

**Searching for Apologies**  
*Yom Kippur Evening 2019/5780*  
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She nodded to the funeral director. Renee had seen it with her own eyes. Her father was gone. It was odd seeing his face, all silent and pale. She never remembered him being still before. He always seemed to be yelling and red with anger. Renee had come to arrange the details. Reliable Renee. She left her husband and kids back home although Derek had wanted to come. But someone had to watch the kids and he had a heavy schedule at work.

Her father would never say it. What she longed for since she was young. Just once, she imagined, he'd look at her and say, "Renee, I was cruel man. I treated you and mother with harshness and not with love. I was wrong. I'm sorry. I have tried to change. I hope you can forgive me." Every one of those words was laughable in reality. Now there was no chance for them. She had tried moving on. She had created a beautiful life without his forgiveness. But standing by his coffin the reality was clear. He'd never be able to say I'm sorry.

This is a season of apologies. On Yom Kippur we offer up our transgressions to God. But most wrong doing involves another person. It is difficult enough to accept the sins we name in the liturgy, even though we know God's forgiveness is readily waiting. It is much harder to share with a person that we've wronged and meaningfully ask their forgiveness.

I spoke last Yom Kippur on apologies and the best way to share them. Those were the apologies we need to offer. But there are apologies we never give and those we never receive. There are apologies we long to receive and those we need to give.

“It is both medically and psychologically beneficial to forgive: it reduces stress; it improves our immune system and reduces disease.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, we can go our whole lives waiting for an apology that never comes. Even when an apology is offered, it often lacks the healing or forgiving powers we might hope to achieve as insufficient in words, action, or making up for the offense. Even a small offense can speak volumes.

There is a story about a couple approaching their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. The husband knew that there were things he did around the house that bothered his wife and so, in honor of their anniversary, he decided to change some of his behaviors to please his wife – his way of asking her forgiveness for the annoyances. One of things he knew she really didn’t like was that he never put the cap back onto the tube of toothpaste. So, on the morning of their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, he began replacing the cap. He did this for several days, and then a week, and then a month went by. He didn’t understand why his wife hadn’t thanked him and forgiven him for the decades of his inconsiderate behavior. One morning, she finally came to him, ‘I have to ask you about the toothpaste...’ Surely, he thought, the next sentence would be, ‘I forgive you – for all the mornings in the past...’ but instead she said, “I have to ask you about the toothpaste – why don’t you brush your teeth anymore?”<sup>2</sup>

Just because someone apologizes, doesn’t mean we are able or ready to forgive. A lifetime of wrongdoing does not disappear because of a few words repentance.

While we struggle with apologies offered, what about ones never given directly? Other religions have the notion of deathbed repentance – finding salvation in one’s final moments as a ticket to heaven. It exists in Judaism too. Even if one has sinned for one’s entire life and repents on the day of death, laws of repentance teach

us, all sins are forgiven.<sup>3</sup> However, as we know from last year, it isn't that easy. There are actually 6 steps to true repentance. Repenting on your final days takes more than feeling bad for yourself, but action to heal the person you offended. Repentance is not about the wrongdoer's feeling, but the person they hurt. Some hurts are impossible to truly repent for. "This concept of forgiveness has little or nothing to do with the perpetrators. It has everything to do with the need of victims to be free from the pain inflicted upon them." This was said by Eva Kor, an Auschwitz Survivor. There are things so much greater that an apology would be insufficient. How can we absolve murder, sex crimes, child abuse and life-destroying lies?<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes we wait to receive or give an apology and wait too long. The other person passes away before we reach out. Like Renee, the death of a family member ends the possibility of receiving or even asking for repentance. With the death, people search for other ways to seek forgiveness or find it from their loved one. A Yizkor memorial meditation is sometimes one of the only paths left to consider. Here's one alternate prayer for when a parent has died:

Dear God,  
You know my heart,  
Indeed,  
You know me better than I know myself,  
So I turn to You before I rise for Kaddish.  
My emotions swirl as I say this prayer,  
The parent I remember was not kind to me.  
His death left me with a legacy of unhealed wounds,  
of anger and of dismay that a parent could hurt a child as I was hurt.

