

CHOOSING HAPPINESS OVER RIGHTEOUSNESS
(inspired by Rabbi Harold Kushner)

I wonder if any of you read the newspaper the Forward. Your grandparents or great grandparents likely did. It used to be the largest of the Yiddish daily papers. Everyone knew it. Isaac Bashevis Singer's stories were serialized there in Yiddish before being translated and printed in English. Now it's a small weekly paper with wonderful articles. You should read it.

Last year the Forward ran a series of op-ed pieces on the State of Atonement. One of the contributors was Randy Cohen, who used to write the Ethicist column for the New York Times. He started his piece on atonement this way: "This might be the most beautiful sentence in the English language: 'You were right; I was wrong.'" He continued, "Enjoy it now: You'll seldom hear it again. And you'll say it even less. Both lapses are unfortunate, but the latter is worse. Because the first step in atonement is simply to acknowledge that you've done something for which you should atone."

"Simply to acknowledge." Would that it were so simple. We live in the age of the non-apology apology. We don't say, "I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you." Instead we say, "I'm sorry if you were offended by my words," or "I'm sorry that you took it the wrong way." Notice how both of those non-apology apologies move the action from the offender to the offended. I'm no longer apologizing for what I said; I'm actually accusing you of being either over-sensitive – you were offended - or unable to grasp simple communication – you misunderstood. This is more than just avoiding responsibility. I'm shifting the blame for what I did or said to you. It's not my behavior that's the problem; the problem is in your response.

Rabbi Rob Scheinberg of Hoboken was so taken by the idea of the non-apology apology that he rewrote the Ashamnu prayer with a list of excuses rather than confessions, called the UNshamnu's. You can sing the part you know:

Oy oy yoy yoy, oy yoy yoy yoy, oy oy oy oy
It's not my fault

It wasn't me
It wasn't so bad
He deserved it!
Oy oy yoy yoy, oy yoy yoy yoy, oy oy oy oy
Everyone does it
No one got hurt
Get over it already
You're way too sensitive!
Oy oy yoy yoy, oy yoy yoy yoy, oy oy oy oy
It's just the way I am
Nobody's perfect
I had to
I needed to
I couldn't help myself
Oy oy yoy yoy, oy yoy yoy yoy, oy oy oy oy
Think of everything good I do
I had the best of intentions
It's really not as bad
As what a lot of other people
Get away with every day
Oy oy yoy yoy, oy yoy yoy yoy, oy oy oy oy

We laugh because we have all heard people say things like that. Maybe you've even said some of them yourself. So just why is it that it is so hard to say "I was wrong?"

It may be, in part, that we're afraid that others will hold us to the same standard to which we hold them, a standard of perfection that is impossible to attain. This true dialogue is from a website called notalwaysright.com:

Customer: "Is it too late to make the drink and fries big?"

Cashier: "Of course not, let me change it – that's an extra \$1.50."

Customer, to the manager: "It should be free since she didn't offer it to me! You should offer it to everyone equally!"

Manager: "I'm sorry sir; she can't give it to you for free. We're all human. We all make mistakes."

Customer: “Well, fine! Next time I want to be helped by someone who isn’t human!”

We laugh at how ridiculous that is. And in that laughter, we understand the importance of Yom Kippur. Because we are human, there is no such thing as perfection. As Harold Kushner has written: “God never asked us to be perfect. That was something we imposed on ourselves and attributed to God. There is no shame in making a mistake. There is no shame in being wrong about something. What is the history of science, what is the history of any branch of scholarship if not the story of things some very smart people believed that turned out to be wrong? The shame is in clinging to a position that we’ve come to realize is wrong because we can’t bring ourselves to admit that we were wrong, because we’re afraid that people will think less of us if we admit that we were wrong or if we admit that something was our fault.”

It’s a shame that we so often feel that way because “Our souls desperately need the ... experience of being able to say to God, “I’ve done and said some things this past year that were wrong, things I’m embarrassed to have said and done,” and getting God’s answer, “That’s all right. Imperfect people are welcome in My presence because imperfect people are the only kind I’ve ever known.”

Randy Cohen, the Ethicist, put it this way: “The first time I wrote a mea culpa column, I expected to be mocked and derided for my confessed misjudgment. I feared I’d lose credibility. But I got the opposite response — I was praised for my courage, cheered for my integrity. People wrote that this was the first time they’d seen a public figure admit a mistake and amend it.

“Beyond any benefit to my readers, acknowledging error was enormously valuable to me. Even after seeing that I was wrong, I could have anxiously attempted to defend a position eroding beneath me. Many of us do so, and it’s exhausting. But to abandon my ill-conceived idea was a joy. A relief! I didn’t have to go on kidding myself that if I looked at it the right way — with a sort of cocked head and a squint — I was actually kind of right. No. I was wrong. And it was by renouncing my error, like shedding a wet woolen overcoat, that I could replace it with a better idea. It was the only way I could grow and develop and learn.”

