

Last spring, Ahavas Israel let our maintenance supervisor go. We interviewed and eventually hired someone who, for the purposes of this story, we'll call Bob. He chose to leave after working one day. The reason why is not relevant to this story. In the 5 hours that Bob worked, he did a variety of tasks, one of which is relevant for this lesson. A day or so before he took the job, a bird had flown into the glass doors of the front entrance and died. Deb asked Bob to take care of the bird. Either throw it into the dumpster or bury it, she didn't care which. By the end of his first and only day working for us, the bird was no longer lying in front of the doors so she assumed that he dealt with it properly. Until a couple of days later, when as she was unlocking the front inside door, she looked off to the right, through the window, into Clara's garden. Something was sticking out of the ground, almost, but not quite, blending in with the wood chips. Looking closer, she realized that it was the wing of a bird. Bob had chosen to bury the bird, but did so in a very shallow grave. One wing, feathers extended, was sticking out of the ground. If a bird could make an obscene gesture, it might have been aimed at Ahavas Israel, one final gesture of reproach, either for the sin of installing all that clear glass, or for the sin of leaving the job of placing the bird in its final resting place so woefully incomplete. The bird was, in a way, flipping the bird at the synagogue.

For weeks, months, afterwards, I would come into the synagogue and look over at that upthrust wing and smile. Bob had one simple task to do in order to take care of the bird, and he left it incomplete. Maybe it was a good thing that he voluntarily left the job. But he left me a wing and this story, representing the importance of finishing the job. That's the lesson for this Rosh Hashanah.

The entire point of Rosh Hashanah is repentance. It's a little more work than burying a small bird, but in principle not much more complicated. There is a right way and a wrong way to bury a bird. There is a right way and a wrong way to say 'I'm sorry.' When you do it the wrong way, it is no better than that wing thrust out of the ground, flipping the bird to the person you have hurt, in effect telling them that it is their fault that you wronged them, they deserved it, they are over-sensitive, they started it, they provoked you.

"I'm sorry" are the two words needed to correct truly hurtful words, acts or inaction. But those words can be seriously undermined if not offered simply and sincerely. Instead of eradicating the emotional pain the affront caused, a poorly worded apology can result in lasting anger and antagonism, and undermine an important relationship.

Here are the simple instructions for apologizing:¹

Remember that the apology is less about you than it is about the person who, for whatever reason, is offended by something you said or did or failed to do, regardless of your intentions.

You should offer the apology expecting nothing in return. It is not your right to expect to be immediately forgiven. A request for forgiveness is not part of an apology. The offended party might accept a sincere apology but still be unready to forgive the transgression. Forgiveness, should it come, may depend on a demonstration going forward that the offense will not be repeated. It's not your place to tell anyone to forgive.

Do not offer your apology with a rationalization, a but. I'm sorry, but I was having a really bad day because my boss yelled at me. I'm sorry, but you got in my way. I'm sorry, but I was angry

1. Based on "The Right Way to Say 'I'm Sorry'" By Jane E. Brody, Jan. 30, 2017 [New York Times] and the book "Why Won't You Apologize?," by Dr. Harriet Lerner.

because he haven't been treating me fairly. The explanations, the excuses, undermine the sincerity of the apology.

Even when the other person is partly at fault, apologize for your part in the incident, however small it may be. Focus only on your part and apologize for it, without reference to anything else.

The focus of an apology should be on what you said or did, not on the other person's reaction to it. The pastor at Aretha Franklin's funeral spent 50 minutes ranting against single moms and other social problems within the black community, barely speaking about the deceased. When afterwards, the family pointed out to him that speaking out against single moms at the funeral of a single mom was offensive, he said, "I'm sorry they feel that way." Saying "I'm sorry you feel that way" shifts the focus away from the person who is supposedly apologizing and turns "I'm sorry" into "I'm not really sorry at all."

If the person you hurt wants to respond, stay quiet and listen. Carefully and non-defensively. Do not interrupt, argue, refute, correct facts, or bring up your own criticisms and complaints.

Offering an apology is an admission of guilt that will leave you feeling vulnerable. There's no guarantee as to how it will be received. It is the prerogative of the injured party to reject an apology, even when sincerely offered.

It's very difficult to take direct, unequivocal responsibility for our hurtful actions. It takes a great deal of maturity to put a relationship or another person before our need to be right.

The courage to apologize wisely and well is not just a gift to the injured person, who can then feel soothed and released from bitterness and corrosive anger. It's also a gift to one's own health, bestowing self-respect, integrity and maturity — an ability to take a clear-eyed look at how our behavior affects others and to assume responsibility for acting at another person's expense.

So remember the lesson of the bird. Don't leave a job undone. When you have done something wrong, apologize for what you've done with no excuses, with no defensiveness, and with no expectation of anything in return. This is the first step towards teshuvah, repentance.

The bird is gone now, except for a single feather. Had it been buried properly, not even a feather would remain. So the final lesson of the bird is this: If you do teshuvah fully and sincerely -- beginning with a proper apology, making restitution for the damage you've done, and refraining from repeating the same behavior in the future -- your transgression will dissolve in the sea of Divine forgiveness. Equally important is your character development. When you apologize and do teshuvah promptly, you will be training yourself to notice your fault lines, the times when you have a tendency to blunder. Over time, with attention, that imperfection in your character will diminish and disappear.

May the coming year bring you courage to extend apologies with a full heart. May this Rosh Hashanah cleanse you of grudges and pettiness, open up your heart with love and humility, and open your hands in generosity and kindness. And may God grant you a sense of wholeness and peace in this coming year.