Help me, O God,  
To subdue my bitter emotions that do me no good,  
And to find that place in myself where happier memories may lie hidden,  
And grief for all that could have been,  
All that should have been, may be calmed by Forgiveness,  
Or at least soothed by the passage of time.  
I pray that You,  
Who raises up slaves to freedom,  
Will liberate me from the oppression of my hurt and anger,  
And that You will lead me from this desert to Your holy place,  
Amen.<sup>5</sup>

When the apology isn't forthcoming, we have to find our own path of healing. But even when someone shares words of repentance, we aren't always able to hear them.

A colleague shared with me the story of an adult congregant who was upset that her father never would apologize for how he treated her. I asked her if he had tried. She said that he did call her and asked to meet with her for coffee. When they met he said he was sorry. She said, but he didn't really mean it. I asked her to think about what it would take for her to feel his apology was sincere. She said there is nothing he could say.

Are we capable of accepting change in someone who has hurt us? What is it we really need when we want an apology? Sometimes there are no words or actions we could find acceptable. Then it is not an apology we are seeking, but a change in ourselves to greater wholeness.

An apology could never be the right answer for many situations. Simon Wiesenthal in his landmark book *The Sunflower* recalls when he was a prisoner in a Lvov work camp. An SS soldier who was dying begged Wiesenthal, as a Jew, to forgive him for his part in the extermination of the Jews. The dying man pleaded with Wiesenthal to accept his last moment of remorse, so that he might die with a peaceful conscience. Wiesenthal left the room without a word.

He often reflected on that moment and wondered if he had done the right thing. He knew he could not forgive this Nazi on behalf of all Jews and others he had persecuted. Be he was very conflicted writing, “Was my silence at the bedside of that man right or wrong? This is a profound moral question that challenges the conscience...Forgetting is something that time alone can take care of, but forgiveness is an act of [choice].”<sup>6</sup>

We live in a world that is full of transgression. We have done much as a people that is wrong. How do we apologize for our destruction of the world? Generations from now will hardly be comforted by our late-in-the-game recognition of the devastation we are bringing to our planet. The animal and plant species we destroy are gone forever no matter how well intentioned our words of apology might be.

We are hearing from that future generation now. Last month at the United Nations, teenager Greta Thunberg said, “Adults keep saying we owe it the young people to give them hope. But I don’t want your hope. I want you to panic....For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away? If you choose to fail us, I say we will never forgive you.”<sup>7</sup>

There is a seemingly endless list of wounds people cause today – misogyny, racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and on. How will we ever find forgiveness for what is being done to Latino refugees in camps at the US borders? One day our official words of apology will be as hollow as when the United States

officially apologized for the internment of Japanese US citizens during World War II. In 1980, Congress called that incarceration a “grave injustice” motivated by “racial prejudice, war hysteria, and the failure of political leadership” and in 1988 offered a formal apology providing \$20,000 to each of the internment camp survivors. Little solace.

Change seems impossible. But change is the only way to move towards repentance. Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb wrote that others can scarcely forgive us for our “slowness to change—yet every positive change measurably moves the needle, limits further suffering, and bends the arc...back toward sustainability and justice. In short: Can we be fully forgiven for past sins? No, some damage done is permanent. Should we move forward, measuring our deeds, trying harder, doing better? Heck yes. That’s the gift of these coming holiday.”<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes the person we need to forgive most is ourselves. We have caused others pain and can’t find a path to redemption in our own heart, so we’ll never be able to properly ask forgiveness of others. We have focused on wounds so deeply that we can’t see a world other than our struggle. We cannot find *teshuva* in our own soul. Sometimes we can be our greatest challenge to redemption.

