

What Does Repentance Mean?

Beth Haverim Shir Shalom

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The novelist Edward N. Westcott once wrote: "If I've done anything I'm sorry for, I'm willing to be forgiven."

It's Yom Kippur-- a time of apologizing, but what does it mean to apologize? And do the words we say on this holiday really matter?

It's been the year of the public apology. From Lance Armstrong to Paula Deen to Anthony Weiner to Alex Rodriguez, we've been inundated with well-known figures asking forgiveness.

Back in January, Oprah Winfrey interviewed Lance Armstrong about finally admitting to having used performance enhancing drugs in winning 7 Tours de France. When she asked him if he had real remorse or was just sorry he got caught, Armstrong replied, "Everybody that gets caught is bummed out they got caught."

Then there was Paula Deen, who, when questioned by Matt Lauer about her use of a racial epithet responded, "I is what I is, and I'm not changing." Clutching a Kleenex, she also dug into the Bible, exhorting those who are sinless to "please pick up that stone and throw it so hard at my head that it kills me."

Anthony Weiner had several chances to apologize for his inappropriate online behavior, and he urged New Yorkers to forgive him yet again. He admitted that "these things that I did were wrong and hurtful to my wife and caused us to go through challenges in our marriage," and he assured the public that "this behavior is behind me."

And then there was Alex Rodriguez who, after being suspended from baseball for 211 games, responded, "I'm sure there's been mistakes along the way. I'm a human being." This after he had apologized in 2009 for his earlier use of performance enhancing drugs by saying, "I was young. I was stupid. I was naive. And I wanted to prove to everyone that I was worth being one of the greatest players of all time."

It's all made for great television, juicy sports talk, and great headlines in the New York Post. For people who like gossip, it's been a banner year. And there's been so much apologizing, it's like it's been Yom Kippur the whole year long!

As I did research for this sermon, I was reminded again and again just how many types of responses human beings exhibit when confronted with their own wrongdoing. Sometimes we deny the allegations and sometimes we apologize, but those apologies come in many varieties.

One type of so-called apology in 3 part harmony is the type given by Paula Deen and Lance Armstrong. It's the apology of, "I'm sorry, but blame my upbringing" or "I'm sorry but blame my culture"; or, perhaps most honest of all, "I'm sorry I got caught." You have to love these non-apology apologies—the apologies of "I'm not really earnestly repenting; I'm saying words that I pray will let me off the hook."

And there's the Anthony Weiner apology of "I'm really sorry this time."

And then, once in a blue moon, we've heard public *meas culpa* from a celebrity who delivers what feels to be an unvarnished apology.

Tiger Woods was brutally honest in his news conference a few years ago as his multiple transgressions came to light: "I was unfaithful, I had affairs, I cheated. What I did was not acceptable, and I am the only person to blame."

And back in 1995 after being arrested for public lewdness, actor Hugh Grant went on the Tonight Show and told Jay Leno, “I think you know in life what’s a good thing and what’s a bad thing, and I did a bad thing. And there you have it,” Grant continued. “In the end, you have to come clean—it was disloyal, shabby, and goatish.”

Now, we don’t sit in judgment about who among these celebrities was earnest in their apology. It’s not us that they have wronged; though their apologies were public, their forgiveness is not in the hands of anyone in this room.

But as I thought of all of these apologies, I got to wondering what, if anything, the non-celebrities among us might learn about *teshuvah*, about repentance, from these paparazzi targets who have been the talk of the *teshuvah* town in 2013. As we begin this New Year, and as we’ve begun this day of repentance and renewal, are there object lessons for us in these public apologies?

First of all, we should all be glad we don’t have to deal with TMZ, the dirty.com, or any other celebrity gossip outlets who go digging for dirt on celebrities; may it remain that way for each of us--we’re lucky!

But here we stand; even though our apologies won’t come with 15 minutes of infamy, we still have to face the people we’ve wronged; we still have to face God and that Book of Life we’ll reference again and again.

We, like celebrities I’ve named and others I COULD have, make mistakes. The question of Yom Kippur is: How can our words be more than just words? Or, as one member of the congregation asked on our spiritual walk the other day, “How do I break the cycle where I repent for my mistakes on Yom Kippur, and then soon find myself doing the same thing all over again?”

We have at our disposal all the same types of apologies as the celebrities I’ve named. We can deny until we’re caught like Anthony Weiner and then apologize again and again; we can issue non-apology apologies. We can, like Lance Armstrong, admit wrongdoing but leave the impression that we don’t actually think we did anything wrong. We can hide behind nature or culture, like Paula Deen.

We also have the ability to issue an unvarnished apology, where we transparently admit what we’ve done wrong.

But what is it, I’ve been wondering, that makes for true repentance? Some celebrities are criticized for their poor performance in public apology; others sound more genuine and believable. How are we to know if they mean it? And when WE apologize, how are others to know if we mean it? Is it what we say that matters? Is it the way we say it? Or is it something else altogether?

Do the words we will utter in the next 22 hours or so really possess the power to change reality? Can they truly atone for wrongs that may have profoundly affected the people in our lives? The act of apologizing, while seemingly humble, as Rabbi Harlan Wechsler writes, could possibly trivialize the very wrongs for which we have decided to atone—as if a few words could make up for all the suffering we inflict. Or, are words of apology, if freely given and truly meant—are they acts of contrition that can, in fact, help to heal past wounds?

I think we gather here on Yom Kippur in large numbers precisely because apologizing is such an incredible powerful ritual. And it is powerful precisely because it raises so many good questions. It seems to bear within itself such extraordinary possibilities: to change our sense of ourselves; to clear us in the eyes of others. To reestablish harmonious relationships which have been damaged because of our actions. And yet, in the search for a morally appropriate response to those things we’ve done wrong, it can also be said that apology runs the danger of seeming puny—a lot of noise that really signifies nothing.

