

HHTAY2018- Kol Nidre Sermon

I AM SORRY- I FORGIVE YOU- I LOVE YOU-three sets of little words with huge meaning.

I AM SORRY.

QUOTES (from Chicago Tribune, 1/20/04) from a sermon that I gave more than 20 years ago.

When Nixon resigned in 1974, he said, “I regret deeply any injuries that may have been done in the course of events that led to this decision.”

Bill Clinton in the Lewinsky affair resisted for months before delivering an apology in September 1998.

The 9/11 Panel: Richard Clarke apologized to the victims’ families and to America for not doing enough. Condoleezza Rice countered his apology with remorse and regret but without apologizing.

What’s wrong with this picture? Either there is no apology or it is quite belated.

The genuine, unadulterated, unqualified apology is becoming, as the Tribune said several years ago, “as rare as a Faberge egg.” So rare that a minister at a recent wedding instructed the couple to practice these words and then led the entire congregation in reciting them: “I was wrong, I am sorry, forgive me.” I promise to give you some very recent examples which reaffirm that the Tribune was correct then, and 20 years later it is even worse.

I am reminded of Eric Segal’s famous but misguided words in the book Love Story, also of many years ago: “Love means never having to say you’re sorry. He could only be right in a world where the other person is always more important than the self. That unfortunately is not true today, but that would be another sermon.

Moreover, saying “I am sorry” is more than these three words. As Billy Crystal said in the movie “Analyze Tq3hat” about grieving for his father, “it’s a process.” This suggests that an authentic apology is a process which has several steps and is what Judaism requires. What better time of year to talk about this than now, a time as well especially when an apology has become even rarer than a Faberge Egg?

The first step is internal and involves humbling yourself. Judaism places great value on humility which in our world today has been replaced by entitlement. The Ethics of the Fathers, Talmud: “Be extremely humble, for the hope of humanity is but a worm.” And in the Siddur, at the end of every Amidah: “May my spirit be as dust before all.” In other words a healthy dose of self-doubt and insecurity never hurt anyone and is necessary for the next step before an apology is possible. You must take responsibility for what you did and admit to yourself that you are wrong.

Then and only then are you ready to go to the offended party which is a must. You could stay in the synagogue for every minute of every HH service and say “Al Chet” and “Ashamnu” over and over again. These prayers are only about you and God; You must do what Maimonides requires:

“Teshuvah and Yom Kippur only atone for sins between man and God.... However, sins between man and man....will never be forgiven until he gives his colleague what he owes him and apologizes. It must be emphasized that even if a person restores the money to the person he wronged, he must apologize and ask him to forgive him.”

“Even if a person only upset a colleague by saying certain things (words do hurt), he must apologize and approach him repeatedly until he forgives him.” (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva, ch.2)

Truly caring about a fellow human being really means being ready to say I’m sorry without qualifications, conditions, or explanations.

Here are some current examples of inauthentic apologies. I don’t think I have to fill you in on Roseanne Barr’s racist remarks after which she tweeted: “It was 2 in the morning and I was Ambien tweeting.” (Sanofi, the maker of Ambien, posted its own tweet to set the record straight: “While all pharmaceutical treatments have side effects,” it read, “racism is not a side effect of any Sanofi medication.” Margaret Renki, NYT, 6/4/18 goes on to add Brian Williams who after being caught in a big lie said, “I am sorry for what happened. As though it had simply befallen him, independent of his own volition.

And in light of the prevalence of men engaging in sexual harassment, I bring you the case of Ari Shavit, the Israeli author of a huge best seller My Promised Land. I read to you a portion of another NY Times article by his victim Danielle Berrin, who brings us yet another inauthentic “apology” along with yet another step she considers important as a Jew.

QUOTE: NY Times, Op-Ed, 12/22/17: "In my case I heard from Mr. Shavit once. In the midst of the media frenzy following publication of my story, he sent an email extending a "deep apology" while also making it clear he had no idea what he was apologizing for. "I sincerely believed my advances were well received," he wrote. Before I had a chance to respond, Mr. Shavit issued an obtuse and offensive public apology claiming our meeting had elements of "courtship". It did not.

Genuine repentance requires a combination of accountability and sensitivity, selflessness and self-awareness. Men like Mr. Shavit would do well to remember that a true apology would not make excuses or justify bad behavior but would take full responsibility for what went wrong.

While prayer, "tefillah," is also a key component of atonement in Judaism, it is a private and personal affair between human beings and God, so I won't suggest it for everyone. I do believe, however, that prayer is meaningless if not married to moral action.

The third element of true return is "Tzedakah" often translated as "charity," but it comes from the Hebrew root of the word "righteousness." Judaism is not alone in reminding us that those who have hurt others redeem themselves through giving- perhaps the most quantifiable aspect of atonement. A complete rehabilitation should include a commitment of time and money to a cause that uplifts and empowers those in need. Engaging in a reasonable period of community service could help inculcate humility and selflessness in those who once thought only of themselves."

