

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Kol Nidrei

5772

The story goes that two friends have had a fight, and for ten years they haven't spoken to one another. One night they are in the synagogue as the Day of Atonement is about to begin. The rabbi goes over to each in turn and tells them that the holiest moment in the year is about to arrive. The time has come for them to apologize to one another and make up. Life, he says, is too short to bear a grudge.

They agree, walk over to one another and shake hands. One says to the other, "I wish you all that you wish me." The second turns to the rabbi and says, "You see - again he's starting with me!"

Probably many of you knew the story (after five years my repertoire is becoming smaller and smaller). However if you still find it funny it is because you, like me, believe that jokes contain a kernel of truth.

We recognize the good intentions of the rabbi but we laugh at his ingenuousness.

When my brother and I were little and used to fight over a toy or later on over the divine right to choose the TV channel, our mother, tired of all the screaming and yelling grabbed us by our arms and brought us together and said: "You say 'I am sorry' to your bother and you say 'I am sorry' to your brother and stop fighting and start playing nicely!" My mother's old recipe worked well with my brother and me when we were very young, but usually, when people are older, it's not so simple, as our funny story shows us.

Now, year after year, in the days before Yom Kippur I find myself repeating like a mantra the following words:

-“I am sorry if I hurt you in the past year. Please forgive me!”

-“Same thing, Rabbi. I am sorry if I hurt you in the past year. Please forgive me!”

Next one: -“I am sorry if I hurt you in the past year. Please forgive me!”

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Silvia, Daniela, Ilan, Abby, “I am sorry if I hurt you in the past year. Please forgive me!”

Just a few minutes ago, Cantor Fuchs and I repeated the same words in front of all of you: “We are sorry if we hurt you in the past year. Please forgive us!” Now, please rise and turn to page 398 for Kol Nidrei.

The source of these forgiving exchanges, I believe, is a famous Mishnah in Tractate Yoma, which deals with the laws of Yom Kippur. The Mishnah reads:

“For sins between man and God, Yom Kippur provides atonement; but for sins between man and his fellow man, Yom Kippur does not provide atonement, until one appeases his fellow man” (Mishnah Yoma 8:9).

And indeed, saying “sorry,” even a mechanical one, can make a world of difference and is better than not saying it, but, I am afraid, it is not enough.

The next necessary step, after you say “sorry” is to say what you are sorry for. It is not enough to think it; you need to be able to articulate it, to put it in words. In this regard, the liturgy of Yom Kippur can be very helpful with two different alphabetical lists of sins to refresh our memory. Some of the words of the “Ashamnu” or “Al Chet” prayers might sound too harsh, but if we use our imagination and aim to understand the words in a broader sense, we would be able to relate at least to some of the transgressions.

I use the word “transgression” rather than “sin” because I don’t want to turn you off with harsh words. The truth, however, is that the words transgression, sin,

offense, and wrongdoing, with their different nuances, all point in the same direction: what we did and should not have done, or what we didn't do and we should have done.

In any event, putting into words what you did wrong, first to yourself and then to God and your fellow human beings, is the next necessary step in the journey towards atonement.

"I am sorry for letting you down!

"I am sorry for not showing up at the school play."

"I am sorry for forgetting your birthday."

"I am sorry for being late."

"I am sorry for not coming to see you sooner."

"I am sorry for all the years I didn't speak to you."

"I am sorry for putting work above family."

"I am sorry that I didn't get to know you better."

"I am sorry for raising my voice."

"I am sorry for being insensitive to your suffering, to your pain."

"I am sorry for doing all the talking and none of the listening."

"I am sorry for not taking good care of the body you gave me, God, as a gift."

"I am sorry for hurting you, even when I didn't mean it, because I recognize that good intentions are not enough!"

The above list is one which applies as much to me as it does to my family, my friends, my congregants; one that hopefully will assist you in making your own list. You don't have to write it down, at least not today or tomorrow, but you can create it in your mind, as you hit your chest and chant the words of Ashamnu or Al Chet.

Last, but certainly not least, the final step in the journey towards atonement, is to actually change, or, as Silvia put it simply: "I did it, I am sorry, and I won't do it again," or again, to use Silvia's words: "Good, you said 'sorry.' Now, next time, set the table, clean your room, and take out the garbage, without me telling you!"

In the words of my teacher Donniel Hartman:

There are those who believe that the goal of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), as its name attests, is to merely attain atonement for our sins, to recalibrate our standing before God. These are called the Days of Awe, for our destiny stands in the balance: Who will live and who will die. To achieve this atonement, we fast and pray for forgiveness.

The problem with this approach, however, is that beyond fidelity to the laws and practices of the holy days, it does not make any other demands upon us. Instead of striving to change our behavior we are satisfied with the yearning for atonement. The old year fades and a new one approaches, and everything stays as it was.¹

Yom Kippur is a wonderful gift from God. We fast, we pray, we hit our chests, we say "sorry" and God, with His magical eraser, gives us a new opportunity to start anew, to write in the book of our lives a new story, one of which we can be proud.

This great gift, however, is only good if we use it, if we *do* write a new story, a different one, if we transform ourselves, if we change.

Again in the words of Donniel Hartman,

Atonement can be viewed as an end unto itself or as a means which enables a new beginning. As an end unto itself, it enables the human being to start over from the same place and to wait again for the next Yom Kippur with its promised "new beginning."

On the other hand, atonement can be viewed as a means. Its importance is derived precisely from the fact that it has the capacity to enable and serve as a catalyst for change and renewal. One of the major stumbling blocks which prevents us from changing our behavior is the difficulty in believing that we are capable of it. We often believe that we are ruled by the past and that it defines us in the present and will continue to do so in the future. The idea of atonement can serve as the ally of the status quo or as the vehicle of liberation from it. A human being who achieves atonement can squander this moment of grace by repeating the mistakes of the

¹ http://www.hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=795&Cat_Id=273&Cat_Type=Blogs

past, or he or she can use atonement to establish the belief that the past does not necessarily define who we will be in the future. One who receives the gift of atonement is given a chance to reshape one's life; the critical question is whether we use this gift or waste it by believing that atonement as an end unto itself is sufficient.²

I hope that next year will find me standing in front of God, in front of you, and in front of Silvia and the children with a new, hopefully shorter, "to do" list. If the next year, however, finds me in the same spot with exactly the same "to do" list as this year, an opportunity will have been lost, another year will have been lost.

The gift of forgiveness is only one half of the miracle of this day. The second half, perhaps the more important one, is the realization that the ability to change is in our hands. We don't have to be the same today as we were yesterday, nor the same tomorrow as today.

May Hashem bless all of us and our loved ones with the gift of forgiveness. May we learn to recognize and name our shortcomings, and may we have the courage and strength to change them, so that our next Yom Kippur will find us more at one with God, with our fellow human beings and with ourselves.

May Hashem bless all of us and our loved ones with health, joy, sustenance and peace, with a good, sweet and blessed year!

² http://www.hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=795&Cat_Id=273&Cat_Type=Blogs