

I Am Sorry -- And I Mean It Yom Kippur

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Delivered at University of Michigan Hillel Foundation (Ann Arbor, Michigan)

A few years back, I saw a funny cartoon in a religious newspaper. It was a picture of a minister, but it could have just as easily been a rabbi. He was standing at the exit following services with an apologetic look on his face, shaking hands and saying to people one by one by one: "Nothing personal... nothing personal... nothing personal." In rabbinical school, I once heard someone say that if as a rabbi, you don't offend everyone at least once in a sermon, then you didn't really say anything. I personally don't agree, but I figure we should nip this in the bud, so let me begin my sermon today by stating to each and every one of you the following three words: "I am sorry."

That word – "sorry." S-O-R-R-Y. That little five-letter word that can convey so much, but so often today, means so little. That is how we characterize this holy day of Yom Kippur for the generation under five- or six-years-old. We explain that this is the one day out of the year that you think about all the bad things you have done to other people and you simply say to them "I am sorry." Then they will forgive you. It's that easy. One day. One word. But, of course, it's not that easy, is it? After all, "sorry" is a hard word to say, right? They even have colorful little books printed up that we can read to little kids on Yom Kippur. Books like "The Hardest Word."

In this book, an oversized, bizarre looking bird with purple hair named "The Ziz" makes a big mistake. "He was flying along, not watching where he was going, and he flew smack into the tallest pine tree in the world. Boom! The tree fell over and knocked down another tree. That tree knocked down another tree and that tree fell on the vegetable garden behind the synagogue. SMASH! SQUASH! OOPS!"

The Ziz is simply beside himself. So he does what any purple haired bird would do in this situation. He flies straight to Mt. Sinai to have a one-on-one with God. A "sit down" with the Godfather so to speak. Now, of course, it was convenient that the Ziz went to Mt. Sinai to talk to God, since, due to his enormous size, while sitting on Mt. Sinai the Ziz's head stretched right up to heaven. God's solution for the Ziz is that he has to "search the earth and bring back the hardest word." So (and I hate to give away the ending here) the Ziz flies around for days returning with such presumably difficult words as "goodnight" and "spaghetti" and "ridiculous." Until finally, he succeeds in his mission from God by finding the hardest word in the world: "sorry."

I hate to sound cynical. But, is "sorry" really the hardest word? I would say that in our society it has become one of the easiest words. Think for a moment, if you will, about the last time you dropped a "sorry" on someone. Think about the last time someone said they were "sorry" to you. We throw sorry's around without even thinking of it. It's almost reflex. Like when someone sneezes and you instinctively give them a "bless you." Are you really intending to bless them or are you just acknowledging that you heard a sneeze emanate from their mouth?

Sorry has become an abused word. We haven't been sparing enough in our use of it. We don't return someone's phone call for a few days, and when we finally do, we just begin the conversation with a quick, trite "Sorry." If we forget someone's birthday, we carelessly offer an "I'm sorry." Eat the sandwich in the fridge that someone else had wanted, just say you're sorry. Bump into someone on the street, and without a second's thought, you will inevitably utter those words, "I'm sorry." Are you really apologizing for being careless? Or is it just part of the routine?

Perhaps the best illustration of the death of meaning behind the words "I am sorry" comes from the 1960s play and movie, "A Thousand Clowns." Murray, played by Jason Robards, spends the day, rather than taking a job, just going up to random people on the streets of New York saying, "I am sorry." Of course,

even though he didn't do anything to these people to warrant an apology, they all respond immediately "don't worry about it" or "no problem" or "okay." Murray concludes, "I could run up on the roof right now and holler 'I am sorry,' and half a million people would holler right back, 'That's okay, just see that you don't do it again.'"

Even for the more serious transgressions, a public "I'm sorry" seems to work. Maybe if it were for an egregious act, one would add a word, saying something to the effect of "I'm really sorry." I'm not even referring to gossip or slander. Think about some very public apologies in recent time. Bill Clinton lying to the American people and committing perjury, and then offering a sorry on national TV. Basketball player Kobe Bryant cheating on his wife and telling her that he's sorry at a press conference in front of millions of people. The American government apologizing to Black Americans for years of slavery. The Pope, on behalf of the Catholic Church's actions during the Holocaust, offering a "sorry" some fifty years later. In 1995, the Church even apologized for the stake burnings during the Counter-Reformation in the 16th Century. Nothing like an apology 500 years late. These national apologies led one writer, Walter Shapiro, to muse that the Italian government, heir to the gore and glory that was Rome should express regret for the sack of Carthage. Perhaps Congress could even withhold aid to Egypt, he writes, until the Mubarak government sheds a few public tears for holding the ancient Israelites in bondage. Could Israel get reparations for that?

My personal favorite "sorry" in the last few years has been when DNA testing is used to determine that some prisoners have mistakenly served time for a crime they did not commit. They lost years of their life behind bars and all they get is "Uh, we're sorry." What does it really mean to be sorry?

Three-and-a-half years ago, Detroit Free Press columnist Mitch Albom wrote a column entitled "Saying 'I'm sorry' – and meaning it." He explains how he learned something about saying "I'm sorry" while in Japan for the Winter Olympics in Nagano. He was due to catch an early morning bus, a 4 a.m. departure, for a long ride back to Tokyo. But when he arrived at the bus station, there was no bus. The fact that it was four in the morning notwithstanding, the man at the bus station made a quick call to the head of the Olympic transportation committee. At his home. Where he was most probably sound asleep.

