Art and Power of Apology

Temple B'nai Shalom

Braintree, Massachusetts

Rabbi Van Lanckton

March 18, 2017

We all know the first act of creation in Genesis, don't we?

Light.

God said, "Let there be light. And there was light."

But the rabbis of the Talmud had a different idea about creation.

I learned this idea in my very first class in rabbinical school. I will remember that class always.

The school was brand new. The date was August 26, 2003. We received instructions to come to Hebrew College that evening. The students did not yet know each other.

Rabbi Art Green, then the Dean of this new school, began that first class by distributing a page of Talmud. He asked us to study it together in pairs.

This was my first exposure to the concept of hevruta, pairs of students learning together. It was also the first time I had studied a page of Talmud entirely in Hebrew.

I was terrified.

Here is the beginning of the passage Rabbi Green asked us to study:

Shiva devarim nira'u kodem sheh nivra ha'olam. Eilu hen: Torah, ut'shuvah . . .

After a lot of joint effort, we puzzled out what this meant in English:

> Seven things were created before the creation of the world. These are they: Torah, and repentance . . . [and then five more].

For the rabbis, the world could not exist without these seven things. Before there was anything else, there had to be Torah, a set of rules to live by, and there had to be teshuvah, repentance, the capacity to apologize and make amends for doing the wrong thing.

As this Talmudic wisdom suggests, to apologize is the highest mitzvah.

We know this also because the duty to make amends, to apologize and correct the harm we've caused, is the central theme of the highest of the High Holy Days, Yom Kippur.

But, all too often, we refuse to apologize or, when we do apologize, we do it clumsily and defensively.

There is a right way and a wrong way to apologize.

Jane Brody offers us advice on how to apologize and how not to apologize.

Brody is the Personal Health columnist for The New York Times. Her column is published in Science Times every Tuesday. She lectures frequently on issues relating to health and wellness. She has written more than a dozen books, including two best-sellers, *Jane Brody's Nutrition Book* and *Jane Brody's Good Food Book*.

Alice and I trust Jane Brody.

A month ago, Brody wrote an article in her column. It was called, "The Right Way to Say, 'I'm Sorry.'"

She says, When the words "I'm sorry" are most needed, they can be the hardest ones to utter. Even when we offer an apology with good intentions, our apology can be undermined by the way we word it. A poorly worded apology can result in lasting anger and antagonism.

Brody provides four valuable lessons for how to apologize. She relies on a book called "Why Won't You Apologize?" by psychologist Harriet Lerner.

First lesson: do not explain your behavior while apologizing. Lerner advises that apologies followed by rationalizations are "never satisfying" and can even be harmful.

"When 'but' is tagged on to an apology," it's an excuse that counters the sincerity of the apology. The best apologies are short. They don't include explanations that can undo them.

Second lesson: do not ask for forgiveness while apologizing. The offended party may accept a sincere apology, but may not be ready to forgive. Forgiveness, if it comes at all, may depend on a demonstration that you will not repeat the offense.

"It's not our place to tell anyone to forgive or not to forgive," Lerner said in an interview. She disputes popular thinking that failing to forgive is bad for one's health and can lead to a life mired in bitterness and hate.

"There is no one path to healing," she said. "There are many roads to letting go of corrosive emotions without forgiving, like therapy, meditation, medication, even swimming."

Hardest of all, Lerner said, is to forgive a non-apologetic offender. Brody cites the case of her aunt. Brody loved her aunt dearly. Her aunt served as Brody's second mother after Brody's mother died.

Brody was raised Jewish and then married a Christian. Brody's aunt refused to come to the wedding. She never apologized for the intense hurt her absence caused. Brody made several attempts to restore the relationship, but her aunt always managed to deflect them. Today, more than half a century later, Brody cannot forgive her.

Third lesson: The focus of an apology should be on what the offender has said or done, not on the person's reaction to it. Saying "I'm sorry you feel that way" shifts the focus away from the person who is supposedly apologizing and turns "I'm sorry" into "I'm not really sorry at all."

Offering an apology is an admission of guilt that leaves people vulnerable. There's no guarantee as to how it will be received. It is the prerogative of the injured party to reject an apology, even when you offer it sincerely. The person may feel that your offense was so enormous that it is impossible to accept your apology.

