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Yom Kippur Sermon 5772
October 2011

Apologizing

For the past six years Stephen Colbert has performed a sketch during the High Holy Days which recently grabbed my attention. The audience and viewers hear a phone ring to the melody of *Hava Nagila*. Colbert reaches under his desk, grabs a white rotary phone with a blue *magen david* on the dial and places it next to his note pad and pen. The audience bursts into laughter. Colbert calls this phone the "Atone Phone" where Jews can dial 1-888-OOPS-JEW and apologize to Colbert himself about anything they've done to wrong him. Go ahead and call it when you get home. Believe it or not, it is for real. The "Atone Phone" is a Day of Repentance hotline that celebrities such as Larry King, Jon Stewart, Barry Manilow, and ordinary folks have called in their quest to own up to whatever they've done to Stephen Colbert. One of the funniest calls came from an anonymous middle-aged woman. She said, "I'm sorry. I'm not sure what I did, but I'm Jewish, so I must have done something."

I'd like to share a story with you that I heard a few years ago on [This American Life](#). In 1980 a man named Allan Bridge connected a phone line to his answering machine in his Manhattan apartment and listened to the calls that came in. These people who left messages found Bridge's number on posters taped to the walls of buildings around the city. They read: "Attention Criminals (Amateurs, Professionals, Blue Collar, White Collar). You have wronged people. It is to the people that you must apologize, not to the State, not to God. Get your misdeeds off your chest! Call Apology 212-255-2748." Initially, calls to the Apology Line were brief: I want to say I'm sorry to So-and-So for this and that. They eventually became weightier. Errant husbands called. Teenage bullies called. You could call and confess to anything and you'd be recorded. Or you could call and listen to other people's confessions. This line, unlike Colbert's "Atone Phone" was serious business.

Bridge came to be known as "Mr. Apology." He realized soon after his posters went up around town that his experiment was greater than he could have imagined. Callers became dependant on the Apology Line. A community of callers and listeners developed. Bridge received so many calls that eventually he published a magazine called "Apology," which included transcripts from his answering machine.

In a 1993 *New Yorker* article, titled "The Confession," which highlighted the Apology Line, Bridge commented that in apologizing, someone is "making an attempt to turn his life into a moral tale. A beginning, a middle, and an end; I did this, I learned this, and the moral is this. A confession becomes a story."

Every year we tell our stories. We come together as a community on this day, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement and confess our transgressions to God. Now, Yom Kippur is not about what we did to each other. That's over and done with. We've already had our window to seek and grant forgiveness from others. That's what the last ten days were, and actually, that's what the whole year is for. So then the

question is; have we done it? Have we actually carved out the time to seek forgiveness from others? Have we made a concerted effort to say "I'm sorry" to all those people that deserve our apologies? I suspect the answer is no.

Growing up in San Francisco, Yom Kippur was the holiday when all the seats in my synagogue's sanctuary were filled. It was the day when all of the 1200 light bulbs were shining bright (we all counted them, believe me). It was the day when our cantor theatrically entered the prayer space singing *Kol Nidre* as he walked down the long red center aisle to the bima. It was the day when I ran into friends and family friends I hadn't seen in some time. It was the day when we didn't eat! And it was the day when my family always had people over for the "break-fast" meal. Rarely was it the day when I granted someone forgiveness or said sorry myself. Not because I've got a stone heart, but because it just didn't happen. And I don't recall anyone ever stopping my parents (who are here today) on their way in or out of the temple to apologize for something they said or did. And they don't remember either.

I can't imagine the times have changed dramatically that Jews today commit themselves wholeheartedly to this custom of seeking and granting forgiveness. I don't know if this is a Reform Judaism issue or if it's widespread across the denominations. But clearly, we don't do what we ought to do. Sure, some of us do, but I would hypothesize that many of us do not.

The "Atone Phone" and Apology Line attempt to conquer one aspect of our High Holy Day responsibilities. And if we open any High Holy Day themed book for children, the primary message we'll encounter is on apologizing. While this is not wrong, it certainly isn't the full picture either. What we're really supposed to do is make Teshuvah. We've all heard this word before—many times too. While rabbis say it with as much casualness as we talk about the movies, one cannot achieve Teshuvah with a flippant attitude.

What does achieving Teshuvah entail? We must first find the answer from Maimonides (aka Rambam), who is arguably the most gifted Jewish mind we've ever known. In his *Mishneh Torah*ⁱ, the Rambam writes, "What is [conventional] Teshuvah? No longer committing a sin one once committed, not thinking of committing it anymore, and affixing to his heart the commitment to never do it again. As it's written: 'Let the wrongdoer abandon his ways'" (Isaiah 55:7). (2:2)

In other words, the stages of Teshuvah include: stopping the wrongdoing, feeling regret, confessing and/or apologizing, and never repeating the act again.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, hailed by Time magazine as a "once-in-a-millennium scholar" is as close to Maimonides as we're going to get.ⁱⁱ In his classic work on Kabbalah titled, *The Thirteen Pedaled Rose*, Steinsaltz comments: "Repentance is a complex process. Sometimes a man's entire life is no more than an ongoing act of repentance on several levels...It is an endeavor to break away from the past and reach a higher level...The starting point of repentance is precisely this fulcrum point upon which a person turns himself about, away from the pursuit of what he craves, and confronts his desire to approach God; this is the moment of conversion, the crucial moment of repentance."ⁱⁱⁱ

Or to put it more bluntly, Teshuvah is no walk in the park. It's not as easy as posting a blanket apology to all of our Facebook friends. It's a highly spiritual process that can last a lifetime. It's about connecting to God and re-connecting to our selves.

