

Kekedem: On Apology for the Future

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When our oldest was a toddler, I took her to her first “gymnastics” class. On one day in particular, the kids were skipping in a circle around the room, and when Coach Elliot announced a change in direction, a few kids were delayed in their reaction and slammed into one another accidentally.

One of the parents rushed the pile-up and insisted her child apologize to the others for “going the wrong way.” Coach Elliot motioned for her to hold on, and said: “Apologies are for things done that deliberately or that purposely hurt someone. This was an accident – say ‘excuse me’ instead.”

I realized at the time that the hardest words - “I’m sorry” -- could become meaningless if they were used as a constant response to everything. As we sit this morning in the depths of our prayer and introspection, we have spent a lot of time on our past, and it is likely we have much to *actually* be sorry for; and many moments that we longed to hear those words from someone else.

This, therefore, is the moment to understand *kekedem*, which mysteriously means *as before*. The last word in the prayer we have focused on these High Holy Days. *Hadesh yameinu kekedem* – *Let our days be renewed as before*.

The *before* is perhaps the most difficult word of all. There is always something before there was a before, and it is often hard to identify the exact antecedent that triggered the cascade of dissonance between us and our loved ones, and between us and our best selves.

What does a sincere apology look like? How does it feel in the moment? What might it do to transform the past, the *kekedem*, into something we can aspire towards in the future?

According to the Talmud, if one injures a fellow, one can pay damages,

medical bills, and every other mode of compensation, but one is not forgiven until one has made an apology.¹ It is the same with our interpersonal offenses. The rabbis make very clear in Mishna Yoma, the laws that deal with Yom Kippur, that the key to unlocking the power of these days lies in a well-placed apology. Yom Kippur alone does not grant atonement, there is nothing magical about being here this morning that will absolve you of the work you still may need to do, but the success of this day hangs on our ability to apologize to ourselves, to others, and to the universe for all the ways we have not brought our best selves into the world.²

I know all of us have been hurt. Lingering in the recesses of our minds is at least one memory from our childhood of parents or teachers who expected too much or too little, memories of being teased or bullied by other kids. And the more “adult” memories: the betrayal by a loved one, the insults inflicted in anger, the lie told that spun out of control, the estranged relationship with a family member.

I know that all of us have hurt others as well. We took someone for granted, over-reacted to someone’s mistake, maybe we abused our power in a relationship with an employee, spread disparaging information about someone, or Betrayed someone’s trust. The list is literally endless.

Left alone, these memories can breed an angry silence. “The silence we impose on ourselves in relationship to others, the silence we experience and interpret as rejection, as abandonment, or as punishment.”³ The silence of anger is all too familiar. We withdraw and withhold, out of a need to punish or a need to hurt; and thereby create a distance that continues to grow in proportion to our ability to stay angry.

The mistakes and hurts we have caused are burdensome to us if we admit that they weigh us down. The pain we have experienced at the hands

¹ BT Bava Kamma 8:7

² This sermon was deeply inspired by a sermon of Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove from 2009: [https://pasyn.org/resources/sermons/\[field_dateline-date\]-4](https://pasyn.org/resources/sermons/[field_dateline-date]-4). I have quoted a number of passages in the sermon and am indebted to his clear thinking.

³ *From a conversation nearly 20 years ago with Rabbi Richard Hirsh in preparation for a sermon in 2000.*

of others can lodge itself so significantly that it can have impact far beyond the moment of hurt.

When we truly offer an apology of the heart, when we ourselves are forgiven, and when we forgive others, there can be a profound letting go of the pain and the past that keeps us stuck and unable to breathe freely.

There is a wonderful book called *On Apology* by Aaron Lazare, a distinguished psychiatrist at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. In the early 1990s, Lazare became intrigued by the process of apology. Lazare lists the numerous ways that we avoid saying those words. Let me offer a few:

We apologize, but do it without sincerity. The words come out, but they are hollow and tinny and reflect no contrition. As the mother of 4 children, I recognize this version A LOT. Even when my girls say it, and Coach Elliot's "excuse me" is absolutely NOT appropriate, they say it to be released from the moment. It is wholly unsatisfying, especially when the behavior is all too familiar, and often followed with, "but she did..." Yeah, that's the sorry, not sorry variation.

