



Temple Beth Sholom

A JEWISH CENTER OF LIFE, LEARNING, AND CONNECTIONS

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Rabbi Cohen Sermon Archive

Kol Nidre 5771

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Saying We're Sorry...

A couple of years ago, TV personality Steven Colbert, who plays a Bill O'Reilly type character on Comedy Central TV, came up with a brilliant bit about creating a Repentance Hotline. Colbert, who is not Jewish, explained that days between the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are called "The 10 Days of Repentance." Before God forgives you for your sins, you are supposed to personally ask forgiveness from those you have offended. So in order to help out all of those who may have offended him, he takes out this big telephone with a large Jewish star on it and he tells everyone he created this hotline, 1-888-OOPS-JEW.

Maybe we should all create such a hotline for ourselves? It certainly would make it easier for people to ask each other for forgiveness. In fact, I've even seen some people Tweet their apologies as an easy way to reach as many people as possible. It's amusing, and it makes for a great gag, but I think Colbert and those on Twitter may have missed the point. Repentance is interactive, yes, but not with the telephone. It must be with another human being or with God to be effective.

Let me read to you a piece about another Repentance Hotline. This, one, however is for God:

Thank you for calling the interactive Repentance Hotline here in Heaven. Due to the approaching High Holidays, which is our busiest season, all of our telephone lines are temporarily busy. Please wait patiently as your call will be answered in the order it was received, and remember, patience is a virtue.

If you have never used the Interactive Repentance Hotline before you will need to listen carefully to our simple sequenced instructions. This service is available for touch-tone telephone users as a supplement to your praying at shule over the Ten Days of Awe. It is not a substitute. Now let us now begin.

To access your personalized account of all your known transgressions, including dates and affected parties, please press #1 now. If you have not already apologized to the affected parties, please hang up now and call back when this has been done. For a personalized list of transgressions toward HaKadosh Baruch Hu, The Holy One Blessed Be God, please press #2.

Please note that in order to provide timely service to all callers, there is now a limit of twenty transgressions per person at one time. Politicians will require several visits to complete their inventory. Please select the transgressions you have committed this past year. In case you have forgotten, we offer a list of the most popular transgressions. To activate this function, please press the pound (#) key. Once you have chosen the proper transgression, enter the code and press the pound key to enter it. As you enter your transgression, our service will prompt you for your explanation. At the conclusion enter the star () key.*

Please note that the same transgression committed against two individuals counts as two items. Now that you have entered your personal transgressions, you may access the repentance component of our service. As our computer reads out each transgression you have indicated, please enter the contrition code. For example, a "1" means you are only mildly sorry for your action; "2" means you are somewhat sorry but have mitigating circumstances and a good lawyer; "3" means you are very sorry but will likely repeat it and have a great lawyer; "4" means you are very, very sorry and will not repeat it unless there are mitigating circumstances and you have Dershowitz on retainer; and "5" means you are extremely sorry and will not repeat the transgression under any circumstances since you have only your second cousin's son-in-law who failed the bar twice.

Please proceed with your repentance sequence now...

Based on your transgression, repentance and tzedaka scores you have been granted conditional atonement. This offer expires within one calendar year.

Thank you for visiting the Repentance Hotline and remember, we know everything! (author unknown)

If only it were so easy! If only we could call in to a hotline and take care of all our transgressions with one phone call. But this is not possible. We have to find how to say I'm sorry and then act on it.

Think about this for a moment – how many times have we heard or said these words, "I'm sorry"?

When our children are small and they discover hitting, we hold their hands and we say, "no, we don't hit. Say, 'I'm sorry.'" And when they are playing and hurt someone else, either on purpose or even by accident, we remind them, "say you're sorry."

"I'm sorry" becomes one of the first words that our children learn and use over and over again. It might even get overused to the point that one feels like, does this person really mean that he is sorry or is he just giving 'lip service' to appease me or someone else? What does it really mean to say, "I'm sorry?"

April 22, 2010, the Horizon deep sea drilling platform explodes. Finally, two months later, Tony Hayward, CEO of British Petroleum begins his remarks before Congress with an apology. He said, "The explosion and fire aboard the Deepwater Horizon and the resulting oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico never should have happened, and I am deeply sorry that it did." While BP has offered a \$20 billion escrow fund to pay for the damages ensued in the spill and the loss of livelihood for so many, it seems that it was offered reluctantly, offered only after President Obama insisted.

In June, British Prime Minister, David Cameron, issued an official apology to the people of Northern Ireland for the 1972 Bloody Sunday killings by British troops of 14 unarmed demonstrators in Londonderry. Commentators to the events said that it was "the straightforward way in which he expressed it, with little of the nuance that might have tempted a politician seeking to requite the grief of the Londonderry families without exciting fresh anger and recrimination among those Protestants who have vowed to keep the six northern counties of Northern Ireland a permanent part of the United Kingdom." [1]

We hear numerous apologies every day both personally and from those who are in the media spotlight. Athletes who admit to doping, politicians who do not fulfill their promises, public officials and celebrities who apologize for the hurt caused to their family because of their infidelity. But what are these apologies followed up with? Are the words enough?

No, words of apology must be followed up by deeds of action if they are to be given any credence. Deeds can be measured and consequences enforced. Words might have a profound symbolic significance as an outward expression, but only if they are also paired with an honest inward change.

The problem is, talk is cheap! Words cannot undo the deeds. Consider the boy who after getting in trouble for bullying the other kids, is told to take the feather pillow outside, shake out all the feathers in the blowing wind and then later go back and collect them all. The task is impossible; all of the feathers cannot be collected. Even words of "I'm sorry" cannot take back the hurt left behind by an action or lack of action.

