



Yom Kippur d'var Kol Nidre – Sept. 24, 2023/5784

By Tova Mirvis

I'm sorry if you felt hurt.

I'm sorry if you misconstrued my actions in a way that caused you distress.

I regret to inform you that inadvertently, mistakes were made -- I thank you for your patience.

Or, to quote the musical *Six*: "I'm sorry not sorry for what I said."

These attempts at apology would surely attract the attention of the website *Sorry Watch*. Established by writers Susan McCarthy and Marjorie Ingall, the site's mission is to "analyze apologies in the news, history and culture. Was that a terrible apology? We say why." Among the offenses they note are "Apologies that are really self-defense... Apologies worse than the original insult. Apologies so bad people should apologize for them."

While the particular apologies dissected on *Sorry Watch* vary in multiple ways, what many of them have in common is a desire to close down the problem as fast as possible. The people issuing these apologies are intent on getting away intact. The bad apology is like a getaway car in which to mount an escape.

A good apology though, according to *Sorry Watch*, does all or most of the following:

1. "Use the words "I'm sorry" or "I apologize." ("Regret" is not apology!)
2. Say specifically what you're sorry FOR.
3. Show you understand why the thing you said or did was BAD.
4. Be VEEERY CAAAREFUL if you want to provide explanation; don't let it shade into excuse.
5. Explain the actions you're taking to insure this won't happen again.
6. Can you make reparations? Make reparations."

This is certainly good advice for constructing an apology, which we would all do well to follow.

And yet -- even with the most well-crafted apology, there is no formula for forgiveness.

While an apology is a specific action, forgiveness can be an unwieldy and unpredictable process. We craves stories in which pain is healed, closure achieved, yet sometimes, even after the best of apologies, the rupture persists. Sometimes even after forgiveness is officially granted, the relationship isn't the same -- how many of us know the feeling of having accepted an apology yet remaining quietly hurt. Maybe we act as though everything is fine but now we are careful with what we say, excruciatingly aware of the need to mind the gap.

If a bad apology is characterized by the urge to shut things down, I think that genuine forgiveness can more likely be achieved by a willingness to open things up -- to lay bare the underlying tensions, to excavate the layers. Rather than trying to erase the messiness, the path toward forgiveness often requires us to sink deeper inside that messiness: why did this hurt the way it did and what is this really about and what past wounds of mine and yours did this land upon?

One of the motifs of the High Holiday season is that when God forgives us, the repair is complete -- no trace of any wrongdoing is left behind. The process of teshuvah is likened to the repair of a shattered vase: the power of God's forgiveness is so great that any cracks and chips once present are rendered entirely invisible.

A similar image of perfect restoration is found in the description of the Yom Kipper Temple Service. Under the direction of the Cohen Gadol (the high priest) a red thread would turn white if the nation properly repented. The cleansing was absolute, with no sign of the earlier stain remaining.

In the human realm, alas, it is rarely so clean. Everything bears its scars, our bodies, our psyches, the physical world around us. When we forgive or are forgiven by our fellow humans, we still see the fractured lines and the persistent stains.

God's perfect forgiveness is generally depicted as the grander sort. But when it comes to forgiveness between people, maybe the idea of perfect repair is not what we ought to aspire to -- maybe a desire for that can actually impede the process of forgiveness.

When we hide our fractured lines and display only our perfections -- everyone is great and everything is wonderful -- we close ourselves off. We all do this sometimes for a variety of reasons, among them fear and privacy and discretion. But there is a cost in doing so, for each other and for ourselves. By exhibiting only our smooth facades and unblemished selves, we leave no point of entry. If the crack is where the light gets in, as Leonard Cohen famously wrote, it is also where forgiveness is allowed to take root.

When we do feel safe enough to reveal our cracked selves, we create space to unspool the larger stories we each hold. We often hear the aphorism "everyone is fighting a battle we can't see" -- a reminder that in every interaction, there are so many stories and needs and histories buzzing about. In a now famous speech at Kenyon College's commencement called *This is Water*, the writer David Foster Wallace challenged graduates to undo their default settings of regarding themselves as being at the center of the universe -- a belief he says is "hard-wired into our boards at birth," and open themselves to the vast array of possibilities at play in any scenario.

He began by describing the daily slog that will await many of these graduates, work and traffic and long lines at grocery stores:

"But most days," he writes "if you're aware enough to give yourself a choice, you can choose to look differently at the lady who just screamed at her kid in the checkout line. Maybe she's been up three straight nights holding the hand of a husband who is dying of bone cancer or maybe this very lady is the clerk at the Motor Vehicles department who just yesterday helped your spouse resolve a nightmarish red-tape problem through some small act of bureaucratic kindness. Of course, none of this is likely, but it's also not impossible. It just depends what you want to

consider. If you're automatically sure that you know what reality is, and you are operating on your default setting, then you, like me, probably won't consider possibilities that aren't annoying and miserable. But if you really learn how to pay attention... it will be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down," he concludes.

We can strive to enact this forgiving mindset not just in line at the grocery store but of course with our family and friends. I'm not sure if it's easier or harder when it's the people close to us, where maybe we think we know all the inner battles at play. And it can be exhausting and disorienting to be swept along on the current of other people's experiences, so we often cling to our own versions, as if they are life rafts. We guard and protect, we confidently proclaim *I would never think that, I would never do that* -- sentences that, like the bad apology, are intent on closing things off.

