

I'm Still Sorry 2018
Yom Kippur Evening 2018/5779
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“I’m sorry.” Such short words to say and so badly mangled by so many. Five years ago, I shared a sermon about how to correctly apologize Jewishly. I’m back because since then the world has gotten so much worse at apologizing and it has never been more important to do it correctly.

You may remember the Rabbi Mark Kaiserman 6-Step Repentance Plan™ or the 6 Rs. It consists of *Responsibility, Recognition, Remorse, Repair, Resolve, and Refrain.*¹ In just the past couple of years, we have seen flagrant and easily avoided transgressions of the 6 Rs throughout society. These examples are nearly all from 2017 and 2018.

Take the first step, **Responsibility**. We have to identify that we did anything wrong. That is the toughest part as people are loathe to see themselves as the wrongdoer.

Dr. David Dao was forcibly removed from a United Airlines flight in 2017 with video of his being dragged off going viral. He sustained a concussion, a broken nose and lost two teeth during the episode. United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz issued a statement saying, “This is an upsetting event to all of us here at United. I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers.”² He never mentioned the dragging of the 69-year-old Dr. Dao off the plane. In a later statement to United employees he called Dr. Dao disruptive and belligerent.

United’s customers, having seen the video, thought differently. So United had to do the classic 2nd apology. Watch for it after any incident. The speaker will offer a short, often problematic, response. Then return one or two days later, having worked with handlers or PR people to issue a better, longer response.

The next day United took full responsibility and suddenly “deeply apologize[d] to the customer forcibly removed.”³ By Wednesday, Munoz was on TV offering full refunds to all the passengers on the flight and personally apologized to Dr. Dao. Munoz was later called to testify before Congress.

If you get it right the first time, taking responsibility for you or your company’s actions, it avoids a lot of headaches.

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. This is **Recognition**. Perhaps no area has been more insufficient and even overtly offensive apologies in recent times than those by public figures accused of sexual misconduct.

The #MeToo movement has risen and more and more celebrities, politicians, businessmen, and other are losing their position or status after numerous accusations of sexual misconduct. These public figures have offered public statements. And they have almost always been terrible.

Harvey Weinstein, perhaps the most emblematic of such abuse, decided the best approach was a tweet explaining his actions as a symptom of his times. “I came of age,” he wrote, “in the '60s and '70s when all the rules about behavior and workplaces were different. That was the culture then. I have since learned it's not an excuse, in the office — or out of it. To anyone. I realized some time ago that I needed to be a better person and my interactions with the people I work with have changed.”⁴ Such a diminished response was vilified in the press. A general guideline: If your apology lacks the words apology or I’m sorry, it probably isn’t sufficient. If your apology is more of an explanation than ownership of your actions, it is also lacking.

#sorrynotsorry is a hashtag meant to indicate that the apology — the “sorry” — comes because it’s expected of you, but not necessarily because you mean it. Invoking the #sorrynotsorry can be a proudly defiant move when, for example, pointing out something unpopular or in poor or questionable taste that you know will upset other people. A real example: “not all babies are cute #sorrynotsorry”. In such a case, it serves as a righteous proclamation that the writer feels justified for speaking up.⁵ #sorrynotsorry is not a Jewish concept and shows no **Remorse** for the damage you caused. While this phrase is often used in humor, it also is offered as a shield to protect anyone from criticizing you. Saying something that insults or hurts another does not disappear simply because you add a cheeky phrase. In fact, your lack of remorse makes it worse.

A key part of a Jewish apology is really listening to the victim’s experience, taking that in deeply. This is to **Repair** the damage in a meaningful way. Most people forget the “what can I do to make it right?” step.

Some people do this in beautiful and meaningful ways. Cris Beam recounts how her wife was going through chemotherapy. At that moment, Cris had an affair with her therapist and left her wife. There had been apologies and reconciliation, but how does one repair that pain? Years later, Cris flew to her ex-wife’s home and spent several days just listening, hearing about the pain she had caused. “I’m so sorry,” she finally said, “for causing you such great sadness.”⁶

The words of an apology alone are not always enough to repair the damage that has been caused. Actions are needed.

When one apologizes, the hope is that they recognize the significance of their actions and commit to a better future. This is the step of **Resolve**. Roseanne Barr blamed her racist tweet this spring arguing “It was 2 in the morning and I was ambient tweeting-it was memorial day too.”⁷ One doubts her ability to see the significance of her actions of commit to a better future.

The final step of the 6 Rs is **Refrain**, to not do whatever you did again. It will take years to see if people who wronged others can change. We only have people’s promises. And as Mae West said, “An ounce of performance is worth pounds of promises.”

A few years ago, Spanish King Juan Carlos I was vilified in the press for an elephant hunting trip in Botswana where, as providence would have it, he also fell and broke his hip. The King told the press on leaving the hospital. “I’m much better. ... I’m very sorry. I made a mistake and it won’t happen again.”⁸ The King has not killed any more elephants as far as I could determine.

Some people don’t apologize. They would rather live with the superiority of being right, in their mind, than engage in a healthy connection. We see at funerals siblings who haven’t spoken for decades. And maybe one was right and the other wrong, but they’d rather lose that unique relationship than ever say I’m sorry. The connection is frozen in distress and we are stuck in a place in our past unable to grow.

A meaningful apology can change everything. It brings people together. It moves us to new height and possibilities. It closes long existing wounds. My friend and colleague Rabbi Zoe Klein Miles of Temple Isaiah in Los Angeles shared a powerful story of forgiveness and the 6 Rs.

She told me: In September 1970, Barton's Continental Chocolate Shop commissioned my father, James Grashow, to make a print of "Abraham, the first Jew," for an ad for Rosh Hashanah.

