

Apology

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Beth Shir Sholom

My colleague, Rabbi David A. Nelson tells the story of two brothers who went to their rabbi to settle a longstanding feud. The rabbi got the two to reconcile their differences and shake hands. As they were about to leave, he asked each one to make a wish for the other in honor of the Jewish New Year. The first brother turned to the other and said, "I wish you what you wish me." At that, the second brother threw up his hands and said, "See, Rabbi, he's starting up again!" *Rabbi David A. Nelson is emeritus at Congregation Beth Shalom in Oak Park, MI*

For some reason, late last year I picked up an issue of *Martyrdom & Resistance*, the publication of Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust museum. It's a newspaper to which I subscribe but I never read. **Never.** As I was about to recycle the November/December issue I was a bit stunned to see an article entitled "We Have No Right to Forgive." The "article" was actually a speech by Ed Mosberg, a Holocaust survivor. Holocaust survivors are unique teachers when it comes to the notion of forgiveness because they **experienced** the cruelest coupling of technology and hatred in history. In the article Mr. Mosberg recounts a journey he and some of his family took to the concentration camps. About one camp he said:

Arriving prisoners were pushed into the gas chambers, where they were suffocated from engine and motor fumes. The bodies were burned on the stockpiles. The victims of genocide were adults, men, women, children, and infants. [This concentration camp] had become one of the largest cemeteries of the twentieth century in Europe. How can we forget or forgive the murder of our brothers and sisters in the gas chambers...? **To forget or forgive would mean to kill the victims a second time.** We could not prevent their first death; we must not allow them to be killed again. We have no right to forgive. Only the dead can forgive.

How can we forget or forgive the burning of synagogues, of holy books, and of Torah scrolls...? The Germans deprived me of my youth. My children do not know what it is to have an aunt, an uncle, a cousin, or a grandmother; for this I will not forgive, and for this I will never forget...

Forgiveness is a major theme of these High Holy Days. In our prayerbook we are constantly asking God for forgiveness for wrongdoings that are both individual and communal, between us and God and even those we commit between one another. Are you...a forgiver? If so, researchers have been found it more likely that you will have lower blood pressure, fewer depressive symptoms and better overall mental and physical health than those of us who do not forgive easily. In fact, findings suggest that failure to forgive may... boost a person's risk for heart disease, mental illness and other maladies. This is especially true past middle age. I'm a 57 year old Taurus. I'm doomed to be a wrinkled and withered unforgiving, curmudgeon, cynic and scrooge! But wait; there may be hope for me yet! Science has discovered that forgiveness is a skill that can be learned! Even more – forgiving and not forgiving the **self** can be even more physically influential than forgiving others. There may even be a genetic component to forgiving. Human survival up to this point may be partially the result of our ability to forgive. Forgiveness, some say, is at the core of our ability to compromise and weave solutions out of complexity.

Forgiveness is so important in our contemporary society that it even comes up in popular songs. Don Henley, realized that forgiveness is “The Heart of the Matter” ultimately proclaiming, in the final chorus of his song, that when faced with our own mortality, forgiveness is in our own best interest. He says:

I've been trying to get down
To the heart of the matter
Because the flesh will get weak
And the ashes will scatter
So I'm thinking about forgiveness...
Don Henley, "The Heart of the Matter"

All this begs a question: If we forgive for our own health and well-being or because it seems more cost-effective than paying high emotional interest on hateful feelings and grudges over a lifetime, or even because we're trying to prevent or forestall Armageddon – is that REALLY forgiveness at all?!

Psychoanalyst Jeanne Safer, who is the author of “Must We Forgive?” writes:

"The whole...12-step mentality has permeated our culture, and the emphasis on forgiveness is part of that. For many patients, forgiveness is a double-whammy: First someone [harms or wrongs] you, and then it's your fault you don't want to embrace them in heaven. I'm not against forgiveness; I'm against compulsory forgiveness with no choice. And I'm against 'forgiveness lite,' which keeps you from feeling the intensity of the experience, from deeply grappling with what's been done to you."