Sometimes the path into this more empathic way of being can be as simple as asking questions instead of making declarative statements. What don't I know about the friend before me? What does it feel like to be them? It asks us to strive for an imaginative kind of empathy, an almost playful, gentle curiosity. We might make a point of asking ourselves: Who is afraid and who is anxious and who is in physical pain and who is lonely and who is afraid for their job and who has a child that is struggling and who is grappling with something so far from my own experience that I cannot begin to imagine it?

It's easier to make the effort toward this more compassionate stance when the stories we discover are ones we naturally feel sympathy for. It's harder when what we ask ourselves to imagine comes into conflict with what we hold dear. Beyond whatever might have happened in each our private realms this year, on a public level, this year has offered oh so many places to feel the brokenness of the world and the inexplicability of people and their actions.

In an essay in *The Guardian*, the writer George Saunders describes trying to imagine his way into the minds of the January 6th capital protesters, not because he has sympathy with their cause but because he has none.

In order to forge some kind of understanding of the perpetrators, he makes use of a tactic he employs as a fiction writer. Saunders describes writing a short story featuring a sexist, xenophobic character. In his initial draft, the character is only an assemblage of his flaws but he remains flat on the page. Then, Saunders remembers that the way to make a character real is to make him more vulnerable -- not to excuse what wrongs he commits but to give him the roundness and richness that all people have. And it's not just any vulnerability Saunders chooses for the character but one of his own flaws, and in doing so, he brings the character to life.

He writes: "Could I, approximately, know the people in that crowd that rushed into the Capitol? Of course. Does that tendency -- to fail to know propaganda when I see it, and react to it with violence -- exist in me too? I know for a fact that it does. Why is this more comforting than terrifying? Well, because it implies that these people are not beyond my understanding, nor your understanding, and that no one is," he writes.

There are hard parts about this idea -- because surely there are people and situations that remain across a vast gap of unfathomability. Because this stance can feel like we are being asked to ignore or excuse or condone, because we are afraid of diving into a sea of moral relativity, of losing any sense of moral compass, of forgoing the need to speak out against injustice.

Acknowledging that he's "not going to get too dreamy about this idea" Saunders writes: "This idea of existing on a continuum doesn't mean "we are all good" or we are all brothers and sisters, exactly the same or all is forgiven no matter what you do, but rather something like: wherever you are on the human continuum I can know you, approximately. I'm going to proceed on that basis: whatever tendencies are large in you must be here somewhere, perhaps smaller and /or nascent in me," he concludes.

To imagine is not to agree. To find that human connection, however remote, is not to excuse or approve. Maybe forgiveness is no longer the right word anymore for what this is -- maybe it's to be willing to look for a fuller picture whenever we can, to live in a forgiving way as we interact with the world, to make a conscious decision to be open rather than closed.

And in doing so, not only do our relations with other people change but our relationships with ourselves. In creating more space for another person, we simultaneously create more room for our own shortcomings and mistakes and misdeeds. There is more room inside us to feel compassion for the wounds we carry and the burdens we bear.

While enacting this kind of thinking is surely a lifelong process, for the next 25 hours, we bring our heightened attention to the possibility of transformation. There are two particular places in the Yom Kipper davening that come to mind for me as places to cultivate this way of being.

We have just recited the Kol Nidrei prayers where we release ourselves from our oaths and vows. Even with its legalistic underpinnings and intentions, Kol Nidrei ushers us into a more fluid way of thinking, modeling a forgiving mindset in which we make space for fallibility and failure and regret and reconsideration. We might have bound ourselves with words but we can unbind ourselves in the same way. We recognize that yes, we vowed to take a certain path and yet for so many different reasons, it didn't quite work out that way. And yes, this coming year, we will likely fall short again and yes, we -- cracked and chipped and stained in innumerable ways -- will try again.

The other place where we have an opportunity to open ourselves into the complexity of our experiences is in the *Al Chate* prayer where we enumerate the various sins we have committed.

Many of us probably recite this prayer with a degree of familiarity that can obscure what is startling about this recitation of sins: in public, we present not our perfected facades, but offer glimpses of our flawed selves. Yes we do it in the prescribed language, and yes we do it in the plural where there is space to hide -- it's not like going around and everyone publicly naming their years' top three sins. But even so. If you ever glance around the room during this part of the service, there is something uniquely vulnerable about the moment -- an intimacy to this shared confrontation of our own fallibility.

It brings to mind a saying I've heard over the years, and which is attributed to everyone from St. Augustine to Dear Abby - that church is not a hotel for saints but a hospital for sinners. Substitute in the word shul, or minyan, and it's a reminder that we can strive to create communities where we can bring our full and often cracked selves, and where we meet those equally cracked selves assembled beside us with stances of understanding and compassion.

In that spirit, what if we choose to see the *al chates* as the beginning of sentences instead of completed ones -- as prompts that invites us to fill in the rest of a story -- not as excuses to wiggle out of taking responsibility for our actions but as contexts that round them out?

What if we glance around the room as we recite the prayer - dare we make eye contact - in recognition of the power of confessing in the presence of one another - not in judgement, but in vulnerability and understanding of the stories we each carry?

What if we use this prayer as an opportunity to see each other more fully, more openly, as we forge pathways of forgiveness for each other and for ourselves?