

I'm Sorry
Yom Kippur Evening 5774
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January 16, 2013: “I made my decisions. They are my mistakes, and I am sitting here today to acknowledge that and to say I'm sorry for that. The culture was what it was....I'm deeply sorry for what I did. I can say that thousands of times. It may never be enough to come back.” For 14 years, cyclist Lance Armstrong had angrily and vehemently denied using steroids or cheating while winning 7 Tour de France titles and becoming an international hero on overcoming the odds. Now, after he had been exposed as a liar and a cheat, stripped of his wins and his reputation, he shared these words with the greatest force of redemption available in modern times: Oprah.

Celebrities and athletes and politicians doing embarrassing, horrific, and even criminal things are nothing new. And neither are their apologies. It has become the standard Hollywood pattern, perhaps best modeled by actor Hugh Grant after his 1995 arrest for soliciting a prostitute. Grant immediately went on *The Tonight Show* and tearily confessed, “Last night I did something completely insane. I have hurt people I love and embarrassed people I work with. For both things, I am more sorry than I can ever say.”¹

“I'm sorry.” Two words that are among the most longed for and said with the least meaning along with “I'll call you,” “I love you,” and “That dress doesn't make you look fat.” What does it signify to apologize? What power do these words carry in eradicating the goofs, errors, and horrible mistakes of our lives?

Yom Kippur is our day of repentance. We seek to fix our own failings. But the details, the actual mechanism of repentance, is a bit blurrier. We are told to apologize for our errors – but how? Both Jewish and secular literature are filled with discussions about being on the receiving end of an apology. When do we forgive? How do we forgive? The apology side of it is often left murkier.

Some things are clear. The *Machzor* repeatedly reminds us that Yom Kippur isn't about forgiveness for what you have done to other people. Atonement is for sins between God and people. Forgiveness is for sins between people and other people.² In Judaism, repentance is done directly and individually with the wronged party. Only the victim of the crime or wrongdoing has the right to forgive. He has no obligation to forgive, but is highly encouraged to do so.

This stands in direct contrast to a large portion of Christian thought. For many Christians, a third party can forgive you for actions you did to someone else. Such forgiveness is even mandated for certain Christian groups. Judaism has no such concept.

An apology means taking responsibility and expressing regret. In English, that usually means saying, "I'm sorry." Not that every "I'm sorry" is an apology. "I'm sorry your rabbi was eaten by a bear" is a statement of sympathy or compassion, not responsibility. AT&T, in response to a crass use of 9/11 imagery, wrote, just two days ago, "We apologize to anyone who felt our post was in poor taste." They don't regret their actions, only the inconvenience of you being bothered by them.

A true apology can make a huge difference in someone's life. "When we apologize to someone we have hurt, disappointed, neglected, or betrayed, we give them a wonderful gift that is far more healing than almost anything else we can give. By apologizing we let the other person know that we regret having hurt him or her. Just as important, we let this person know we respect him and we care about his feelings. It becomes one of the most effective tools for mending a relationship."³ A sincere apology benefits both parties.

Barbara, Lyle, and their 4-year-old daughter Cameron, came home one evening to find their house ransacked. Some jewelry and electronics had been taken, but the destruction and violation were the real crimes. They remained upset, frightened, and angry for weeks. Police were able to track down some of the stolen items and traced them to a 15-year-old boy named Randy. Randy's arrest alleviated some of the pain of the family knowing he was behind bars.

This was Randy's first offense and he seemed truly upset by his actions, so he was recommended for a special program where he would have to meet with the family he harmed. While Lyle was still angry and reluctant, Barbara insisted, wanting to tell Randy about the harm he had caused them. The couple spoke to Randy during their meeting and he listened. Then he broke down, told them how very sorry he was for everything he had done. He hadn't thought how his actions would impact anyone else. He would never do it again.