As the 13<sup>th</sup> century poet Abraham ben Samuel wrote: “I have tested the hearts of those who hate me, but no one hates me as my own heart does. Many are the blows and wounds inflicted by my enemies, but no one batters me and wounds me as my soul does. To whom can I cry out, whom can I condemn, when those who are destroying me come from within myself?” How can we find forgiveness for ourselves so we can journey to repentance towards others?

As we seek *teshuva*, repentance for our actions and forgiveness for others, have we looked inward to our healing? How much can we look for renewed strength in our family, our community, our faith, and our spirit?

Forgiving ourselves is not about forgetting our faults, our limitations, our errors, and our sins. It's not about someone else's actions, hurt, pain, and choices. It is about releasing the anger we hold onto at ourselves so, we may harness our energies for good and not for regret.<sup>9</sup>

In a sermon given in 1807, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav cautioned us: "Ruminating about old mistakes and about the past can in itself be sinful." Just as we are supposed to find the best in each other at the season of forgiveness, so too in ourselves. Rabbi Nachman continued, "You have to judge yourself favorably and find the good points that exist in you. You have to search until you find some modicum of good in yourself to restore your inner vitality and attain happiness. And by searching for and finding [the] good that still remains in you, you genuinely move from the scale of guilt onto the scale of merit."

Self-forgiveness is not letting yourself off the hook. If you hurt another person, feeling good about yourself doesn't change their pain. And it is really about them. But self-forgiveness may be a necessary story for you to truly, meaningfully, openly ask another person for their forgiveness.

Rabbi Naomi Levy offers a modern day take: "Teach me how to love myself, God. I am so critical of myself. ... I accept shortcomings in others, but I am so unforgiving of myself. ... Teach me how to enjoy my life. ... Show me how to embrace the person that I am. ... Soften my heart. ... Fill me with the capacity to treasure my life. Thank you, God, for creating me as I am."<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes it is not our failure but others. We yearn for apologies that never come or arrive without much meaning. We are the victim. But living in that pain for a lifetime doesn't help us to live our life. If we will never get our needed "I'm sorry," or no apology will ever be sufficient, it is then we must find the repentance we need in ourselves.

The Kotzker Rebbe said, "When I was younger, I thought I would change the world. Then I realized that I couldn't change the world, instead I would work on changing my city. Later I realized that I couldn't change my city but rather should just concentrate on changing my family. But now I have decided just to try and change myself."<sup>11</sup> We can't control what they did or the word and actions they might offer. We can work on our own journey and take control of our spirit and our own future.

Apologize, the right way, to those you have wronged. Accept meaningful words of apology from others. At least they are trying. Turn to those you've hurt with an open heart before the opportunity disappears. Turn to those who have wronged you and invite their growth and healing. And give yourself a gift this new year – search in your own soul to find the best within you and share your own acceptance.

May this new year be the doorway to a new life of change and blessing.

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- 1 Dr. Fred Luskin, *Forgive for Good*.
  - 2 Rabbi Beth Klafter, Forgiveness: The Timeless Message of this Time.
  - 3 Yad, Teshuvah 2:1.
  - 4 Rabbi David Evan Marcus, <https://momentmag.com/ask-the-rabbis-are-there-things-that-cant-be-forgiven>
  - 5 <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/alternative-yizkor-prayers-to-say-for-abusive-parents>
  - 6 Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*, pp. 97-98.
  - 7 <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>
  - 8 <https://momentmag.com/ask-the-rabbis-are-there-things-that-cant-be-forgiven>
  - 9 Rabbi Beth Klafter, Forgiveness: The Timeless Message of this Time.
  - 10 Rabbi Naomi Levy, “When We Are Too Hard on Ourselves,” *Talking to God, Personal Prayers For Times of Joy, Sadness, Struggle, and Celebration*, <https://jewishjournal.com/culture/religion/121478/>
  - 11 [https://www.nyhebrew.org/templates/articlecco\\_cdo/aid/3244692/jewish/Rabbis-Corner.htm](https://www.nyhebrew.org/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/3244692/jewish/Rabbis-Corner.htm)