My father made an edition of one hundred prints, signed and numbered. At the time, my father was 27-years-old. A Swedish art dealer saw the ad in the newspaper and fell in love with the work. Someone put him in contact with my father, and the dealer came to my parents' New York apartment on 89th and Riverside Drive. The dealer absolutely loved the print, and said he wanted to represent my father in Europe. He would take the edition and would send my father the money. My parents kept one print.

"We were very naïve and young," my mother said. "We were very trusting, we let him take it."

As the dealer was walking out of the apartment, my father admired his keychain, which had a little fold-out scissors on it. The dealer gave the little scissors to my father and left, and my parents never heard from him again.

My father went on to have an incredible career. He created the poster for the Centennial celebration of the Statue of Liberty, and album covers for Jethro Tull and for the Yardbirds. When I became a rabbi, my parents thought it was appropriate that Abraham should live in my study.

47 years after the Swedish dealer had walked out of their apartment, my father received the following email from Norway:

Dear Mr. Grashow.

My father was in the art business in the early 70s. He passed away a couple of years ago. Now my mother also passed and we found a series of "Abraham" when cleaning out their estate. It's a series of 100, and we've got lots of them.

We are three siblings that live in Sweden, Norway, and California.

We would love to have your input, and look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

Cathrine, Christer, and Charlotte

My parents were stunned! They wrote back immediately:

Hello and thank you for reaching out. This answers a mystery that started 47 years ago. [Your father] visited us in Manhattan and looked at prints. He ultimately wanted the edition of Abraham promising distribution and payment. We remember distinctly [he] left with the prints and handed me a keychain with a fold-out scissors. We never heard from him again.

We were very naive at the time and often laughed how foolish we were at the time to let so much go for what turned out to be only a keychain. I would personally love to have some of the Abraham prints because your father had all of them.

The art dealer's three children, now ages 57, 60 and 62, were mortified. They said that their father had been in the art business for only about three years, and the he had become a minister. They had loved the print. In fact, it was framed and hanging over the mantle of their childhood home. They had grown up with it. They had no idea there were all of these copies in their father's belongings. When they found the prints, they researched my father on the internet and saw the extent of his work.

The three siblings wanted to return the prints. They made an incredible decision. They wanted to repair their father's wrongdoing, and they wanted to do it in person. They arranged a date and flew into New York and took a train to Westport, Connecticut, where my father met them.

From the minute the three siblings stepped off the train with their big battered suitcase, they were beaming. They met my father with smiles and big hugs. In my father's studio they opened the suitcase. Wrapped in a yellow and white quilt was the original cardboard box, and inside were 87 prints. As soon as the box was opened, my mother burst into tears. It was a moment of true, redemptive teshuva. It was a literal "return."

Afterwards, the siblings and my parents shared a toast of champagne and lunch. The siblings kept repeating how much they wanted to make it right. They didn't understand what happened, but they knew they wanted to make it right. At the end of a wonderful afternoon, my father drove them back to the train.

My parents received an email the next morning:

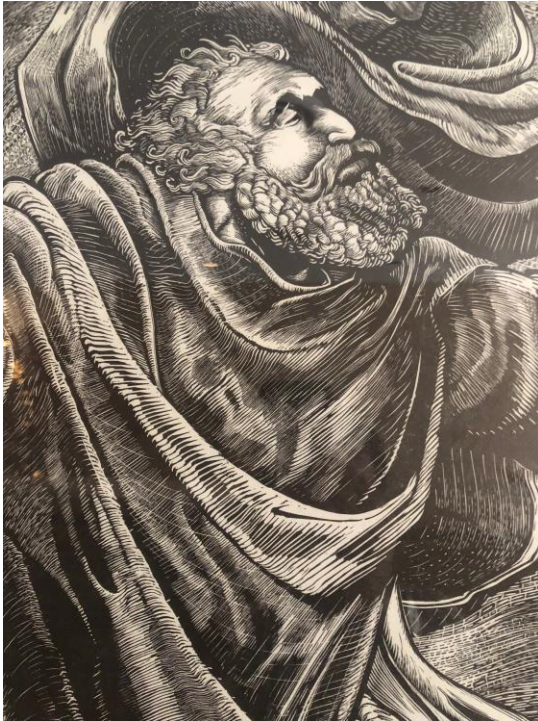
Thank you for a fantastic day together yesterday! Your hospitality, a delicious lunch and showing all your work made our day. This day will stay in our memories for all our lives and we're so happy that we were able to correct one of our father's mistakes.

We're so thankful.

Love Cathrine, Christer, and Charlotte⁹

They could have kept them. Or sold them. Or ignored them. But the siblings summoned the strength to admit their father's mistakes and make it right. They engaged in the 6 Rs and transformed an artist and his family.

This is one of the prints of "Abraham the First Jew" made by James Grashow. I acquired it for RTFH as a symbol of what forgiveness and a willingness to change can bring. It will hang in our synagogue and I hope when you see it, you are reminded of the power of apologies and the need to do them right.



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."¹⁰

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 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.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/14/business/united-airlines-passenger-doctor.html>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/14/business/united-airlines-passenger-doctor.html>

⁴ <https://www.bustle.com/p/harvey-weinsteins-i-came-of-age-quote-is-getting-dragged-by-women-on-twitter-2806013>

⁵ <http://jewishjournal.com/opinion/177684/>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/30/opinion/sunday/apologizing-apologies.html>

⁷ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2018/05/29/roseanne-barr-apologizes-racially-charged-tweets-obama-adviser/650973002/>

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17752983>

⁹ Facebook Post from Rabbi Zoe Klein Miles on June 13, 2018.

¹⁰ *On Apology*, Aaron Lazare, p. 263.