

Yom Kippur 5778

What is the hardest thing in the world? Not the worst thing – there are evils aplenty to nominate in that category, in our personal lives as well as on the world stage – but the hardest. When we consider the challenges that life throws at us – money problems, health problems, threats against Jews in Israel and around the world – what is the one thing that we find the most difficult to cope with? In my experience, as difficult as those things are, and a hundred others, the hardest thing in the world is to admit fault, out loud, to the face of the person that fault injured. “I did something wrong to you; I’m sorry; please forgive me” may be the most difficult sentence a person can utter, which explains why it is so rare.

In the Mishnah, the earliest stratum of rabbinic literature, we learn that transgressions between us and God are forgiven by this day. By coming before God and truly apologizing, God forgives us. But the same tradition teaches that transgressions between one person and another are never forgiven by God until we secure forgiveness from the other person first. It is not that God *will not* forgive us; God *cannot* forgive us until we make things right with those whom we have wronged. How did the early sages know this to be true? This theology of apology is found nowhere in the Hebrew Bible. There, Yom Kippur is indeed a day of atoning for sins, but the mechanism laid out in the Mishnah of apology to others preceding God’s forgiveness seems to be a rabbinic innovation.

It’s a pretty good one. If we recall that the Torah reading for this day, a description of the animal sacrifices in the ancient Temple, was historical memory by the end of the first century, we begin to see the genius of the early rabbis at work. A teacher of mine in college once asked the class ‘Who was it that gave the rabbis the authority to make these kinds of decisions?’ He

then answered his own question: ‘They just took it.’ And, having taken it, they did not rest there; they energetically reinvented the religion that had until just recently focused on sacrifice and tithing, shifting its center to study and prayer. The fact that we are sitting in this room today, 1900 years later, is proof of their success. If Judaism was no longer about sacrifices, what was it? The rabbis of the first and second centuries insisted that the values of Torah, as well as its holiday cycle and its non-Temple rituals, remained vital to our relationship with God.

So on the High Holidays, two shifts occurred: Instead of sacrificing animals, we would now read the sections of the Torah that describe sacrificing them. And, instead of the sacrifices atoning to God for our sins, prayer would serve the same function. Those are simple acts of substitution, replacing one set of rituals with another. But here is where the rabbis get inventive: By teaching that Yom Kippur is not only about apologizing to God, but also to each other, and that God cannot forgive us until we forgive each other, the rabbis fully inhabit their roles as both conservators of tradition and radical reformers of it. Retaining the basic outline of the holiday, they infuse it with new content. They did so consistently, in all areas of Jewish life, and here the effect is a dramatic reimagining of Yom Kippur as a day of interpersonal healing and personal growth.

If the rabbis had merely substituted prayer and Torah reading for the sacrifices, and left the meaning of this day alone, we would be left where many people think things are right now: A long, boring service that re-enacts ancient beliefs about God without shedding one bit of light on our own lives. But the rabbis can never leave things alone. Picking up on the Torah’s themes of love, loyalty and concern for the downtrodden, its championing of justice, fairness and righteous behavior, the rabbis were building on a solid foundation, and adding in the idea of personal

obligation to each other, they signaled the overall approach that rabbinic Judaism would now take.

Why won't God forgive us for our sins against each other until we apologize to each other? Why did the rabbis turn Yom Kippur into an exercise in saying the hardest word? As part of their overall designs of democratizing Judaism, decentralizing it, making it portable for a now wandering people, they also personalized it. If Judaism was going to mean anything after the Temple fell, it would still mean living in relation to both God and other people, but by a new means. Instead of going through the Temple to receive God's forgiveness, we would now go through other people. Instead of giving God a goat, we say we are sorry to each other. The goat thing was much easier. Replacing sacrifice with interpersonal healing means that things got harder in order for them to become more meaningful. The fall of the Temple could have been the end of Judaism, but by shifting to a program of prayer and study, and to a theology of experiencing divine forgiveness through personal forgiveness, the rabbis saved Jewish culture and made it the personal religion it has remained ever since. They also burdened us with responsibilities, including the hard obligations of not just going through the motions. Ritual is supposed to give structure to ethics and personal responsibility, not take their place. Whether it is sacrifices or candle lighting or prayer on Yom Kippur, rituals devoid of ethical or relational content are empty and meaningless. The only issue for us today is whether we are satisfied with empty rituals or whether we are willing to make good on what they represent. When the rabbis started forcing us to apologize to each other or suffer not being forgiven by God, they make an astonishing claim: Do what is meaningful, and hard, or lose your relationship with God.

Here's a story about how hard it is to say "I'm sorry": For eight years, I had no contact with my oldest son, Aaron. The reason had little to do with him; his mother and I had been in engaged in an ugly legal battle for over a year, starting just after his eighteenth birthday and, when it was over, we lost contact. My other three kids continued to have contact with him, but he and I didn't. Why? I don't know. I was angry, I was busy, the longer it went on the harder it was to know what to say, so I said nothing. I couldn't even guess why he didn't call, but I didn't blame him. I should have kept in touch; that was my sin.

My hope was that, like so many things, reestablishing our relationship would be easier than I feared. Too often we imagine things to be far worse than they really are and, dreading facing them, we worsen them through inattention. Maybe he was angry, busy and put things off the same way I had, but yearned for a connection.

Last year, I wanted Yom Kippur to be a time of saying sorry for things that I had done or not done, for allowing my anger at his mother to stop me from being a father to him. It was time to take action and relieve the guilt and pain of inaction. But I didn't have an altar in Jerusalem to which I could bring my goat. I didn't even have a goat! I did have a phone and access to e-mail and texting. And this was not just an interpersonal matter; it was a moral, religious one. I was now willing to sacrifice my pride on the altar of my love. But would my offering be accepted, by my son and then by God? As it turns out, it was. Aaron and I reconciled, he visited us in Chicago, we attended the ceremony at which he received his master's degree. Things are better now, but it took my having enough humility to admit my fault to myself, and to him, and to persistently attempt to apologize. There are no guarantees for such apologies, except that not

apologizing will guarantee continued estrangement. I did teshuvah - admitting fault, apologizing, and changing the dynamic of our relationship - and was redeemed from my sins.

For the sin of pride, for the sin of anger, for the sin of laziness, for the sin of procrastination, for these and so many others we come together on this day to plead for forgiveness. But we will all remain unforgiven until we say “I’m sorry.” The discomfort we feel in getting to “I’m sorry” has much in common with the discomfort of getting to deep Jewish knowledge, to skilled Jewish living: it’s just easier not to. No one will know; no one will much care; what’s the difference? I still feel Jewish, in my own way. We let ourselves off much too easily.

The good news is that every day we each have a chance to engage in teshuvah; it is not a one-day window that Yom Kippur provides. This day is a dramatic reminder of the hardest thing to do, but if failing to complete the task all at once is no barrier to trying again tomorrow and the next day and the next. We all yearn for good relationships, for the pleasures of shared time together, for forgiveness, for transcendence. We want to rise above the pettiness that we are all prone to, and we can. We ache for depth of knowledge and experience, and it is there for the taking. But we have to change; we have to be different this year, to get those results. On any given day, we can make the call that will change our lives for the better. We can make things right with others; we can learn what we do not know, we can help and build and celebrate in ways that we have not. This year, let it be our prayer that we have the courage to say and do the hardest thing, so that we will merit the things that are most meaningful. Stepping up, we will be lifted up. Reaching out, we will grasp each other in love and, finding forgiveness there, we will also receive it from God. Gemar hatimah tovah; may you all be sealed in the Book of Life.