That same Japanese man, who was woken in the middle of the night because an American reporter needed a ride, helped Mitch Albom into a taxi and began to utter "I'm sorry's." But these weren't the same "I'm sorry's" that we are greeted with when someone bumps into us on the sidewalk or doesn't provide adequate customer service at the mall. This man apologized profusely. He took responsibility. And then he continued to apologize... on behalf of his entire country. He also paid for the taxi by the way, which cost nearly \$1,000 for the 6-hour ride.

He was genuinely sorry. He did not want his mistake to contribute to any ill will toward his country. Albom writes, "There was such genuine contrition behind that plea, as if he were truly apologizing on behalf of every Japanese man and woman, that I could only shake his hand and say: "Please. Stop. I do not blame anyone." Now that's a true and certain "I'm Sorry." Had that same incident played out here, in the U.S., Albom believes, and I agree, someone would have shrugged, said "sorry" and gone back to his coffee. Instead, he got a genuine apology and a solution, in person, on behalf of the whole country.

What prompted Albom, in 2001, to write about this encounter from the Winter Games in Nagano that took place three years earlier? He was trying to make sense out of the reaction of U.S. naval officers after the terrible collision between the USS *Greenville* and a Japanese fishing vessel. If you recall the episode, the *Greenville*, on a routine training mission, ripped into the bottom of the fishing boat, sinking it within minutes. In all, nine people, most of them students like many of you, were dead. At first, the Navy issued a statement of regret – essentially saying to the entire Japanese people "We are sorry." But the Japanese were not satisfied, and why should they have been. Other U.S. officials offered sympathies, but that too was still not enough. The Japanese, particularly the families of the missing, wanted an in-person apology, and they wanted it from the captain of the ship, not from a Public Relations liaison.

Albom concludes that “what we have here is a common human dilemma: How does the guilty party say it is sorry? How does the victim know it is sincere? Fortunately for us, we have a long-standing tradition of repentance in Judaism. Teshuvah, literally, returning is the process for seeking atonement. It is about returning to the right path by repenting.

One of our people’s greatest teachers, Rabbi Moses Maimonides, teaches in his Laws of Repentance, “Who has achieved complete repentance – teshuvah? A person who confronts the same situation in which he [or she I’ll add] sinned and abstains, although that person has the potential to commit the sin again.”

These days of Awe, the season that begins one month before Rosh Hashanah and doesn’t really conclude until the proverbial gates of heaven close after Shemini Atzeret in a couple weeks are a time of introspection. A time to explore the meaning of who we are and what we have become, as well as who we want to be and how we want others to perceive us. We review our actions over the last year. We reflect on how we speak, how we act, how we carry ourselves.

Teshuvah is about change and about return. Teshuvah means turning from who we were into something different, someone who behaves differently. It means envisioning ourselves returning to an earlier situation but making another choice this time, doing it differently. Teshuvah is a search. Searching for a new way to act were we again to find ourselves in the situation in which we missed the mark or blundered. Yom Kippur isn’t about saying you are “sorry” – that trivializes the magnitude of the holiday. It is about doing teshuvah. And an apology is only a part of that process.

Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik explains what it means to feel remorseful when performing teshuvah. “Remorse is related to another emotion: the sense of shame – the sense of shame a person can feel for himself. “We are astonished at ourselves” – meaning, also, that we are ashamed at ourselves.” Have you ever felt ashamed at yourself? More than just disappointed in yourself for an error in judgment. Have you ever done something that truly embarrassed you for being you?

It has been said that it takes two to tango and the same is true of teshuvah. Just as we are challenged by our need to ask forgiveness from others, it is equally difficult at times to accept the repentance of others. How to truly accept the apologies and contrition of our friends is another sermon in itself. What I believe our society desperately needs is to rethink our understanding of saying sorry. We should hold our sorry offerings until we really mean it. Until we truly feel contrite and are ready to do teshuvah – to make amends. Not just for Yom Kippur, but on a daily basis.

Saying “sorry” is easy. Doing real teshuvah, really being contrite and remorseful, finding a solution to the problem, promising yourself and the intended party that you will really make a strong effort to never repeat your misdeed again if put in that position, that’s difficult. That’s the challenge. It’s not the words that are difficult. It’s meaning them. And not stopping until the injured party believes that you do.

I recall once at a summer day camp, I witnessed two children pushing each other. Apparently, one of them deeply offended the other about a disability he had. Being the peacemaking counselor that I was, I followed the textbook and insisted that they each offer one another an apology. I was taken aback when one of the boys, looked at me with tear-filled eyes and said, “I’m just not ready for that yet.” He put faith in teshuvah. “I am sorry” were not empty words to him, he had to first find it in himself to apologize. And that is commendable. There is much to learn from this child. A sincere apology requires us not only to admit we were wrong, but to believe it as well. Therefore, on this Yom Kippur I leave you not with the words of Elton John’s song that claims: “I’m sorry seems to be the hardest words.” But rather with a challenge. The challenge to do teshuvah. Not that might just be the most difficult word.

I wish you a Shabbat Shalom and that you are sealed in the Book of Life.

Shanah Tovah.