

I'm Sorry Yom Kippur 7563

Last year, when 911 was still just an emergency telephone number, you may remember that our country was involved in an international crisis of a different kind.

There was a Chinese interceptor pilot, who made a regular habit of taunting our spy planes and, on this occasion he, unfortunately, came a little bit too close. He went crashing into the sea, and our crew had no choice but to set their limping aircraft down on a Chinese Island.

For days, the drama went into overdrive, as China blamed *us* for crashing into *their* plane. They not only held our crew of 24 hostage, but they demanded a formal apology.

I can only imagine what was going on in the back rooms of Washington. For realistically, what kind of apology were we really going to give? Yet we had to get our crew back and, of course, whatever part of the aircraft Chinese intelligence had not scavenged. So in good diplomatic fashion, delicate negotiations proceeded until exactly the right words could be agreed upon - words that, in effect, placed as little blame on us as possible and, at the same time, could still be sold as an apology to the Chinese people:

Dear Mr. Minister,

Both President Bush and Secretary of State Powell have expressed their sincere regret over your missing pilot and aircraft. Please convey to the Chinese people . . . that we are very sorry for their loss.

Finely crafted words. Our highest ranking diplomats probably burned the midnight oil drafting them. It was, in essence, the apology that wasn't!

And this brings me to us. For this is our appointed hour to confess our wrongdoings and to say a simple, "I'm sorry." Yet, simple it apparently is not. Just as world powers struggle for exactly the right wording, we ourselves tend to be top diplomats when it comes to an apology. If you find it hard to say, "I'm sorry", it appears that you're in very good company.

Nicolaus Mills is a professor of American History at Sarah Lawrence College. And he has concluded that the public apology is actually a relatively new thing. For example, generals have traditionally never apologized for their mistakes in battle. We know for a fact that neither Julius Caesar nor Napoleon Bonaparte, two of history's great warriors, ever did. And even after our own bloody Civil War, when the dead on both sides were Americans, there were no apologies to be found anywhere in the memoirs of either Ulysses S. Grant or William T. Sherman.

Now, one might think that today our society is more evolved. And Professor Mills does say that, especially after the lessons of both the Holocaust and the American Civil Rights movement, we are beginning to be more forthcoming in admitting mistakes.

After all, how many times in recent years have we heard our politicians utter the words, "Yes, I have engaged in an inappropriate relationship?"

But then again, for most of us, these kinds of confessions tend to ring hollow - from Bill Clinton in "Monicagate," to Gary Condit regarding Shandra Levy. In short, even though we now know we're supposed to apologize, we still struggle with the whole process.

Deborah Tannen studies such things. She's a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University. And she says that when it comes to apologies, it's easy to play games. That's because the word "sorry" can actually mean two different things. "The word 'sorry,'" she says, "sits right on that fine line between regret and fault." So, when we go to a funeral and say we're sorry, we're obviously not taking responsibility for the death. But whenever there's a possibility that the word "sorry" can imply fault, we will sidestep that "S" word.

She describes a 3 1/2 year old boy who, one day, told his mother that he didn't like Yom Kippur. When she asked him, why that was? He said quite directly, "because, on Yom Kippur, you have to say you're sorry." Our defenses, apparently start to build at a very young age.

And then they're reinforced as we grow older. Dr. Tannen points out that even our computers are programmed to avoid apologies. For those of us who are Mac users, we're most familiar with that fatal phrase our computer recites when something very wrong happens: "It's not my fault."

And now I've learned that computers can also help us avoid apologies altogether. Last year, Premier Christian Radio in London, started an on-line confessional. Rather than sitting in a confessional booth next to a priest or minister, Christians can log directly onto www.theconfessor.com. I actually checked it out and, on this website, there are selected biblical readings, and a box in which you can type your own personal confessions. And so you shouldn't worry, this web site is completely confidential - a confession won't even remain on your hard drive - the slate is wiped clean, so to speak.

But, if computers aren't your thing, I also read about a phone-in service called, "The Apology Line." For a fee, you can call in and pay someone else to go and apologize on your behalf.

Wow, we really don't like to apologize! There's an old Greek proverb which says, "From the time they invented 'I'm sorry,' honor was lost." Dr. Tannen says the reason most of us feel this way is because, "admitting fault weakens our position." It's a "degradation ritual," she says, that places us in a "one-down position."

I also think there's another reason we're "apology challenged" - and that is, that being wrong implies failure - and we're taught not to fail!

A colleague, once remarked to me how interesting it is that in basketball, a 40% free throw record is a pretty good thing and, in baseball, a .400 batting average is outstanding. Nobody shoots 100% or bats 1,000! But, when it comes to assessing our *human* averages, we tend to be far less forgiving.

I remember reading what Thomas Edison once said about all his failed attempts to invent the light bulb: "It's not that I have failed. It's just that I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

It's O.K. to be human. It's natural to have a less than perfect batting average. We don't always say the right thing. We have moral lapses in judgment. We do things that are plain stupid. We get into fights and disagreements with people. We hold grudges. And we sometimes go to bed at night churning from anger, or hurt, or regret.