On the other hand, words can begin a process of reconciliation as a part of the overall process of an inward change. By acknowledging our faults and our responsibility for our actions we see an attempt to reach out to those who we hurt. This is all a process of *teshuvah*.

Moses Maimonides defines that *teshuvah* must begin with the spoken word in a public forum as the beginning of returning to the right path.

When we consider the *vidui*, our confessional prayer, we do this together. We recite the words of confession in this public place, surrounded by our entire congregational family.

As we recall the words we just spoke, they are written in the first person plural. We say, "We all have committed offenses; together we confess these human sins." We ask, "For all these, O God of mercy, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement!"

O God, grant US! WE have sinned. WE have transgressed. WE have done wrong.

But these are words, what are our actions?

In *Hilchot Teshuvah*, it says:

"Transgressions against one's fellow, as for instance, if one wounds, curses or robs one's neighbor or commits similar wrongdoings, are never pardoned until the injured party has received due compensation and has also been appeased. Even though he has made compensation, the wrongdoer must also appease the one he has injured and ask his forgiveness. Even if a person only annoyed another in words, he has to pacify the latter and entreat him until he has obtained his forgiveness."

Words alone do not suffice. It is not enough to just say, "I'm sorry." There must be a change in behavior.

While we say to our children and we try to remind ourselves, "use your words." But these words are not enough unless they truly reflect the outward changes that we are going to make through our actions.

Tonight, we stand here together. If God is our Judge during these High Holy Days, we should ask, who will defend us? Should we defend ourselves? But it is said, the person who represents him or herself has a fool for a client. So who will defend us? Who will stand up for us before God the Judge?

In the Talmud, masechet Brachot: We read that God sent three leaders in our history to defend the Jewish People. First, there was Noah. God told Noah that the world was going to be destroyed for the transgressions of the people and that Noah and his family would be spared. However, it was his job to build an ark to rescue two of each animal. But Noah did not argue with God about the decision to destroy the world and everyone living there. Rather, he took it as a fait accompli and did not want to waste any energy arguing when he had enough to do with building an ark and gathering the animals.

Then there is Abraham. Again, God is not happy with the people of Sodom and Ghemorrah and announces to Abraham that he is going to destroy the two cities. But Abraham negotiates with God up until the point that God agrees to not destroy the cities if Abraham is able to find 10 people worthy of not destroying them. Unfortunately, Abraham is not able to save the cities, but does negotiate for his nephew's family.

And finally, there is Moses. God frees the Israelites from Egyptian slavery only to have them enter the desert and complain over and over again about not having the food or shelter they did in Egypt. Were conditions in the desert so terrible that the people longed to return to a life of slavery and persecution? How quickly did the Children of Israel forget the long days and nights of servitude to the Pharaoh and his court? How short is the memory of the feelings of the taskmaster's whip on their backs? Within in days of being free, the people are crying to be returned to Egypt where there seemed to be plenty of food. God, having heard enough of their complaints and frustrated with what God considered to be ungracious people, holds Mt. Sinai over their heads promising to destroy the people and get Moses another group whom he can lead.

Unlike Noah and similar to Abraham, Moses challenges God to not destroy the people. But unlike Abraham, Moses says, (loosely translated) 'Over my dead body will you destroy these people! Do you want the other nations to say, 'look at their God who takes them out of slavery only to destroy them in the desert!' God, you'll be the laughing stock of the world!' Moses stands up for the people, defends them and even puts himself in front so that God cannot choose Moses over the people but rather, says, God, it's all of us or none of us.

Tonight, we stand up for one another. Tonight, no one is left alone in front of God or the people to defend their actions. We stand here together and we commit together to recognize our faults and change our behaviors so that we can always improve ourselves over this next year.

A Hasidic master, the Rabbi of Levov taught: People cannot be redeemed until they recognize the flaws in their souls and try to mend them. A nation cannot be redeemed until it recognizes the flaws in its soul and tries to mend them. Whoever permits no recognition of his flaws, be it a person or nation, permits no redemption. We can be redeemed to the extent to which we recognize ourselves. (Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham *The Spirituality of Imperfection* pp.54)

We recognize ourselves as individuals and as a nation. We know that we have flaws and we know that we have mending to do. We know that this is not an easy task, but we know that we are not alone.

Rabbi Yaacov Haber, wrote a sermon entitled "The last Shabbat of the Year." In it he wrote:

The Talmud teaches, "If one sins and then is genuinely ashamed of what they did (*boshet*) that sin is forgiven!" Also, "anyone who swallows their pride and lets someone be right, even if they are wrong, will be forgiven for

all their sins!" God will forgive you even if you're wrong. And finally, we read in Proverbs: "With kindness and truth sins are forgiven."

Since we were children, we learned how to say I'm sorry. Tonight, we remember what that really means. We know that we do not always have to be right and that sometimes it is important to save the face of another so that they are not embarrassed or feel alone in their self-examination. And finally, it is with kindness, honesty and integrity that we stand here together, on this night, seeking forgiveness for not only our community but our world and ourselves.

May each of us continue to recognize who we are; our strengths and our deficiencies. May we learn to say I'm sorry but also show that we mean what we say. May we never feel alone in our quest to become better people and may we always strive to give strength to those who need our support in their quest for their own betterment. May we recognize the good that is in us and the good that is in another hence together, believing in ourselves and believing in those who stand with us tonight and believing in our world that truly is filled with blessings for today, tomorrow and generations yet to come.

[i] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/20/weekinreview/20jburns.html>

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