

**Rabbi Rachel Timoner**

**September 18, 2010 / Yom Kippur**

**Family Alternative Service 5771**

“I’m Sorry”

There once were two little boys, ages 8 and 10, who were excessively mischievous. They were always getting into trouble and their parents knew that if any mischief occurred in their town their sons were probably involved.

The boys' mother heard that a rabbi in town had been successful in disciplining children, so she asked if he would speak with her boys. The rabbi agreed, but asked to see them one at a time. So the mother sent her 8-year-old first.

The rabbi, a huge man with a booming voice, sat the younger boy down and asked him sternly, "Where is God?"

The boy's mouth dropped open, and he said nothing, sitting there with his eyes wide. So the rabbi repeated the question in an even stronger voice, "Where is God!!?" Again the boy didn't even try to answer. So the rabbi raised his voice even more and shook his finger in the boy's face and yelled, "WHERE IS GOD!?"

The boy screamed and sprinted from the room, ran directly home and dove into his closet, slamming the door behind him. When his older brother found him in the closet, he asked, "What happened?"

The younger brother, gasping for breath, answered, "We are in BIG trouble this time. God is missing – and they think WE did it!"

Now, I am sure that at one point or another, every person in this tent has done something bad. Something that made you want to hide in the bottom of your closet. Something that made you think, “Oh man, I’m in BIG trouble this time.”

Even though you never made God disappear, it probably felt like whatever you did was that bad. Maybe you broke something fragile and precious, you lied about something really important, you hurt somebody else, maybe even on purpose.

I want to take some time this morning to think together about what happens in that moment when you realize you’ve done something wrong. Your friend is sitting there crying. Your parent is standing over you, angry. Your neighbor or coworker isn’t talking to you anymore. What goes through your mind and what goes through your heart in those moments?

(Walk around and take responses from congregation)

Let me ask you this, how many of you find it easy to turn to the person you’ve hurt when they’re angry at you and say I’m sorry. How many people find that to be difficult?

Why is it so difficult?

First of all, in a moment that feels like a crisis, we have three instincts. Fight, Flight, and Freeze. I don’t want to make all of these High Holy Days about our evolutionary past, but it’s true. Our first animal instinct when things get rough is to make ourselves big, to puff ourselves up, to protect ourselves. Someone’s angry at us, someone’s blaming us? Fight back.

“Well, maybe I did break it, but how could I have known it was there? Maybe it shouldn’t have been there in the first place, did you think of that?” “OK, I hit you, but you hit me yesterday.” “I didn’t lie, I think you’re the one who’s lying.”

Next, we run away. Like the boy who thinks he’s accused of making God disappear, we disappear. Our coworker’s mad? Quick, let’s sneak out early. Our neighbor’s mad? Don’t come out of the house when they’re in the front yard.

Our third option is to freeze. Maybe if I don't move or talk, and pretend I'm not here, it will all just blow over, and go away, as if it never happened.... Is it working?

So sometimes in the moment we're not very good at saying I'm sorry. Because saying I'm sorry is the opposite, all at once, of fight, flight, and freeze. Instead of making ourselves big, we make ourselves small. Instead of running away, we turn and face the person we've hurt. Instead of pretending it's not happening or it's no big deal, we name it, we admit it, we say it out loud.

I want to say a word about shame. Shame doesn't help us with saying I'm sorry. Shame is the feeling that we are as bad as whatever we did. There is a scene in the film *Being John Malkovitch* in which the characters are exploring inside the brain of a man named John Malkovitch. They are going through the different passageways in his brain and come to a small place where he is a little boy. And he's sitting, rocking back and forth saying to himself, "Bad boy! Bad boy! Bad boy!"

There is a time in every childhood when we are scolded in such a way that we believe for that moment that we are bad. We get confused, and we think that what we did is who we are. That voice, "bad boy, bad girl," is shame.

If we have too much shame, it's hard to have the strength, or the courage, or the dignity to be able to say I'm sorry. But if we can remind ourselves that what we did isn't the same thing as who we are. If we know that we're good inside. If we remember that everybody makes mistakes. If we trust that we can fix what we did and make it right again – pay for the broken object, return what we took, heal with our words – we *can* find the courage, the strength, and the dignity to say I'm sorry.

