

# Apologies And Forgiveness<sup>1</sup>

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Forgiveness is an important theme during Yom Kippur. We ask God to forgive us many times throughout the Yom Kippur liturgy. We sing,

*“V'al Kulam Elohai Slichot.”*

For all these failures of judgment and will,  
God of forgiveness, forgive us.”

In addition to asking God for forgiveness, we are also supposed to ask others. Are there things you have done towards others that you regret? Are there people in your life you should ask to forgive you? It doesn't have to be something big. It could be just a slight, that didn't mean much to you, but to the person, was hurtful. Asking forgiveness can be very healing for **both** parties.

If you really want to be forgiven, the request should come with an apology. As hard as it is to ask to be forgiven, it is even hard to add an apology because it admits you did something wrong. “I am sorry you got hurt” is very different than, “I am sorry I did this to you.”

Why is it so hard to apologize?

- You are afraid of the person's reaction.
- Maybe they won't accept your apology.
- You are embarrassed and ashamed of how you and others see you.
- If you admitted what you did:
  - It makes you seem weak.
  - It is giving in to the other person
  - It is an admission of fault
  - You have to swallow your pride.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the book, On Apology, by Aaron Lazare.

But there are many gifts to both the apologizer and the apologizee. This story gives a beautiful example of how a family apology can be more than just offered words.

A mother bought her favorite gourmet brownie desert to serve at dinner one night. But when dinner-time came, she couldn't find it. She immediately accused her 16-year old daughter of eating them. The daughter denied it so the mother accused her of lying and lectured her about the importance of trust between family members.

The next morning the mom brought it up again. As the daughter glanced up she noticed the brownies sitting on a shelf where the mom had put them for safe keeping the day before. The daughter said smugly, "Well are you going to apologize?" The mom launched into a sincere, agonizing, and shame-filled apology. Being a typical teen she then said, "I love it when you apologize, mom, because it makes you look so foolish." A few weeks later, to the mom's surprise, her daughter apologized to her for something the daughter had done. As a teenage girl, she had never apologized for anything. Why now? When the mother humbly apologized she set an example, which was a much better teacher for her daughter than a lecture ever could be. And both apologies brought the mother and daughter closer together.

Today, we see far too many shallow and empty apologies from those in public, whether it be politicians or celebrities. They do it because of political or social pressure even if they don't mean it. How do we offer an apology that is meaningful and heartfelt? Why do some apologies heal while others fail? Can apologizing be seen as a sign of strength? And if we are ready to apologize what is the best way to offer an effective and healing apology?

The *mahzor* comes with ready-made instructions on how to apologize to God. But how do we apologize to people? That is so much harder. In his book, On Apology, Aaron Lazare teaches us how to offer an apology. For the apology to be effective and healing, we need to consider the needs of the person who was offended. Think of your needs when you want someone to apologize to you.

Some of the needs could be:

- To restore your self-respect and dignity
- To be assured that you and the offender have shared values
- To be assured that you were not at fault

- assured that you are safe from further harm by the offender
- knowing that the offender felt bad or guilty about what they did to you.
- The opportunity to communicate your suffering and other feelings about the offense.
- Reparations where appropriate

If you can understand your needs for an apology, then you can make an apology to others that is so much more than just saying the words, “I am sorry.”

Since apologizing is so hard to do, what motivates people to apologize?” For some, it is a need to respond to the shame, guilt, and concern for the person they have hurt. An apology can also help to repair a damaged relationship. For others it is a new awareness of right and wrong. What didn’t seem wrong then, does seem wrong now. Sometimes it takes an awareness of aging, or facing death to find the strength to apologize.

Maybe we are ready to apologize but just don’t know how. So what is the best way to apologize? It should include the following four things:

1. The acknowledgement of the offense
2. The explanation
3. Expressions of remorse, shame, humility, and sincerity
4. Reparations

It is important to acknowledge in detail what you did. Be honest. Try not to manipulate the story to make you look better or avoid responsibility. Recognize how what you did has hurt the other person.

Vague apologies such as “I am sorry for what happened,” or apologies in the passive voice such as “Mistake were made,” are usually not very affective.

These are also not helpful:

- Blaming the victim by saying,
  - “Other people were not bothered by what I did, but if you are, I’m sorry.”
  - “I am sorry you are upset with me.”

- Minimizing the damage by saying, “Oh common. What I did really wasn’t that bad.”

Next, it is important to show remorse. You deeply regret what you did. You are ashamed because that is not how you want to act.

Do you need to explain? Not if it is an excuse. But true explanations can help to lessen the impact of the hurt. If the person offended realizes some things were going on that affected how you acted, they know that this is probably something that will not occur again, and that it is not their fault.

Reparations are important if there was something material involved, such as replacing something that broke. Reparations can also be verbal, such as inviting the person to join you for coffee. You can also offer, “Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?”

What do you as the apologizer get for apologizing? It helps to restore your own dignity and self-esteem and it can help to repair a relationship that was once close, and is now broken. An apology brings peace not only to the offended, but also to the offender.

Is it ever too late to apologize? The story of Joseph and his brother’s teaches us that even a later apology can be very powerful.

Many years after Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery, they came to Egypt where Joseph welcomed them and their father. Genesis tells the story.

“When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrong that we did him!”<sup>1</sup> So they sent this message to Joseph, “Before his death your father left this instruction: <sup>17</sup> Tell Joseph I told you to say this. ‘Forgive, I urge you, the offense and guilt of your brothers who treated you so harshly.’ And Joseph was in tears as they spoke to him. His brothers went to him, flung themselves before him, and said, “We are prepared to be your slaves.”<sup>2</sup>”

At first they were too afraid or too embarrassed to apologize directly, so they told Joseph that their father wanted him to forgive them. Then they broke down and offered their version of reparations. “We are prepared to be your slaves.”

If the offense is very serious, it may take a while, even years, for the person who

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<sup>2</sup> Gen 50:15-18

was hurt to be ready to hear your apology, so be patient, and try again later, if needed.

So now that I have shared with you how to make an honest and heartfelt apology, it is my turn. I usually begin each Erev Yom Kippur service by offering an apology to anyone I may have hurt or offended. This year I waited until the end of my sermon to use what I learned in my apology.

I apologize to anyone who I have hurt or offended during the last year. As your rabbi, I try my best to be attentive to each of your needs but it has been a difficult year for me. This was the year of mourning for my mom. I have struggled with various health issues, some still unresolved. I was adjusting to working a second job as a mental health counselor in Binghamton. I know I have been short with some of you. My patience was not what it usually is. Being under stress, I was not as tuned in to you as I usually am. So I may not have even been aware of what I did or said to offend you. If I was short with you or not patient, or not available, please accept my apology. I will try to do better this year. If you would like to talk to me in person about something that occurred during the year between us, please contact me by e-mail or cell phone, so we can find a time to meet. **My relationship with each and every one of you is important to me.**

Wishing you a year of offering apologies, of accepting apologies and a year when I am able to be more patient.