There is the *conditional* apology: "If anyone was offended by what I said, I apologize." This feels particularly awful because it shifts the blame. The offense is no longer objective but merely a matter of perception. If *you* are offended, well that is *your* issue, but not my intention, in fact, many people do what I have done, and may not think my action to be offensive – is it really my fault that you do?

Then there is a *vague* apology: "I apologize for whatever I did." This non-specific, non-reflective, non-apology bears the appearance of contrition, but falls far short of the mark because of what *isn't* said.

Finally, the most common and perhaps most utilized in political spheres is the *passive* apology, deflecting what happened as if by an unknown cause: "Mistakes were made." Not *my* mistakes, mind you. Whose then? Not sure.

Here's the thing – I just offered 5 different versions of the *non*-apologies. I'm sure there are many more ways all of us have experienced these, and probably offered a few as well. No matter which technique, each one is a mode by which we avoid what we know we have to do.

It's not generally thought that apologizing is a sign of weakness, although narcissistic tendencies often do, if they even allow for an apology. For most of us, it's that it's really. hard. to. do. Our egos, our vanity, our pride - all of that stops us from acknowledging that we were wrong and someone else was right. Moreover, when we do apologize, since there is no promise of forgiveness, it is a leap of faith, and a decision to take responsibility, even if there is a possibility we won't be forgiven.

There are no stories of apology in the Torah. The story of Noah and the flood teaches about imperfection, and that our character as shaped by how we *respond* to our failures, not the failures themselves.

The first collective sin of the Jewish people is the making of the golden calf. We first learn of the concept of *selicha* (forgiveness) in the story when the Israelites ask to be pardoned.⁴ There is no *apology*, per se, but there is a growing understanding that one's behavior has consequences. The concepts of atonement and pardon are introduced in later priestly and prophetic texts, and even then it's somewhat obscure.

Several midrashim explain that on the eve of the very first Sabbath of creation, after creating the sun, the moon, the stars, the beasts of the field, and the fish of the sea, God is imagined to go through a final punch-list of items.⁵

Each item checked off makes some intuitive sense, like the rainbow after the flood, the ram caught in the thicket for Abraham to use instead of Isaac, the manna in the wilderness, even the Garden of Eden itself.

One item stands out from others in the list. The midrash explains that before that Sabbath, God did not rest until *teshuvah* – repentance - had

⁴ Exodus 34:9

⁵ Pirke Avot 5:6; BT Nedarim 39b

been created. As if God knew that the world could not exist and humanity could not endure, unless we had the ability to say, “I’m sorry.”⁶

No question that arriving at a true reckoning is hard to come by. This isn’t so easy to do. When we are aware of how we caused pain *kekedem*, in the days before now, how might we renew ourselves in the coming year? How might we make true amends if we have made someone doubt themselves, carry around the experience like a lead weight; be the cause of someone’s inability to move forward thereby separating themselves from the world.

Apologies are indeed important, but why *do* they matter as much as they do? Lazare identifies 7 distinct psychological needs of the offended party:

1. Restoration of self-respect and dignity
2. Assurance that both parties have shared values
3. Assurance that the offenses were not their fault
4. Assurance of safety in their relationship
5. Seeing the offender suffer
6. Reparation for the harm caused by the offense
7. Having meaningful dialogues with offender.

Ultimately, a sincere apology reflects a genuine acknowledgement of the offense – wrenching your brain away from all your justifications and putting yourself in the other person’s place.

On a recent episode of *This American Life*, entitled, *Get a Spine*⁷, Producer Nancy Updike tells the story of the anatomy of one particular and unusual instance of an apology.

I’m quoting now from the podcast.

“This apology was about sexual harassment, but it was startling because it was not curt or vague. It was not a lawyered-up mess of non-contrition in the passive voice. It was a true reckoning, publicly and fully accepted by the person who'd been wronged.

⁶ Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, 2009

⁷ <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/674/transcript>

She forgave him. That almost never happens—a public apology that lands. And everything that went into this apology, which is a lot, is an answer, one answer, to a question that keeps wafting up from stories about sexual harassment in the last couple of years, but also, more generally, about what are offenders supposed to do?” What is any of us supposed to say, when we offer a sincere apology for our actions?