But what is one to do with an inauthentic apology or if an apology of any kind never comes? This brings to me the third of my small words with big meaning- "forgive."

I FORGIVE YOU.

Quote: "Our coffee cups were long empty and still my companion talked on about her mother-how she'd never praised her, never told her she was special, and never congratulated her for anything. All my life I've lacked self-confidence because of her," my guest said, tears brimming in her eyes. Sad? Well, yes, I suppose so but the woman in tears was 83 years old and her mother had been dead for more than forty years." ("Still Blaming Mom and Dad? Grow Up" from Woman's Day)

Here no apology was ever going to be forthcoming. What is the injured party to do with her unresolved feelings, made up largely of anger?

Here is an illustrative story: "One of my teachers had each of us bring a clear plastic bag and a sack of potatoes. For every person we'd refuse refused to forgive in our life's experience, we chose a potato, wrote on it the name and date, and put it in the plastic bag. Some of our bags were quite heavy. We were then told to carry this bag with us everywhere for one week, putting it beside our bed at night, on the car seat when driving, next to our desk at work. The hassle of lugging this around with us made it clear what a weight we were carrying around spiritually, and how we had to pay attention to it all the time in order not to forget and keep leaving it in embarrassing places. Naturally, the condition of the potatoes deteriorated to a nasty slime. This was a great metaphor for the price we pay for keeping our pain and negativity, how our anger was corroding our own insides. Too often we think of forgiveness as a gift to the other person, but it is clearly a gift to ourselves. (Source unknown)

Harold Kushner sums it all up: "We nurture grievances because that makes us feel morally superior, Withholding forgiveness gives a sense of power, often power over someone who otherwise leaves us feeling powerless. The only power we have over them is the power to remain angry at them. At some level, we enjoy the role of being the long-suffering, aggrieved party." (How Good do we have to Be, p. 105)

But if in the short term one enjoys feeling power and superiority, and nurturing the anger, the long-term effect is not as enjoyable as this story indicates. By the way, asking for an apology and getting does not work to well either.

Again, the Talmud underscores my point, as does Maimonides. "The sages of the Talmud offer a fascinating psychological insight. They say that the normal life span of a quarrel is two or three days. If a person hurts or offends you, you are entitled to be upset with him for that long. (We are talking about routine arguments and misunderstandings here, not major offenses.) If the bitter feelings extend into the fourth day it is because you are choosing to hold onto them. You are nursing the grievance, keeping it on artificial life support, instead of letting it die a natural death." (Kushner, *ibid.*, p.106)

And Maimonides, writing almost a thousand years ago said: "...the person who refused to grant forgiveness is then the one considered the sinner. (Mishneh Torah, *ibid.*)

Also Maimonides: “it is forbidden to be cruel and refuse to be appeased. Rather he should be easily pacified but hard to anger. When the person who wronged him asks for forgiveness, he should forgive with a complete heart and a willing spirit. Even if he aggravated and wronged him severely, he should not seek revenge or bear a grudge.” (ibid, 2:10)

Letting go of anger, an emotion which is so powerful, is so hard to do, but we must, for our own sakes, if not for others.

Not everything in life is black and white. There is a lot of gray. There are mitigating circumstances. There is something called “the benefit of the doubt.” Be more forgiving. Sometimes you must forgive even before you receive an apology, sometimes even if you never receive an apology.

These days are meant to be a start and an annual catch-up or make-up test, if you will, an opportunity to do what must be a daily process: I AM SORRY, I FORGIVE YOU.

The greatest consequence of not being able to say simple but powerful words- I AM SORRY, I FORGIVE YOU and what is most tragic for ourselves and the well-being of the world - is that you may have as a consequence great difficulty in saying the most important three words of all:

I LOVE YOU.

I am not going to elaborate on “Love” but offer you a real life example of what happens when you can’t say these words, regardless of the reason.

Sometimes, it’s not what you say it’s what you don’t say.

Here is a story told by a distinguished colleague, Rabbi Jack Reimer.

Quote: “We all know how important it is to say I love you. But sometimes we don’t say it enough. The service was over, and the only people left at the cemetery were the rabbi and the mourning husband. The husband remained at the grave for a long while; finally the rabbi approached him. “The service is long over and it’s time to leave,” he said. The man waved him away. “You don’t understand. I loved my wife.” “I am sure you did”, said the rabbi. “But you have been here a very long time. You should go now.” Again the husband said, “You don’t understand. I loved my wife.” Once more the rabbi urged him to leave. “But

you don't understand," the man told him. "I loved my wife- and once I almost told her.

When Jack Reimer told the story, he added, "Can you imagine the sense of shame if you have to stand at a grave and bid farewell, and then realize when you could have said, when you should have said when there was still time? Can you imagine having to live the rest of your life with the knowledge that you loved someone and that "once you almost told her?"

So remember these words:

I AM SORRY.

I FORGIVE YOU.

I LOVE YOU.