Randy's apology melted away the couple's anger. Instead of thinking of him as a monster, they now saw him as a troubled, mixed-up teenager. They learned more about Randy and his difficult childhood. They discovered he had never been in trouble with the law before. Barbara and Lyle decided to try something different. In lieu of jail time, he was sentenced to

clean their house every week for three months – helping repair what he had destroyed. But at the end of the three months, the connection didn't end. Barbara and Lyle had grown close to Randy, and soon became surrogate parents to him. Over the coming months, Randy spent more and more time with them, getting family experiences he had never previously found. Because of his genuine apology, he ended up a member of the family.⁴

Given the importance of apologies, it would seem there should be clear steps on how to make a proper apology. Popular books on the subject each list their own versions of how to apologize. For example, Ken Blanchard in the bestseller *The One Minute Apology* says the steps are 1. Surrender and take full responsibility. 2. Tell the other person what you are apologizing for. 3. Share how you feel about what you did.⁵

As Jews, when one tries to figure out how to properly apologize, it becomes clear that process is inadequate. The steps for apologizing are actually the same steps as full *teshuva*. If one is to truly repent for past misdeeds, the “I’m sorry” piece is only valid if surrounded by other actions and feelings.

Based on Jewish sources, the steps to repentance might be listed as:

1. Take personal ownership over your actions
2. Admit what you did and to whom you did it
3. Share how you now feel about what you did
4. Make restitution and reparations to those you've injured
5. Commit to a change in behavior to not repeat the act.

That's not easy to remember. So to help out I have developed the Rabbi Mark Kaiserman 5-Step Repentance Plan™ or, for short, the 5 Rs:

*Responsibility, Recognition, Remorse, Repair, Resolve*⁶

[The Kaiserman 5-Step Plan is trademarked with all rights reserved. Rabbi Kaiserman and the Reform Temple of Forest Hills shall bear no liability in using this plan. Forgiveness is not guaranteed. If guilt-ridden symptoms continue, please see a professional]

After weeks of avoiding and denying charges of using racial slurs in her past, chef Paula Deen finally came clean in several videos and interviews with lots of crying. She said, “I want to

apologize to everybody for the wrong that I've done. Inappropriate and hurtful language is totally, totally unacceptable. I beg you...for your forgiveness." She certainly seemed remorseful, but her words lacked any specifics both of what she had done, and more importantly, what she would do in the future. So she is light on recognition and devoid of repair.

In his public confession, Lance Armstrong said, "Do I have remorse? Absolutely. Will it grow? Absolutely. This is the first step and these are my actions. I am paying the price, but I deserve it." Taking him at his word, which is really hard to do, he lacked full recognition of how deeply he hurt his fan base, fellow riders, and those that supported him. While he claimed this is the first step, and a pretty clunky one at that, Armstrong neglected to name anything he might do and the months since have lacked such efforts. Well, if you don't consider his recent return to cycling as the best way to repairs his years of deceit while cycling.

Most of our apologies aren't very good. We try, but we offer clunkers such as "I'm sorry you're upset." Apologizing is essential to maintain relationships with our family, friends, and co-workers. We all mess up. Apologies show we recognize our errors and how they impacted others. But people usually apologize for other reasons – a guilty conscience, to end conflict, to escape punishment, or to look good. In some ways, apologies are self-serving, even if they also bring benefit to the person we are apologizing to.

And apologies are tough. Elton John told us "Sorry seems to be the hardest word." And it really is. The closer the relationship, that harder it often is. When we actually do apologize, we end up doing so like Paula and Lance. Badly. We omit or obscure one of the 5 Rs of the Kaiserman 5-Step Repentance Plan™ - Responsibility, Recognition, Remorse, Repair, and Resolve.

Responsibility

To apologize, we have to accept our own behaviors and own up to them. Often, we try and apologize, but resist our guilt in the matter. In 1876, President Ulysses S. Grant, facing corruption and failure in his administration, stood before Congress and famously said, "Mistakes have been made."⁷ The passive voice distances the speaker from the actions – sure there were errors, I'm sorry for them, but I should not be held accountable for them.

Many speakers don't go quite as far, but rather qualify their apology and therefore render it inadequate. In 1990, after butchering the National Anthem before a baseball game, making an obscene gesture, and then spitting, Roseanne Barr came under national criticism including from then President George Bush. Her response regarding the President was, "I'm sorry I didn't sing so good, but I'd like to hear him sing it."⁸ Adding in a "but" to an apology negates everything said before it. Take the horrible apology: "I'm sorry I hit you baby, but you just make me so mad."