Jewish tradition has a very strong position on shame. We are never supposed to shame other people, and we are to go out of our way to protect people from being ashamed. In fact, Judaism obligates us to rebuke other people – Judaism says that we have to tell other people when they are doing something bad. The word for this in Hebrew is *tochecha*. We are obligated – we must – give *tochecha* to other people. If our neighbor is pouring toxic waste down the drain, we can't just say, "well, it's not my problem." We have to say, "Hey, that's not right." If we see someone lie or cheat, we don't just say to ourselves, "hmmm, she shouldn't do that." No, we are obligated to say to her directly, "You shouldn't do that, it's not right."

But, Judaism also teaches that we must try as hard as we can to prevent shame for the person we are rebuking. So, we avoid rebuking people in public, in front of others, because that usually will make a person feel ashamed. Instead, we pull them aside to talk privately. Another way to prevent shame is to be careful to separate what the person did from who they are. “I know you’re not somebody who would want to hurt the environment, so you shouldn’t pour toxins down the drain because they go straight to the ocean.” Or “I know you care about doing what’s right, so I was surprised to see you cheating....it’s not right.”

So we go out of our way not to shame other people, and when we find shame in ourselves, we heal it. We heal shame by fixing the things we’ve done wrong, and that starts with saying I’m sorry. Everything we’ve done wrong hangs on us. It doesn’t leave us. We carry it around. And it makes us feel ashamed. Until we fix it.

Now, because we often miss the chance to apologize in the moment when we hurt someone, we find ourselves, a lot of times, needing to say sorry later on. And that can be awkward. It’s a nice day, and you’re having a nice time, and everything is going well, you think to yourself, why bring it up? It’ll ruin this perfectly nice day. Especially if time has passed, I’d rather believe that whatever I did, and the other person’s hurt feelings, will just disappear.

But it’s amazing how often the things that still hang around us, the things that still kind of weigh on us, and linger at the edges of our minds, are still there for the other person too. Everyone acts like it never happened, but it did happen, and when one person has the courage to bring it up, everybody feels relieved, everybody feels better. So, even if it’s awkward, we interrupt the nice day to say, “I have to talk to you about something that’s bothering me. Five months ago, when you fell on your face, I’m the one who tripped you. I’m really sorry and I promise I’ll never do it again. What can I do to make it up to you? ...or... Eight months ago when you were saving up all of your candy, and I took your last one, I’m sorry. I’m going to buy you another box.....or.... I feel really badly for what I said the other day, I could tell it hurt your feelings. I didn’t mean it and I’m sorry, and I wonder how I can make it better.”

But what happens if, by reminding the other person of what happened, we make them angry all over again? Who wants that? “Oh yeah, you did say that hurtful thing to me last week! Man, that hurt my feelings, how could you be so mean? I’d forgotten all about it, but now that you bring it up, I’m mad all over again.” Of course, we generally want to avoid that. But usually, even if the other person gets angry for a little while, if we are genuine in our apology, if we

really mean it, usually the other person is grateful. Grateful that we care about their feelings, grateful that we still remember what we did and that we want to fix it. Grateful that we're saying I'm sorry. Usually their anger melts away and they forgive us. Not all the time, but usually. Imagine if someone came to you, and they were really sorry, they really meant it, and they wanted to try to fix what they'd done, don't you think in most cases you'd want to forgive them?

Not everyone will forgive you. But Judaism teaches that if you are really sorry, if you do something to repair what you've broken, or return what you've taken, or heal what you've hurt, and if you ask for forgiveness, your slate, and your conscience, are clean.

Today is the Day of Atonement. Today is the day when we ask for forgiveness. Today is the day when we list all of the things we've done wrong, all of the things that are weighing on us. We fix them as well we can, and we say to the people we've hurt, I am sorry. Today is the day that God promises us that if we do that with our whole heart, we are forgiven. May each of us have the honesty to admit what we've done, the courage to feel small and tender in remorse, and the dignity to look the other person in the eye and to say with all our heart, I'm sorry.