In asking and reflecting on all of these questions, I’ve come to a conclusion. The words of apology we say DO matter. But on their own, they aren’t sufficient. We can craft the perfect apology- articulate, sincere, detailing our failings. And that’s important. But the problem comes when we conflate apology and repentance—when we think saying “I’m sorry” is sufficient in and of itself to make our relationships whole again.

Think about pre-school kids you know. A teacher on our spiritual walk reminded me of this lesson. The teacher said, “Think about what happens in my classroom every day. One kid slugs another. And then I bring him or her over to the kid they’ve hit, and I say to them, “tell him you’re sorry.” And the kid who delivered the knuckle sandwich inevitably says, “I’m sorry,” with that *punim*. That face that says, “I’m like Pavlov’s dog. You’ve conditioned me to say these words when I do something wrong.” And then, we can’t believe what a high percentage chance there is that, before the day is over, she’s slugged another kid.

Judaism affirms unequivocally that the words we utter do matter. The kid in the classroom HAS to be taught the ritual of “I’m sorry”; it’s a lesson that many adults I’ve met never seem to have learned. Those words—“I’m sorry”—they’re powerful. But often, about things that really matter, times when we’ve really harmed another, places where we really missed the mark, they might not get us all the way to *teshuvah*, to true return of our relationships to wholeness.

How do we get to that point, though? How do we ensure that we are able to bridge the gap between apology and *teshuvah*?

Rabbi Harlan Wechsler recommends a kind of prescription- a 5 step process for repentance. He calls them the 5 “R’s of repentance, and today, I’d like to prescribe them to you, and to myself, as we seek to be whole again, as we seek to break the cycle of sin and repent, sin and repent.

Rabbi Wechsler prescribes the 5 “R’s” in the following order:

1. Remorse... Thou shalt feel bad and be remorseful for what you have done.
2. Recantation... Thou shalt turn your feelings into words, and confess your sins.
3. Renunciation... Thou shalt willfully renounce your wrongdoings, removing them from your thoughts, forgiving yourself and deciding not to commit them again.
4. Resolution... Thou shalt resolve to follow a better path if put in the same position again, to lift yourself up to the place you want to be.
5. And, finally, reconciliation... Then and only then, thou shalt ask for forgiveness. ■➡

Remorse, recantation, renunciation, resolution, and THEN reconciliation. PHEW. This repentance thing is going to take a lot more work than we might think.

You mean it’s not enough to apologize? Not enough to either say it really eloquently, OR really mean it, however fumblingly we speak? It’s not even enough to sit in *shul* for hours at a time, thinking and feeling and telling ourselves and God how much we’re sorry for what we’ve done?

Look—I have no intent to minimize apology tonight. To the contrary, apologizing is a *sine qua non*, and without it repentance cannot take place. Rambam, our 12th century teacher, affirms that even if one has decided to abandon sin and to radically alter one’s way of life, it does not amount to a complete act of repentance; without asking for forgiveness, acquittal is denied.

But, I submit to you tonight that apology on its own, without remorse, recantation, renunciation, and resolution rarely leads to true reconciliation. When we shortcut the process of repentance, it’s hard to emerge whole in our relationships with each other and with God. When we confuse apology for repentance, perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised when we find ourselves making the same mistakes again soon after Yom Kippur.

In the spirit of my words, I'd like for us to do more than talk tonight. I'd like to do more than have you listen to me as we gather on this Sabbath of Sabbaths.

With your *machzor* when you came in tonight, you received an index card. On the card are written 5 words—the 5 R's of Repentance: Remorse. Recantation. Renunciation. Resolution. Reconciliation. I'm going to give us 5 minutes for this PRIVATE exercise; I won't be asking you to share what you write on this card, unless you'd like to share it with me at some later time.

Take a few moments now. If you're comfortable, you could write down some notes on the card; if you're uncomfortable writing on *yuntiff*, you can just carefully think through the steps.

Either way, I want you to think about one thing you are looking to repent for this Yom Kippur—maybe pick something that you find yourself repenting for every year. Take 5 minutes, quietly, privately, and either literally or mentally fill out the steps you need to work through to get to repentance.

What might Remorse, Recantation, Renunciation, Resolution, and Reconciliation look like in real life?

OK. Go.

Quick responses?

Tonight, we do not sit in judgment of A-Rod's apparent lack of contrition or Hugh Grant's seemingly genuine apology; we are not to be judged this Yom Kippur against the apologies of Paula Deen or Tiger Woods. To my knowledge, no expose will appear on PerezHilton.com tomorrow regarding your *teshuvah*. No. tonight, we have the privilege and responsibility to answer to a higher power. This Yom Kippur is about the words of apology we will say, and so much more at the same time.

We have the privilege that Yom Kippur provides us, to stand privately before God and before people we've wronged. Only we and they and our future actions will determine whether this year's apologies will penetrate deeper than the skin. As Tiger Woods said back in 2010, "My real apology... will not come in the form of words. It will come from my behavior over time."

But if we are to get to repentance, we must not skip the steps. Even an interview with Matt Lauer or Oprah Winfrey is not a shortcut to repentance. We must feel remorse. We must recant and confess. We must renounce our errors and actively decide not to commit them again. We must resolve to follow a better path. And then, we must ask forgiveness. We must walk through each of these steps if we are to achieve the kind of wholeness that truly allows us to begin again.

When we say "*G'mar chatimah tova*," May we be sealed for blessing in the Book of Life, the beauty of Yom Kippur is that the *chatimah*, that seal, is up to us. It's in the emotions of our hearts. It's in the decisions of our heads. AND it's in the opening of our mouths. This year, let's use them all.