

Kol Nidrei – 2023 – Rabbi Yaron Kapitulnik

Why is it “So Hard to Say I’m Sorry.”

“What do I got to do to make you love me?

What I got to do to be heard?”

In 1976 - “Rabbi” Elton John introduced this song to the world. I’ll bet he never imagined it would be part of a Kol Nidrei sermon.

But how can it not when the name of the song is:

(Abbie) “...Sorry seems to be the hardest word.”

But why?

Why is it so hard for us to say, “I’m sorry”?

Do we really need an entire day of fasting and prayer to take responsibility for our hurtful words and actions?

Shouldn’t we know better?

Psychologists tell us that apologies are central to our physical and emotional health. They bestow self-respect and demonstrate integrity. They develop within us a stronger sense of empathy.

And yet apologies are like the kale salad of relationships. It’s good for us, but its bitterness often makes us choose something else on the menu.

No thank you, I’ll pass on apologizing.

One main reason people don’t apologize is the “magnitude gap.” This term describes how we tend to “downplay” what we did, to minimize how much hurt we inflicted, and to justify our actions as unintended. We convince ourselves that our behavior was a mere slip-up, a one-time, non-significant event.

Does this sound familiar?

“But I remembered your birthday every other year.”

Then there are narcissistic people who by nature apologize less.

Does this sound familiar: “I’m a narcissist - What? Me? Impossible...”

Another reason we tend not to apologize is known as the power of inertia. Our inability to change direction. We cling on to an idea that we did no wrong, and we just can’t let go.

I saw it so many times as a survival guide in the Judean desert. People go on a hike, they pick a path, and suddenly they realize that they have taken a wrong turn. But rather than turn back, they convince themselves that they will be ok, that the path they are on leads to the same destination only to keep getting deeper and deeper into trouble - eventually finding themselves hanging over a cliff.

Does this sound familiar?

“But I’ve always done it this way?”

And more honestly, apologizing hurts our self-esteem. When we apologize, we have to admit to ourselves that we are not exactly who we think we are. We are not as decent, caring, moral or sensitive as we want to see ourselves and that self-reflection is very hard to grapple with.

It’s hard to admit that maybe I’m the cause of the rift in the relationship, maybe I have been the one who was hurtful, self-absorbed, maybe I was the one not being sensitive to the challenges of my parents, my children, my friends – could it be that I pushed too hard, too fast, that I didn’t listen to their pain? To their needs? Is it possible that all the things I accuse them of doing, I did myself?

Yom Kippur is the harsh reminder that we must own our mistakes, taking this first step on the path to Teshuva.

The word Jew - Yehudi, derived from Yehuda - means I am grateful to God.

You have heard me say many times that to be Jewish is to be grateful.

Every morning Jews recite the prayer - Modeh Ani - which translates as I am grateful, I thank you God for a new day.

And tonight, I want to suggest that *Modeh Ani* doesn't only mean I am grateful but also that "I admit I'm wrong."

In the beginning of *Mishna Horayot* - there is an argument between a group of rabbis. When Rabbi Akiva realized he lost the argument – we read: "Rabbi Akiva Modeh"- Rabbi Akiva conceded.

Modeh Ani - means I am grateful.

Modeh Ani- also means I concede.

Being Jewish is being grateful for the ability to be wrong.

As my favorite Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai reminds us so beautifully:

From the place where we are right.

Flowers will never grow in the spring.

The place where we are right.

Is hard and trampled like a yard.

Because there is no growth without owning our mistakes.

But we live in a culture where people, rather than own their mistake and apologize, double down on their lies. Claiming innocence even when there is no doubt, they are responsible, blaming others for their misdoings.

When was the last time you saw a CEO of a big company, or a politician, admit that they were wrong or express genuine regret?

And when our culture fails us, we must turn to our religion, wisdom and tradition, and the role it plays in grounding us to be counter-cultural.

How many of us grew up hearing the words of Saint Augustine who said:

"Fallor ergo Sum – I err, therefore I am."

Which then inspired 17th century English poet Alexander Pope to write:

“To err is human, to forgive is divine.”

But last year I was inspired by a sermon given by Rabbi Daniel Ross at Central Synagogue, who taught exactly the opposite –

“To err is divine, to forgive is human.”

Really? God, the divine, makes mistakes?

Yes, open to Genesis 1:16.

“God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars.”

The Rabbis immediately saw a problem with this text, if God created “two great lights” how could it be that the Torah describes one as “the greater” and one as “the lesser?”

Rabbi Shimon offers an explanation: When God first created the sun and the moon, they were equally bright. Then, the moon said to God: Master of the Universe, is it possible for two kings to serve with one crown?

God agreed with the moon that the two lights can't be equal - and that one of them must be subservient to the other.

And so, God said to the moon: go and diminish yourself.

The stunned moon said to God - but I am the one who pointed out the problem to you, that we are both great lights, and in return you punish me by making me the lesser?

God realizes that the moon is right. God made a mistake by making the lights equal and then furthered the mistake by punishing the moon for confronting God.

Did you know that at the beginning of every Jewish month, Jews used to offer a sacrifice, and now we say a prayer, to atone for God's mistake?

We do this because in the Talmud we read: “For the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: This sacrifice of the new month shall be MY atonement for MY mistake, for having diminished the size of the moon.”

“To err is divine, to forgive is human.”

God makes mistakes, and we who are created in God's image, make mistakes too.

And if God can admit God's mistakes, then we must too.