“The person who apologized is a writer, and actor named Dan Harmon. He co-created the TV show *Rick and Morty*, and also an NBC comedy called *Community*. He was the boss, essentially. He delivered his apology 6 years after the events in question, and he delivered them on his own podcast, *Harmontown*. It was 7.5 minutes...The person Dan hurt was another writer Meghan Ganz, and it was her first job writing for a sitcom. She was the most junior person in the room, and the least experienced. Dan was impressed with her and favored her in obvious and inappropriate ways. He told her he was interested in her (though he was involved with and living with someone else), and she told him she wasn’t interested and rebuffed him.

Harmon then turned on her, started savaging her work, berating her in front of the other writers. This all went on for about two years, start to finish.

The apology that gave her relief was actually built out of earlier, not successful apologies, like the ones I suggested before. You can listen to the entire podcast yourself – but what opened the door was Meghan saying in a Tweet: *redemption follows allocution*.

Over the course of an exchange on Twitter, Meghan outlined what she was looking for. She laid out some specifics that needed to be addressed. She doubted her talent. She didn't know how to act around bosses or co-workers afterward. She was still roiled inside. She lost time to this. And of course, allocution-- a full account.

Harmon read the book by Aaron Lazare as recommended by his therapist, and did some serious *heshbon hanefesh* – accounting of the soul. Dan's apology worked, partly because he finally took a risk. He admitted to things

that, if Meghan had wanted to, she probably could have used against him. Lawyers advised him not to say those things, he says on the podcast. By admitting them openly, *he chose her well-being over his own comfort*, maybe for the first time in their whole relationship. A lot of people just aren't willing to do that, even for seven and a half minutes.

He chose her well-being over his own comfort. This is the line of the story that has stayed with me. Many believe that forgiveness is impossible. “I’ll never forgive them” – we say out of shock, disbelief, betrayal, and anger. But really, what I have come to learn, is that forgiveness is only impossible if you think you are required to somehow accept the offensive behavior, forget that it ever happened. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. But it does require a shift in perception—looking differently at people and circumstances that cause us pain.

It is indeed an evolving process. If nothing else, becoming aware of the ways in which we actually need apology – in which we have the capacity to forgive, to step out of the angry silences, is an important first step. We can only learn how far we can move in this process, and where we get stuck, if we embark on the road. We can only learn how far we can go if we relinquish the power someone has to live in our head and turn us into bitter, angry people.

In Psalm 27, the Psalm we read during the month of Elul leading up to Rosh Hashanah, we read: “Listen, Adonai, when I cry aloud, have mercy on me; do not thrust me aside in anger; do not forsake me; do not abandon me.”

Without the assurance of relationship, the Psalmist asks, how can we embark on the process of atonement and return? To not apologize is to say that you don’t share a value system with another person. To use Lazare’s language, apologies, “remind us that people can make mistakes and recover from them, that values once ignored can be reestablished, that a relationship can be healed. We breathe easier knowing that our original estimation of the offending party was correct after all; our trust was not misplaced.”⁸

⁸ Aaron Lazare, *On Apology*, p. 45

Forgiveness *is* essential to the human experience. When I think about the apologies I have received, that came from deep within the other person, I remember them more than the offending incident. When I have had to dig deep and offer an apology of my own, as hard as it was, I also felt relieved, and decidedly human.

So what are we to do? Perhaps as I have been speaking you have focused on a particular relationship that needs attention and repair. Maybe now you are asking, “So how am I supposed to do this – how do I know I can do it? What if I can’t? What if don’t want to?”

I do not have an answer for you. But each of us has to find the process that will best work for us. Apologies are not an exact science, and each of us comes to this journey from a different place.

But even if the ways of forgiveness are somewhat of a mystery, the results of forgiveness are clear. When we all pray together the words *selach lanu* – forgive us; *mechal lanu* – pardon us; *kaper lanu* – grant us atonement, may the apologies we offer and those we receive create the world to come in which we all can live.

Hadesh yameinu kekedem – may our days be renewed with the power of forgiveness.