And what is it that can turn the tide? What can release us from our hurt? What can make amends with those we've harmed and even estranged? An apology. Words, well chosen, can begin the healing.

In his studies of public policy, Professor Mills says that a formal public apology should have three qualities. And I'm certain that these same qualities would work equally well for us as individuals.

First, he says that an apology cannot be self-serving. We shouldn't apologize only because we're under pressure to do so, or because in the end, it leaves us better off. In other words, an apology doesn't really count if we're just giving it to get off the hook. An apology has to be given because we feel it and mean it.

Second, the wording of an apology has to be specific. It can't just be a generalized admission of guilt like, "I'm sorry, I was wrong." It has to specifically mention what it is we did wrong. And obviously, it also has to be said right to the specific person, and not to a higher authority, or even to God instead.

And third, an apology must be accompanied by a concrete action. Possibly an attempt to make up for the damage that we caused. Or, when that's not practical, then at least a promise to halt the offensive behavior in the future.

This is good advice. And it comes as close as any Jewish text I've ever read on *teshuvah*, to getting to the heart of an apology.

On this /Eve of Kol Nidre / Yom Ha-kippurim, we are here to reflect on all of our misdeeds and to make amends. Most of us can admit our wrongdoings to ourselves, even to God. But it's much harder to admit them to other people. Yet, today, Judaism would have us remember that it's O.K. to be wrong; it's O.K. to fail; and it's O.K. to say, "I'm truly sorry."

Kate Wenner is a journalist who, last year, published her first novel called, "Setting Fires." She wrote about her father, who died of cancer at the relatively young age of 70. All his life, before he became ill, he was rather distant and even harsh with his children. He was easily angered, he would lash out with criticism, and was intolerant of being criticized himself.

His cancer diagnosis came quickly, and within a matter of months, he was reduced from an athletic biker and skier, to a severely weakened and frail human being.

Kate took care of her father, sleeping in the bedroom next door, monitoring his every need, and for the first time achieving a closeness they never had before. It was in this closeness that she finally unlocked the shameful secret he had carried with him for nearly a lifetime - the secret which explained the mystery of his hardened personality.

It seems that when he was 14 years old, his mother and sister set fire to their family's dry goods store for the insurance money. It was late at night, and the family who lived in the apartment upstairs came screaming out of the building, carrying their young children. They could have easily been killed.

As he broke down and told Kate his dreadful secret, tears streaming down his face, he said: "I came from people who were despicable. They set this fire out their own greed. To risk killing children so you can make a fancier store? That's evil. I was part of evil. Now you see why I'm ready to die? . . . I'm tired of living with shame."

Shortly after that, Kate's father did pass away. And she wrote, "Facing the truth restored my father to himself, but it also restored him to us. In his final days, he at last allowed himself to feel loved and to give love in return."

Kate's father waited until near death to confess the secret of his shame and say, "I'm sorry for taking it out on you." Instead, he chose to live with misery and to inflict his aching pain on others. Holding onto our wrongdoings like we're keeping a secret, does not make us stronger, it makes us weaker. Even though we're all naturally afraid that an apology will put us in a one-down position and disgrace us, the fact is that it really raises us up and restores our honor!

This is the moment for all of us to confess, to really confess. To let go of the inner burdens we carry. To say "Al Cheyt," and liberate ourselves with earnest apology. So that, at the closing of this awesome day, the final blast of the shofar will clear away our guilt.

The Hassidic master, S'fat Emet, said that at this season especially, we recognize how much we are, in fact, like that ram's horn. While it is still on the animal, the horn is a source of strength and power. It is used for goring and asserting the animal's will. But, when it rests in our hands as a docile instrument, it reveals a softer inner dimension - a "still small voice."

Sometimes, whether intentionally or not, we gore and attack another person - like an animal asserting its horns. Yet, we also have inside of us the "still small voice" - the inner voice of conscience. When we are wrong, when we fail, we have the ability to repent and say, "I'm sorry."

Thankfully, you and I are not great superpowers. We don't have to worry about having sent soldiers into battle or having violated Chinese airspace. All we have to do is take responsibility for our personal shortcomings. All we have to do is look at our spouse, our parents, our children, our friends and co-workers - and say, "I'm really sorry for what I did wrong, I apologize for what I said; and I will not do or say it again." And my one promise to you, is that our personal apologies won't touch off an international incident, yet they will make us and those we care about feel a lot better, stronger, and more deeply loved.

There's an old tradition that during these holy days, we visit the graves of loved ones. It's customary to prostrate ourselves on the ground and, in effect, ask of the dead forgiveness for our past offenses.

I cannot help but think, how sad to wait until after death to say these things, and how much better it would be to say them now! So, let's use this precious opportunity of Yom Kippur, and allow the "still small voice," of the shofar to speak through us. Its trembling words can restore our honor and strengthen love and friendship.

G'mar Chatima Tova – may our actions this day, lead us to be sealed for blessing in the Book of Life!