First, quickly, I did not use the words of Dr. Safer to slam 12-step programs or the philosophies of Alcoholics Anonymous! That program has a wonderful success rate and we are grateful for it and the health it has brought back to so many individuals and families. In fact, though, its two founders drew heavily upon and used Christian biblical texts to help one another out of alcoholism and into sobriety. There is nothing wrong with that. It is actually a testament to the effectiveness of AA and its 12-step cousins that the founders' ideas about forgiveness are so pervasive in our society. Still, the Christian notion of forgiveness, on its own and as presented in AA, is a notion of forgiveness, not the only one. Dr. Safer makes some sense as does, Linda Davis the Executive Director of Survivors of Incest Anonymous, who says:

"I always tell ministers, 'Don't use the F-word.' (that's "forgiveness" not "fundamental" or anything else!). Ms. Davis goes on)...Forgiveness is a bonus. You don't have to **get** there."

Missing from discussions that emphasize the need or the desire or the possibility of forgiveness between persons, nations or peoples is that true forgiveness cannot take place without true apology. Like forgiveness, apology is also something that can and, I believe, must be learned. In her article on apology published in Harper's Business Review, appropriately titled, "The Art of the Apology," Holly Weeks says that a good apology is built from three elements:

"Acknowledgment of a fault or an offense, regret for it, and responsibility for the offense."

Holly Weeks encourages offenders to apologize by using clear language and to apologize for the right thing (not some tangential or a lesser offense that is easier to put into words). Husbands know this reality well, when our wives ask, “Do you know why I’m angry/hurt/disappointed/insulted/compromised?” “Yes” is not the right answer, unless the husband really does know the offending action or words. “No” is not the right answer either because that lack of awareness of the offense exacerbates his culpability and makes any forthcoming apology lacking in sincerity because the offending husband was oblivious to committing the wrong in the first place.

Worse yet are apologies that use equivocation or qualification (by husbands or anyone else):

“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“I’m sorry you heard me incorrectly.”

Such non-apologies insult the injured party and actually place more burden on those who have been wronged. When wrongs need to be righted between individuals, it’s hard to get a track record on how apology or forgiveness is brought to the table, because, unless the discussions are part of some public record, the conversation usually happens in private. However, when such exchanges are between nations or peoples, there must be documentation. As such, we can more closely examine the language of reconciliation and apology. A helpful, very public example is the document issued by the Catholic Church, then under the papacy of Pope John Paul II, when, about a decade ago, the Church made a statement regarding the Holocaust that was hailed by many as an “apology” to the entire Jewish people. The statement, entitled, “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah,” is laudable on many counts. For example it is certainly an expression of reassurance, a commitment to battle anti-Semitism in the present and the future, and even, to a carefully limited degree, an acceptance of responsibility. The statement deserves our respect, our informed understanding and even our gratitude. It is not, however, an apology. If that were its intent, we might have expected it to be titled with the word “apology” included.

The statement begins with an introductory letter by Pope John Paul himself, in which he says:

On numerous occasions during my pontificate I have recalled with a sense of deep sorrow the sufferings of the Jewish people during the Second World War...

And the document goes on in much the same vein:

We deeply regret the errors and failures of those sons and daughters of the Church. We make our own what is said in the Second Vatican Council's declaration [*Nostra Aetate*](#), which unequivocally affirms: "The Church . . . mindful of her common patrimony with the Jewish people and motivated by the Gospel's spiritual love and by no political considerations, deplores the hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against Jews at any time and from any source".

Quoting John Paul, addressing the leaders of the Jewish community in Strasbourg in 1988 the Church expresses

the strongest condemnation of anti-Semitism and racism, which are opposed to the principles of Christianity." The Catholic Church therefore repudiates every persecution against a people or human group anywhere, at any time. She absolutely condemns all forms of genocide, as well as the racist ideologies which give rise to them. Looking back over this century, we are deeply saddened by the violence that has enveloped whole groups of peoples and nations.

