

Shuva

Giving An Apology that Works

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This resource is from the first session of the T'shuva Series which was held in September 2022 and is shared with the permission of Jericho Vincent of Shuva.

How do we give an apology that works? The words I am sorry on their own are not enough.

Many people feel that the apologies they have received are mixed or inadequate. We also have difficulty giving apologies. Giving an apology can be tricky no matter what the intention is.

As the High Holidays approach, some people take time to ask one another, "Do you forgive me?" But the work to apologize and make amends may be lacking. When we apologize, the stakes are high - so are the potential for growth and repair.

Apologizing properly, and recognizing the harm we have caused, requires something similar to what happens in [building muscles, which is the creation of microtears](#). In other words, the work we need to do in apologizing involves breaking ourselves down to bring ourselves up and make ourselves stronger. We become better people - not by never messing up, but by messing up and doing the work to repair the harm we caused.

Jericho's source sheet on Delivering an Apology that Works:

<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/427464?lang=bi>

The Architecture of an Effective Apology - The section from Chulin in the source sheet shows how G-d attempted to recalibrate and come up with a solution to the harm caused to the moon in diminishing it. G-d doesn't get it right on the first attempt to repair, and G-d demonstrates resilience by trying again and again to come up with a resolution. It says: "G-d saw that the moon was comforted." This teaching demonstrates the importance of centering the person we harmed in our attempts at repair because only after G-d sees and centers the moon, does G-d come up with a resolution that works. The text also teaches the importance of the community or other beings in the work to repair harm.

In thinking about applying effective apologies in the workplace, Jericho said, "The ability to navigate apology and repair effectively emerges from where we are personally - if we can't do it in our personal lives, it is unlikely that we can do it in our workplace." When we think about the

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apologies we need to give, we may want to reflect on the things we would want to hear from someone apologizing to us and apply it.

Restorative Justice: Jewish Roots

Restorative justice centers the idea of repair. It asks: What has been damaged? It seeks justice by attempting to repair the damage. It recognizes that healing has to be relational.

Three elements of restorative justice that we can infuse into our apologies:

1. **Centering the one who was hurt** - Make sure our apology is without excuse or explanation, but about emphatically affirming the hurt and the person we harmed. Make the apology about them. Paradoxically, this involves first taking the time to center ourselves and ask what damage, wound, or confusion in ourselves led us to hurt this person. And what do we need to do so that we never act that way again. Turning inward first will help us center the person we harmed.
2. **The important work of community in relationships** - Restorative justice brings together the one who caused harm and the one who was harmed, as well as their support people and other stakeholders. This was evident in the time of the *bet din*, Jewish court, where people were judged, asked to take accountability, and held in a microcosm of community. When we deliver an apology we need to consider who the other stakeholders are. Can we call upon them to help hold us accountable for whatever action we want to take to repair and to support us as we become better? And are there people that the one we harmed can bring to support them as we try to repair how we have harmed them?
3. **Believing in the inviolable goodness of every person** - This belief is essential and includes the goodness of the person who caused harm. It is why it is called *teshuva*, which means returning. If we are owed an apology there is something in believing the inviolable goodness of the person who caused harm. If we are the harm doer, we need to believe in ourselves that we can be better. We are returning to the goodness that is always present in us. Shame can get in the way of delivering a good apology, so anchoring on to this belief can help us overcome the same. This belief does not mean that we are absolved by our wrongdoing by merely existing - but that we have the ability to reckon with what we have done.

Know that there is a time and place for apologies. We need to first pay attention to the needs of the person who was harmed. This means doing the work around whether or not the person we harmed wants to hear from us.

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- **Session #2: What do we mean when we ask a sexual offender to “do t’shuva?” with Dr. Claire E. Sufrin, Senior Editor at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America – Tuesday, September 13 at 1pm ET/ 10am PT**
- **Session #3: Restorative Justice and T’Shuva: Repairing Harm to Individuals and Communities with Alissa Ackerman, PhD and Kevin Lynch, Ampersands Restorative Justice – Tuesday, September 20 at 1pm ET/ 10am PT***

**Please note that this session includes engaging with an individual who has caused sexual harm and is engaged in a process of taking accountability - which is what restorative justice is about. Because we know this might be difficult for some, a breakout room staffed by a clinician will be open for anyone who feels the need to leave the main room and take a break from the conversation.*