If you won't accept your responsibility in the situation, you can't actually go through the *teshuva* process.

Recognition

In order to apologize properly, you have to know what it is you're apologizing for. What did you do and to whom did you do it? Until you can name both, you can't apologize.

It is becoming common before Yom Kippur for people to send mass e-mails or post on Facebook statements such as, "For anything I might have done to offend you in this past year, I am truly sorry." The sentiment is wonderful; the value is minimal. If someone had actually done something offensive, such an apology doesn't identify the issue.

Being unable to name your errors and your victims is often a failure of one's admission of responsibility in the matter. Even rabbis can be guilty of that sin. Rabbi David Wolpe one of the best known and most respected rabbis in the country, recently commented on a YouTube video of a Bar Mitzvah boy in a highly choreographed dance with female dancers. Wolpe called it a travesty, a spectacle, and godless. He ridiculed the boy and his family for celebrating money over Judaism in both their bar mitzvah and in life.⁹

The boy, Sam Horowitz, had his own rabbi to defend him. Bill Gershon chastised Wolpe for mocking a 13-year-old boy. He noted that Sam and his family are wealthy, but are extremely active in the congregation and extremely generous in the community. Sam donated all his gifts to the under-privileged kids that he spent time with on a family trip to Israel.¹⁰ Rabbi Wolpe wrote, "I...apologize to Sam and his family for anything I said that was wounding"¹¹ and then proceeded to ignore his insult to Sam, but railed against extravagant b'nai mitzvah. He didn't reach out to the boy or his family. He didn't affirm that rabbis shouldn't mock and attack

teenagers in the public press. Wolpe had no recognition of what he had done or to whom he had done it.

Sometimes we apologize to the wrong person. After Mike Tyson bit off part of Evander Holyfield's ear, his apology was to the public, not to Holyfield. Or we apologize for the wrong offense. A husband who has committed adultery apologizes for the emotional pain he caused his wife. But he doesn't apologize for the affair.

Spouses sometimes tell each other, "You know what you did!" But if you don't understand exactly what you did, you can't begin to make repentance for it.

Remorse

Without feeling badly about your actions, you can't repent for them. That's hard when you don't feel the other person's claim of injury is valid. We have to use our best empathic skills to see the situation from his or her eyes. Lance Armstrong's apology was widely criticized for seeming to lack any empathy at all.

Apologies without remorse can be seen every single day. Catch a kid – or a boyfriend, girlfriend, spouse, friend, student - doing something wrong and they will say, "I'm sorry..." They aren't sorry for what they did. Only for getting caught.

Repair

Words alone don't cut it. We have to try and repair the damage we have caused. Sometimes the apology is sufficient. Sometimes nothing will ever be – you can never totally and truly apologize for certain crimes.

In many circumstances, we can try and find some way to apologize with actions. If we steal something, we can return the object. If we have hurt someone verbally or physically, appropriate restitution is more of a challenge.

Monetary reparations are often associated with countries for past shameful acts. Sometimes the money becomes a new offense. When one Japanese American received \$20,000 for four years of internment during WWII, the \$5000 a year price tag that was implied was a new insult. He lamented, "It would have been better to receive no financial settlement."¹²

On the other hand, reparations done right can build new relationships and opportunities. When second baseman Roberto Alomar spat in umpire John Hirschbeck's face in 1996,

Alomar's heartfelt apology was also followed by a \$50,000 donation to the charity set up in memory of the umpire's recently deceased son.¹³ When an usher ejected a lesbian couple for sharing a kiss at a Los Angeles Dodgers game, the team responded not only with an apology, but by donating 5000 tickets to area gay and lesbian organizations and providing sensitivity training for all employees. Baseball "Gay Days" were a direct result. "This is a home run for all concerned," one observer noted.¹⁴

Too often our apologies are just words. Appropriate actions are also needed.