Fourth lesson: We need to listen to the hurt party without defensiveness. Such open listening is at the heart of offering a sincere apology. Lerner urges us, when we offer an apology, not to "interrupt, argue, refute, or correct facts, or bring up our own criticisms and complaints."

Lerner views apology as "central to health, both physical and emotional. 'I'm sorry' are the two most healing words in the English language. The courage to apologize wisely and well is not just a gift to the injured person, who can then feel soothed and released from obsessive recriminations, bitterness and corrosive anger. It's also a gift to one's own health, bestowing self-respect, integrity and maturity — an ability to take a clear-eyed look at how our behavior affects others and to assume responsibility for acting at another person's expense."

Another expert on apologies, Marjorie Ingall, wrote a column in Tablet magazine called "How to Say You're Sorry."

Ingall writes a blog called SorryWatch. Her essays on that site applaud good apologies (and analyzes what makes them good) and criticizes bad apologies (and examines what makes them terrible). She and her co-writer, Susan McCarthy, examine apologies in politics, sports, pop culture, literature, and history. They look at research on effective and ineffective apologies.

Ingall says the elements of good apologies are not difficult. She claims that Maimonides, the 12th-century sage, said that true repentance requires humility, remorse, forbearance, and reparation.

I've seen that claim about Maimonides often, but have not found its source. Still, it's good advice.

To apologize properly, you must

- Own the offense, even if it makes you uncomfortable.
- Name your sin, even if it makes you squirm.
- Use the first person, and avoid the passive voice. Say, "I'm sorry I kicked your Pomeranian," not "I'm sorry your dog got hurt."
- Acknowledge the impact of what you did.
- Be real, open and non-defensive.

And when you've said your piece, let the other person speak. Even if the response is clipped and abrupt, if it is an acceptance of your apology, say, "Thank you." If the injured person remains mad, you will just have to sit with that for a while.

Maimonides said that if your first apology is not accepted, you must try twice more. If after that the person will not forgive you, you are free to stop trying.

Finally, you must make reparations. Pay for the broken window or the dry cleaning, tell everyone in the office that the error was yours and not your underling's, donate to the wronged party's favorite charity, educate yourself if your mistake was an indication of your cluelessness about other cultures, races, or religions. In your heart of hearts, you know what to do to try to make things right. Apologizing well requires both humility and bravery.

Ingall also has advice for what to avoid when apologizing.

Always say "I'm sorry that." Do not say "I'm sorry if."

Don't be "sorry <u>if</u>" anyone was hurt by your words or actions. Be sorry <u>that</u> you were hurtful. Own it. The "if" adds a shadow of doubt—hey, maybe you didn't say or do anything nasty after all! "If" is cowardly; "that" takes responsibility.

Don't make excuses. Benjamin Franklin said, "Never ruin an apology with an excuse."

Don't say, "I'm sorry about that, but there's a lot going on in my life" or "I was exhausted." Those claims diffuse responsibility. They are nothing but excuses.

Also avoid the unapologetic apology Ingall calls "the case of the missing nouns." She says, "In a lot of public apologies, the politician or celebrity never actually says what he did wrong. He apologizes for "what happened" or "the events of last week." Sometimes he uses the passive voice, as in "unfortunate things were said" or

"mistakes were made." To apologize well, you must name the sin. How else can you show that you understand the harm and won't repeat it?

Never say, while apologizing, "Let's move forward." Ban this phrase from your apologies. It's code for "Let's forget this ever happened." You have no right to make that request; the person you wronged gets to decide it's time to move on. The sinner doesn't have the prerogative to rush the forgiveness process.

Bad apologies are cagey, ungenerous, grudging attempts to avoid taking full responsibility for whatever you're supposedly apologizing for.

Good apologies are about stepping up. Sometimes that means apologizing even if you feel you are the wronged party. A good apology, even if you believe the other party was also in the wrong, serves the value of "shalom bayit"- "peace in the house." In a relationship we value, apologizing helps preserve the relationship, which is far more important than sorting out degrees of blame.

Apologizing does not always mean that you are wrong and the other person is right. It just means that you value your relationship more than your ego.

A good apology means laying yourself bare. It means putting yourself in the other person's position.

In short, it's not about you.

Sinning is easy; apologizing is hard.

Apologizing to the one we have hurt restores to that person dignity and honor. Apologizing also permits us to be imperfect and provides a way to heal a relationship. I hope we can continue to grow in our ability to avoid hurting one another and to offer sincere apologies when we fall short.