Judaism teaches that if a person who is sincere in her penitence and has acted in a way that demonstrates true change and resolution, if she asks for forgiveness three times and still isn’t forgiven, God then forgives her. She can’t change the past. She shot the arrows. However, she can make a better future for herself by performing full *t’shuvah*.

Those in twelve-step recovery programs know well the destructive consequences of their conduct. They know that asking for forgiveness, when possible, is one of their required steps. They recognize too that the person whose life they damaged may not have the capacity to forgive. Or that asking for forgiveness could worsen the situation.

When possible she does her *t’shuvah*, asking for forgiveness, taking responsibility for her conduct, following Maimonides’s steps that others may recognize from the big blue book, doing all that is possible. Even without being forgiven by the person she hurt, God may forgive if true *t’shuvah* was performed. Five steps: Recognition, renunciation, confession, reconciliation, resolution.

That said, there are times when a transgression is beyond forgiveness. Maimonides articulates several types that are so reprehensible that complete *t’shuvah* isn’t possible and the person who sinned forfeits his share in the world to come. Even though Maimonides may not describe much of the most despicable conduct we remember from this past year explicitly, I do believe that these perpetrators are beyond *t’shuvah*.

Take Bernie Madoff, for example. If he was to ask those whose lives he ruined to forgive him, could they? Could Jaycee Dugard or her family ever forgive Philip Garrido, the beast who abducted Jaycee when she was a child? Could you imagine a person or God forgiving these monsters? Granted, neither you nor I have the right to forgive for transgressions committed against others. Only the person whom has been hurt directly can forgive. Nevertheless, I’d like to believe that Madoff’s and Garrido’s crimes in particular, and many others, are beyond *t’shuvah*. Personally I hope there is a special

place in *Gehinom* for Madoff and Garrido. Thankfully, our tradition has limits to *t'shuvah*, as some transgressions, both against God and against another person, are considered by our rabbis to be beyond repentance.

The reality, however, is that we here are not sociopaths or psychopaths like Madoff and Garrido. They sustained their behavior for years and years without detection, regret or remorse. We wouldn't believe them even if they tried to repent. Think of that pathetic image of Jimmy Swaggart, crocodile tears streaming down his face, apologizing for his infidelity. Not so convincing, was it? Our transgressions, however devastating as they may be, tend to result from poor decision making, in isolated moments of weakness or frustration, or sometimes in extended periods of temptation. How do we ask for and grant forgiveness? Do we have the capacity to say contritely and honestly, "I am sorry?"

President Obama forgave Representative Joe Wilson for his outburst in the House Chambers. Did Serena Williams ever give that line judge a "big ol' hug," as she wished? Did Kanye West look into the eyes of Taylor Swift and say, contritely, "I am sorry for ruining your moment?"

Some transgressions aren't so transient and are concealed usually until someone else reveals them. Even sincere contrition may not be enough. For example, can the wife of State Assemblyman Mike Duval, who was caught boasting of his adulterous exploits into an open mic, forgive him? Has Elizabeth Edwards forgiven her husband John for his infidelity?

These are high profile examples of despicable conduct. They were committed by otherwise decent people who, nevertheless, behaved inappropriately.

The rest of us can be rude, threatening or unfaithful without being famous. And our *t'shuvah* will not be televised. The capacity to forgive rests in the hands of the victim. Even so, *t'shuvah* is a two-way street. Marriages struggle and a partner strays. How one responds reveals the limits of forgiveness. Can a wife forgive her unfaithful husband and welcome him back into their bedroom? Can he ever truly regain her trust? Or is the damage irreparable?

Can parents who are verbally, even physically abusive periodically ever regain the full trust and confidence of their children? Is saying "I'm sorry" enough if it happens a second time, a third time? Possibly not. And the perpetrator and the victim must learn to live with the consequences—destroyed marriages, fractured families, lost trust. Even so, full *t'shuvah*, in the eyes of God, still may be possible, with demonstrated acts of recognition, renunciation, confession, reconciliation and resolution. The parties still may be able to move forward, perhaps not together, maybe not completely whole, but forward nevertheless, beyond forgiveness to a new beginning. In the end holding on to that pain holds us back. We may not be able to forgive a person face to face for his or her conduct; however, we may have the capacity to free ourselves from the pain.

This is what I have learned from those in recovery. Their actions might have irreparably damaged those once close to them, and they might not be able to heal completely. Nevertheless, they are able to regain control of their lives and move in a new direction, having done their best to forgive, or perhaps be forgiven, without, of course, forgetting.

When the people they damaged can let go as well, they too can move forward. They can't change the past, but they can control their future.

In Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*, the protagonist remains burdened with the decision he made—correctly, I might add—to walk away from the dying Nazi who had summoned him, this random Jew, to forgive him for atrocities he committed against innocent Jews. The protagonist could not forgive. Even so, it took some time before he could move forward and regain control of his future.

Our task, when forgetting is impossible, is to find the capacity to let go of the past—not forget, maybe not forgive, but let go—so that we can at the very least, continue to live less burdened and more whole.

Doctors Sidney and Suzanne Simon teach, “Forgiveness is recognizing that we no longer need our grudges and resentments, our hatred and self-pity. We do not need them as an excuse for getting less out of life than we want or deserve. . . .Forgiveness is no longer wanting to punish the people who hurt us. It is no longer wanting to get even or have them suffer as much as we did. . . .Forgiveness is moving on. It is recognizing that we have better things to do with our lives and then doing them.”¹

So on this Kol Nidre, as you consider the people who hurt you and the people you hurt, thinking about all your transgressions, do you have the capacity to forgive, and to be forgiven, and to move on unshackled from the chains of resentment and unburdened by your grudges?

I'm not sure yet if my students from the *Mishneh Torah* class can forgive or let go. I hope that they and we can heed the advice of the Doctors Simon and, if anything, forgive simply for the sake of moving forward. I hope that for most of us doing *t'shuvah* and saying “I'm sorry” for our transgressions will be sufficient. If saying sorry isn't enough, then let us find the capacity to live in our present with a resolve to learn from the past as we plan for ourselves a better future of peace, contentment and wholeness.

AMEN

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¹ *Moments of Transcendence: Readings for Yom Kippur*, Dov Peretz Elkins, ed.