Attempting to make Teshuvah for the many transgressions we've committed against each other, I would imagine, might be an exercise in futility. We will gossip again. We will lie again. We will hurt someone's feelings again, and we will make a grumpy comment in a stressful moment, again. We're human after all. We might not set out to do these things but they happen. It seems that making Teshuvah on our death bed is really the only time when we can live up to our words that we'll never miss the mark again.

So if Teshuvah is reserved for the major transgressions, what should we do about all of these minor ones? I suggest we go back to the basics this year and just apologize. All of us have hurt others in varying degrees where we missed the opportunity to seek forgiveness. Dismissing Teshuvah for a moment and simply apologizing should not be viewed as a copout. We're not "just" apologizing because as Maimonides teaches us, apologizing is part of the Teshuvah process.

When I told my grandmother what my Yom Kippur sermon was about, she said, "That's hard to do. It's not easy to apologize." And she's right; it is a challenge. That's why we don't do it as much as we should. So how do we apologize effectively?

Dr. Aaron Lazare, former chancellor and dean of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, wrote *On Apology*^{iv}, a book that examines the integral components of effective and sincere apologies. According to his research, most apologies need to contain the following elements:

1. Full acknowledgement of the offense. Start by describing exactly what you did wrong, without avoiding the worst truths. Once the facts are out, acknowledge that your behavior violated a moral code. It doesn't matter whether you and the person you've hurt shares the same ethics: If you've broken your own rules, you're in the wrong. Accept responsibility.
2. An explanation. A truthful explanation is your best shot at rebuilding a strong, peaceful relationship. Explanations help you and your victim understand why you misbehaved. Excuses merely deflect responsibility. Leave them out of your apology.
3. Genuine expression of remorse. Anyone who has been on the receiving end of the comment "I'm sorry you feel that way" knows the difference between sincere regret and an attempt to avoid responsibility for bad behavior. Few things are less likely to evoke forgiveness than apology without remorse.
4. Reparations for damage. An apology includes real repair work: not just saying, "I'm sorry." Often there will be nothing tangible to repair; hearts and relationships are broken more often than physical objects. In such cases, your efforts should focus on restoring the other person's dignity. The question "What else

do you want me to do?" can start this process. If you ask it sincerely, really listen to the answer and act on the other party's suggestions, you'll be honoring their feelings, perspective and experience. The knowledge that one is heard and valued has incredible healing power; it can mend even seemingly irreparable wounds.

And I would add a fifth rule. The perfect moment to apologize is the moment you realize you've done something wrong. When we lack the ability to say we're sorry, minor offenses eventually accumulate enough weight to sink any relationship.

Just like achieving Teshuvah, we should feel good about ourselves after we apologize, regardless of how the recipient responds. In the end, an apology "is an act of honesty, an act of commitment, an act of generosity, and an act of courage."^v Mastering this technique can mean a lifetime of solid and resilient relationships. And as a friend told me recently, "A true apology is among the most graceful and profound of all human exchanges. When it is sincere, it is not an end but a new beginning." This is what Yom Kippur is really all about.

I love what Alan Bridge did. He gave people a venue to begin the process of starting over by getting their internal *shmutz* off their chests. As we embark on this time of reflection and forgiveness I think about what our non-Jewish friends do. Giving confession allows individuals to free themselves of heavy burdens. I imagine confessing to a priest can be quite liberating. Here at TBH, we have our own confessional during these Yom Kippur services. During the *Viddui*, I'll be reading not only the words from the *machzor*, but words that we wrote. You will hear confessions from fellow congregants and friends. This is the second year we've instituted this practice and the response has been overwhelming. This shows that people want a venue to say "I'm sorry." However, this should not be viewed as your "Get out of jail free card." This doesn't complete your work. It was our attempt to personalize the service just like when we read personal memories during Yizkor. The "Jewish" way also includes getting face to face with the person we've hurt and apologizing.

When Ira Glass asked Marissa Bridge in 2004 about her husband nine years after his death, she said, "I think the word apology means something bigger than just saying you're sorry...Forgiveness was a big part of his personality. He really believed in the power of forgiveness. And anyone can be forgiven if they are sorry."^{vi} Forgiveness ought to be a big part of our personalities too. In 5772, let's go back to the basics, forget about our egos and get to work. May apologizing become the ritual it was meant to be.

ⁱ The *Mishneh Torah* is an all inclusive *halakhic* guide to the entire system of Jewish law, and for the last 800 years since its composition has remained matchless in its clarity and scope.

ⁱⁱ Steinsaltz translated the entire Talmud into Hebrew from the original Aramaic and is in the process of translating this monumental text into English, Russian and other languages. This project is something to be in awe of.

ⁱⁱⁱ Steinsaltz, Adin. *The Thirteen Pedalled Rose*. New York: Basic Books. 2006. p. 96

^{iv} Lazare, Aaron. *On Apology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004

^v *ibid*

^{vi} [This American Life](#) (Dial "S" for Sorry: November 5, 2004)