Resolve

Part of that action is to change our future behaviors. When our offense is a one-time aberration of our typical actions, a commitment to change may be all that is necessary. When it is part of a pattern of behavior, more significant resolutions are needed such as therapy or rehab.

Since many people are unable to recognize their own ongoing negative behaviors, their apologies for a specific instance lack credibility as they imply this was a unique action or an understandable response.

Apologizing for being late is fine. Doing it 50 days in a row makes you seem somewhat insincere. Every time Yankees star Alex Rodriguez denies his steroid use, his previous confessions, current evidence, and his robotic tone appear quite disingenuous.

Matt Cordle is a 22-year-old from Ohio. He did something horrific this June. Getting behind the wheel of his car drunk, he killed a 61-year-old man, Vincent Canzani. Cordle could have lied and possibly avoided punishment for his actions. But he decided that he would own his actions and seek to make what little restitution was possible. He posted a video online stating "I killed a man." And "I will take full responsibility for what I've done." He used the video to beg anyone watching, "Please don't drink and drive....I can't bring Mr. Canzani back, and I can't erase what I've done, but you can still be saved, your victims can still be saved."¹⁵ While full repair is beyond anyone, Matt is striving to fulfill the 5 Rs.

It is the 6th R that now comes into play.

For many people, once they apologize, they feel all further discussion should cease. Ben Johnson, the Canadian sprinter who had lied about his steroid use in the Olympics, later

reluctantly apologized. When the media further pursued the story, he angrily told them, “I said I’m sorry. What else can I say? ...I lied and I’ve admitted it. Life goes on.”¹⁶

For many kids, an apology is a magic eraser. Caught in some rules violation, they apologize, and then don’t understand why the slate isn’t instantly clean. “I had a party while you were out of town, we all got drunk, burned down the house, lost the dog, and totaled the car. But I apologized. I said I’m sorry. Isn’t that enough?”

One can be truly and honestly sorry for behavior and commit to change. That doesn’t always mean the change comes. The 6th R is to Refrain from that behavior in the future. *Teshuva*, Judaism teaches us, is only complete when you find yourself in a nearly identical circumstance, but you make a better decision. In the moment of an apology, that’s impossible to determine. The 6th R reveals itself only over time.

An apology is an ongoing process. Saying I’m sorry is only one step “It is an ongoing commitment by the offending party to change his or her behavior....It is a behavior that requires of both parties attitudes of honesty, generosity, humility, commitment, and courage.”¹⁷

Take the time this Yom Kippur to reflect on your life and who you might have hurt. Own up to your actions and try to see the pain through the other person’s eyes. And then have the courage, the empathy, the compassion, and the *menschlikite* to apologize for your hurtful actions directly to that person.

Whenever you err, and we all do, make sure to follow the 6 Rs on your path to repentance:

Responsibility, Recognition, Remorse, Repair, Resolve, and Refrain.

It will bring healing and better relationships with those around you. It will make real the repentance we talk about on this sacred day. And it will bring wholeness to your life.

¹ Paul Slansky and Arleen Sorkin, *My Bad*, pp. 117-118.

² Solomon Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed By Time*, pp. 52-53.

³ Beverly Engel, *The Power of Apology*, p. 12.

⁴ Engel 25-26.

⁵ Ken Blanchard and Margrey McBride, *The One Minute Apology*, pp. 25-28.

⁶ Derived from a variety of secular and Jewish sources, Rabbi David Stern taught me one version of the 5 Rs from which this is primarily based.

⁷ Lazare, p. 89.

⁸ Slansky and Sorkin, p. 90.

⁹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/on-faith/wp/2013/08/15/have-we-forgotten-what-bar-mitzvahs-are-all-about/>

¹⁰ <http://rabbisteinman.com/2013/08/19/forgive-blogelul/>

¹¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/on-faith/wp/2013/08/20/the-bar-mitzvah-re-examined/>

¹² Lazare, p. 131.

¹³ Slansky and Sorkin, p. 137.

¹⁴ Lazare, p. 131.

¹⁵ <http://becauseisaidiwould.com/saveyourvictim/>

¹⁶ Slansky and Sorkin, p. 122.

¹⁷ Lazare, p. 263.