

Yom Kippur 5784: Making Amends and Moving Forward

So here we are on this day of Atonement. We've spent the past 10 days and possibly the entire Hebrew month of Elul preceding Rosh Hashanah considering what we want to change in the New Year. We may have asked people for forgiveness of our misdeeds. We may have given tzedakah to charitable organizations that are doing the work of repairing the world. We can do these things any time of the year, yet the High Holy Days bring these thoughts and actions to the forefront of our minds.

I've been thinking a lot about forgiveness and atonement. Our modern culture puts great emphasis on asking for and receiving forgiveness. We teach our children, "Say you're sorry" right away when they cause harm. We expect our pop culture icons to immediately apologize for hurtful actions and then we wonder if their apologies were sufficiently sincere and if we should grant them forgiveness. Our society puts a lot of emphasis on the forgiveness part but doesn't teach us how to do the real work of making amends. It's no wonder we get uncomfortable just talking about atonement. Sometimes the Yom Kippur liturgy is easier in Hebrew because we can pretend we don't understand.

But this is important stuff, and we are smart folks so we should figure it out. Last year Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg published a new book called, [On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World](#). I had followed Rabbi Danya on that thing formerly known as Twitter for many years and knew her as an inspiring teacher. So I bought the book and have

read and reread it over the past 11 months. (Some things take time and repetition for me to digest.) In the book, she builds on the writing of Maimonides - 12th century philosopher, rabbi, and physician - and articulates five steps to the process of repentance. These steps make a lot of sense and yet they are different from the way many of us handle incidents where someone has been hurt. Maimonides centers the victim, if you'll allow me to use that term, rather than focusing on forgiveness. The person (or institution) that did the harm has lots of work to do before offering an apology. That way, the request for forgiveness is informed by recognition of their action and empathy for the person or people harmed. It's simple to understand but a lot of work to actually do. And to be clear, we all have all been hurt and we have all caused harm to someone in our lifetime, so we will benefit from learning this process from multiple angles.

Here are the steps as Rabbi Danya outlined them in her book:

- 1) We have to get past our first instinct to be defensive and shift blame and simply own our stuff. Name it and own it.
- 2) Take time to do some research and actively seek out fresh perspectives so we can understand in new ways. Begin the process of change.
- 3) Our actions have consequences and sometimes that means paying damages or volunteering time at an appropriate charity. And it also means humbly accepting the fact that we might no longer get to return to that social group or job or relationship as a result of our actions.
- 4) And now we get to the Apology. A real apology will be a sincere one that expresses our regret and sadness. It requires us to listen with

empathy and give up our desire to be comfortable while we try to offer the victim what they need to hear.

- 5) If we really engage in the work of healing and transformation then we will act differently moving forward.

Notice the apology doesn't come until the 4th step. Rather than a sheepish "I'm sorry" as soon as we are called out on causing harm, we wait until we have transformed into someone who can offer a heartfelt apology. Once we have done the work of owning the harm we did and accepting the consequences of our actions, we bring understanding and humility behind our words. And remember, Maimonides taught that our goal isn't seeking forgiveness. Sure, it would be a big relief if that is offered. But it is not required. The ultimate goal of this process is to reach a point where we make different choices when facing a similar situation. Then we know we have changed and become closer to the person we strive to be.

Why is this so hard for us? Maybe it is as simple as our desire for a happy ending. This is why I love Hollywood - I can watch a movie and see conflict resolved and smiles all around in a mere two hours! As we all know, real life doesn't usually play out like a movie.

So, we have some homework for 5784. Let's agree that we will step into the uncomfortable feelings of acknowledging the harm we will inevitably do. We are humans, after all, so it is bound to happen. There will be times when we mean well and still cause harm to someone. Our good intentions do not get us off the hook. We still have to examine what we did, admit

that we caused harm, figure out how we can change our behavior going forward, and apologize to the ones we harmed. The only way to get through this process is to go through the process.

There is a medieval Jewish story that, much like our Torah reading in Deuteronomy this morning, reminds us that we have what we need to do the work. It goes something like this:

A ruler had a child who had gone astray on a journey of a hundred days. The child's friend said, "Return to your parent." The child said, "I cannot." Then the ruler sent a message to the child, saying, "Return as far as you can and I will come the rest of the way to you." In a similar way, God says, "Return to me and I will return to you."

We don't have to do the work all by ourselves. We just have to start walking.

I invite you to walk with me on this journey of repentance and repair. May each step we take together bring us closer to healing and transforming our world.

End with singing We Shall Be Known by Ma Muse