Finally, attaching all mass killings, attempted genocides and ethnic cleansings to the Holocaust, the document says:

...the Catholic Church desires to express her deep sorrow for the failures of her sons and daughters in every age. This is an act of repentance ("*teshuva*"), since, as members of the Church, we are linked to the sins as well as to the merits of her children. The Church approaches with deep respect and great compassion the experience of extermination, the *Shoah*, suffered by the Jewish people during World War II. It is not a matter of mere words, but indeed of binding commitment.

Echoing the words of Holocaust survivor Ed Mosberg, whom I quoted earlier the statement reaches the conclusion that the Church

...would risk causing the victims of the most atrocious deaths to die again...

Therefore the Catholic Church commits itself and its followers to a passionate “desire” for justice to work to “ensure that evil does not prevail over good as it did for millions of the children of the Jewish people...”

To condemn the Holocaust does not apologize for it. Neither does repudiating the Holocaust or regretting the Holocaust. It doesn't even help to “express sorrow.” Holly Weeks, the “apology expert” I cited earlier says this specifically:

Don't think in terms of an “expression of regret.” Instead, your goal should be actually communicating your regret, that is, getting it across to the other person. Expression is one-sided—as though one were getting an apology off one's chest. Communication, however, occurs between people, and an apology needs to work well for the other person to be effective.

Perhaps this is the strongest argument for priests to marry. If they were, their spouses would have never let them get away with this dance around apology. Here's an apology for the Holocaust:

We are sorry! We were wrong! For centuries we allowed venomous messages of vitriol to pour from our pulpits. We stereotyped; we devil-mongered; we scape-goated; we were passively and actively violent against Jews and Judaism. We are sorry for what we did that perpetrated this evil and sorry for what we did not do to prevent it. We apologize.

That's it – no more and no less. There's no rejoinder of asking or even begging for forgiveness. What happens now is that the wronged party, in this case us, the Jewish people, are faced with whether or not we will accept this apology. The tradition says that we *must* accept an apology after it is offered three times sincerely, otherwise the onus shifts to us. ***We don't need to forgive in order to accept an apology.*** Forgiveness, we'll remember, is a bonus for

the forgiver and the apologizer. Here are some other timely apologies:

We are sorry for my selfish needs of power and wealth. I am sorry for sending our precious children off to fight in battles that cannot be won by military might. We are sorry for looking at the world in simplistic ways that say that there is such a thing as a military victory anymore (if there ever was!). We are sorry for lying in order to justify this violence and bequeathing this mess to generations to come. We are sorry for prostituting our religion, be it Islam, Christianity or anything else to justify the wholesale slaughter of others. We are sorry for not loving my enemy's children as much as our own. We are sorry for considering any human being to be expendable collateral damage or justifiable loss. We are sorry for not loving our own children so that they might LIVE for God instead of die for God. We are sorry for using fear of the other in order to enable us to label another human being as "alien." We are sorry for being so comfortable that we cannot feel the discomfort of others and do something to relieve that discomfort. We are sorry for using fear as a means to political ends. We are sorry for passively allowing some humans to be unhealthy so that we can be healthy, hungry so that we can eat, ignorant so that we can be learned and homeless so that I can be housed. To these we should all add our own, personal apologies and express them in our bedrooms, living rooms, on the freeways, at work, in line at the market and everywhere else we blame others for our own faults and lose our ability to apologize.

Is there a system that deals with the wrongdoer and the wronged without emphasizing the need for forgiveness? Yes, and that system, I believe, is Judaism. At this time of the year that system gives us three components to accomplish the process of apology: Teshuvah, Tefillah and Tzedakah, turning, contemplation and righteous giving. In order to turn from doing wrong, we must first admit it by saying we are sorry. Only then can we have the content upon which we can contemplate and meditate. However, we do not meditate for its own sake. We meditate in order to **do** something right about what we've done wrong. Asking for forgiveness is not part of the picture; unless God forgives. It's certainly not God's responsibility to forgive us for things we've done to each other! But I'm not so sure if God does forgive and I'm not sure that's a burden or an expectation to put on God any more than it is on those we've

wronged. Perhaps the best for which we can hope is that God accepts our apologies.