And still, for so many, even this is not a strong enough argument to admit our mistakes. There is still a much more powerful force stopping us from doing what we ought to do.

I believe that at the core of our resistance is our fear of being vulnerable. We have a voice inside ourselves, a powerful voice, that keeps telling us that even if we offer an apology – there is a chance that the injured party will reject it. After all – we know that the words that are even harder to say than “I'm sorry” are “I forgive.”

And we tell ourselves that if the other side won't forgive us then our apology won't change anything and so there is no point in making the effort, in being vulnerable, and possibly hurt. So, we just prefer not to try, no kale for me.

Is there anything we can do to fight this voice?

I'd like to share with you a Midrash written by Tama Biala. It's part of a collection of midrashim called Dirshuni - composed by Israeli women.

It's a Midrash about the story of Job.

For those who forgot the story, Job is a very successful, rich, happy, and righteous man.

The story begins with God kvelling to Satan about his loyal servant Job: “There is no one like him on earth, a blameless upright man who fears God and shuns evil.”

Satan replies, “Does Job fear God for no reason?” Suggesting that Job only praises God because his life is so good. After all, why would Job not be loyal and praise the hand that feeds him?

So, Satan suggests a test. He challenges God to take away all that he gave to Job, and see if he remains such a God fearing, blameless person, when his life isn't as easy and good.

And God does what Satan suggests. First, he makes Job ill. And nothing changes. So God ups the ante, and takes everything Job has and loves. He kills Job's cattle. And still, Job remains loyal. Then he burns his house and all his possessions. Again, nothing changes. And finally, he kills his family.

Despite his pain, and anguish, Job refuses to curse God.

The midrash begins here on Kol Nidrei night with Job sitting "in his insult" - alone, on the ground, mourning and in despair.

"Now Job remembered what his masters had told him. On Yom Kippur, we cannot atone for the sins one person does to another until we ask for forgiveness from whom we have erred. So Job asks himself - "What will be of Adonai who has not yet come to me, asking me for my forgiveness? Yom Kippur is coming."

"Job wondered: Maybe Adonai is scared of Satan's voice which keeps echoing "Does Job fear God for no reason?" The voice that tells him he was justified to inflict such pain on Job. Maybe just like us, Adonai is afraid that Job can never forgive Adonai for the pain Adonai inflicted on him.

Eventually God appears to Job. The specifics of what they say is not described. All we know is that Job keeps talking to God using a "responsive voice."

The Midrash clarifies: "What is this responsive voice?"

It is a reassuring voice. A comforting voice. One that helps calm and affirm. A voice that ensures that anyone is capable of forgiving even the most horrendous transgressions.

And that is what happened to Adonai, the voice of Satan vanished from the book and is never mentioned in it again.

I love this Midrash, I love how Adonai fights the voice of Satan within him. Eventually owning his mistakes, apologizing, and restoring all of Job's blessings. If God can fight that voice, surely, we can too. If God can be vulnerable, surely, we can too.

And if Job can confront God, surely, we can confront those who have hurt us. Don't "sit in your insult", waiting for an apology. Go to them. Use your

responsive voice. What you say is up to you? I believe that your gesture, indicating that the “door is open” will be the calming, reassuring push to allow them to be vulnerable, and apologize.

I am not naive. I know - there are people in our lives that will never be able to beat that voice inside them convincing them they have done no wrong. There are people that no matter what, their ego, their lack of awareness, or maturity, their narcissistic personality, their fear of being vulnerable - will never allow them to apologize.

Sadly, in these cases, if you are waiting for them to apologize, you might be waiting forever.

If this resonates with you - the words, “I’m sorry” still have relevance. But not as an apology, but rather as an expression of sadness, that you have found yourself in this situation. That your relationship is not what you have hoped it would be.

Don’t wait for your son or daughter you miss to call you. Pick up the phone and tell them you are sorry that you have grown apart. A relationship doesn’t have to be an “all or nothing” - cherish what you have and hope that with time you will be able to rebuild.

Don’t let a long-standing friendship die. Tell your friend you would like to find a path to move forward.

Don’t keep making excuses for not visiting, for prioritizing, for not finding time for the people that matter in your life. Make the most out of the time we have left.

Maybe it's time to admit that your mistake is waiting for them to apologize, something that might be impossible for them to do, and that by waiting - you too are responsible, you allowed the relationship to fade.

I hope by now you are all sitting on the edge of your chairs, waiting to go and apologize, or to just say how sorry you are for being in a painful situation.

Yet, Kol Nidrei is a harsh reminder that we will fall short. That some of the promises we make to ourselves will never happen.

Kol Nidrei is a reminder that even with the best intentions and efforts - we will not accomplish all that we hope to achieve.

Let's be honest, many of you are sitting here tonight, holding on to the exact same hopes and promises you had last year, and many will be sitting here next year with the exact same resolutions you are making tonight.

So, I pray to God, asking that saying sorry will be something that becomes easier for you this coming year.

Because...

From the place where we are right

Flowers will never grow in the spring.

The place where we are right.

Is hard and trampled like a yard.

But doubts and love dig up the world.

Like a mole, a plow.

God, please help us dig up the world with our plow of love, let our Teshuva be like a mole digging up the hard ground we have created.

Let us hear your voice, a voice of hope, of love and forgiveness.

Help us quiet our inner voice, the voice of fear and anger.

Help us stand vulnerable in front of those we have hurt.

Help them realize that to err is divine, we all do, and to forgive is human.

Help us be human.

Make the world a place where we no longer believe that

sorry seems to be the hardest word.