Kushner uses the image of sea crabs that grow a hard shell to protect themselves from predators. It works very well to keep the creatures safe. But as a crab grows, it reaches a point where it's too big for its shell. That carapace that served to protect it has become too confining, too limiting. So it sheds its shell and for a few days it's exposed and vulnerable. Soon it grows a new shell, which lasts for a while and then the process has to be repeated. But here's the point: if the crab was afraid to shed its hard outer shell and leave itself vulnerable because it's a dangerous world out there, it would never grow. And more than that – it would die, crushed by its own rigidity.

And this is really what we are called to do during the Holy Days. We are asked to shed our defenses and open ourselves up to both honest self-reflection and to the criticisms and accusations of others. It is difficult to do. It is scary. It is much easier to stay inside our shell of denial, making excuses or non-apology apologies. Unlike sea crabs, we can probably get away with doing that for a long time. It will not stunt our physical growth. But make no mistake – there are consequences.

If we can't admit mistakes, then we cannot correct them and improve ourselves. If we can't offer real apologies to those around us, then we risk permanently damaging important relationships. There are only so many times a friend can hear a non-apology apology before he decides the friendship might not be worth the effort. If we can't allow ourselves moments of true atonement, moments of vulnerability when we shed our hardened defenses, then we risk succumbing to a death of spirit which leaves us emotionally crippled.

And what about those times when we really do think that we're right? What about all those arguments and disagreements with friends and family over who said what to whom? Or who promised what when? Everyone is sure that their recollection of events is correct. Why would I apologize if I truly don't think I've made a mistake?

Kathryn Schulz wrote a book called, Being Wrong. The book has been cited by Bill Clinton as a must-read for our politically polarized leaders for whom being right seems more important than compromise. Schulz includes a number of stories and vignettes to illustrate her theories. Here's a short one:

A wife says to her husband, “Why did you buy the pound cake when I asked you to get the crumb cake?”

Husband: “No, you said pound cake. I saw the crumb cake and it looked good but you asked me for pound cake so that’s what I bought.”

Wife: “No, I asked for crumb cake.”

Husband: “Maybe you meant to say crumb cake but you said pound cake.”

Wife: “Maybe you heard pound cake but I said crumb cake.”

Who is right here? Who knows? Unless there was a video recording of the original conversation, no one will know. But they are both very sure of their opinion, and they are getting into an argument – over cake. Think about how different that dialogue would be if one of them could say, even if they didn’t necessarily believe it: “You’re right, I guess I misheard.” Or, “You’re right I guess I misspoke.” I was wrong, you are right. Those words cost us so little, and yet they are so difficult for many to say.

Many years ago I was doing pre-marital counseling with a couple who were both recovering alcoholics, in AA, where acknowledging imperfection is part of the program. I often ask couples to describe their conflict style: do you talk things out? Yell and scream? Shut down and sulk? The prospective groom told me something that I try –not always successfully – to keep in mind. He said to me, “we don’t really do any of those things. When we have a disagreement, even when I’m pretty sure I’m right, I think to myself, ‘who is this more important to – me or her?’ And she does the same thing. And that usually solves the problem.” It is a brilliant solution which acknowledges that being right is not the highest value. Stopping a fight, making peace, putting someone else’s priorities above our own and thus deepening a relationship – these are often higher values.

Another story: A young mother sitting in the park sees two boys in a sandbox get into a fight, and one says “I hate you. I’m never going to play with you again!” For a few minutes, they play at separate ends of the sandbox, and then they slowly edge closer to each other and after a little while, they’re playing happily together. The young woman says to her companion, “How do children do that? How do they manage to be so angry with each other one minute, and the best of friends the next?” The other woman replied, “It’s easy. They choose happiness over righteousness.”

We too have the power to choose happiness over righteousness. Righteousness means always having to be right. It means remembering every time someone hurts us or disappoints us, and never letting them forget it (and—frightening thought—giving them the right to remember every time we hurt them or let them down and to constantly remind us of it). Happiness means, in part, the ability to admit we are wrong, and maybe sometimes the ability to let someone else be right even if we don't think they are. It means giving people the right to be human, to be weak and selfish and occasionally forgetful, and realizing that we have no alternative to living with imperfect people –because imperfect people are the only kind there are..... The quest for righteousness estranges us from one another; the quest for happiness enables us to get past our shortcomings and connect with each other. [Carter and Evans blog]

The great Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, wrote a poem called, **The Place Where We Are Right**. He says:

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

This is why we are here today. We do not come to Temple on Yom Kippur to say to God, “I am righteous and have not sinned.” We come to shed our rigidity and say to God, “I have sinned, forgive me.” And God asks of us, “Have you made peace with others? If you have hurt someone,

have you been able to say, ‘I was wrong and you were right, and I am sorry’?” And if you were at a stalemate in an argument, have you been able to take the high road, have you been able to choose happiness and relationship over conflict and righteousness?” When we can do all of that, we will know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that our prayers have been answered.