Torah Lessons for the Home

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| Parshas Mikeitz |

All About Apologies

PARSHAS MIKEITZ: ALL ABOUT APOLOGIES

We begin with a passuk: ויאמרו איש אל אחיו אבל אשמים אנחנו על אחינו אשר ראינו צרת נפשו בהתחננו אלינו ולא שמענו על כן באה אלינו הצרה הזאת – "The brothers said to each other: 'We're at fault. We saw our brother's pain and we ignored him'. Yosef heard them and he turned around and cried."

In the whole debacle of Yosef and his brothers, this was the turning point. It is here that Yosef finally heard his brothers acknowledge their mistake. At this point Yosef wells up with tears and can no longer keep up his charade of being the heartless monarch. Yosef is finally ready to reveal his true identity. And what was the cause? Three short words: אבל אשמים אנחנו, three very powerful words.

THE MOST IMPORTANT WORDS

It's human to err, but it is super human to admit your error. People are not so ready to admit that they were wrong; at most someone will say "Ok you're right…" that's the furthest one will go in admitting his fallacy. "Me - wrong?" it just doesn't go together, and that's why it's so hard to admit. But in fact learning to own up to your wrongs and to admit them will go a long way for you in any relationship. And in truth, it's not such a big deal, everyone makes mistakes; it's only human.

I was at a seminar recently where the speaker handed out little slips of paper and asked the participants write out what they thought were the three most important words for marriage. So everyone wrote something else: Love, Communication, Empathy, Care, Giving etc. When everyone was done, the speaker showed everyone what he had written on his slip of paper: (1) I (2) Was (3) Wrong. The three most important words in your marriage are "I was wrong".

WHAT IS THE ARGUMENT REALLY ABOUT?

So often that's all your spouse wants to hear. There can be a whole drawn out argument, and it seems like it's never ending. But there's a really simple way to end it. Instead of arguing, instead of rationalizing and justifying, just say "I was wrong". Do you really think that your spouse wants to hear a justification? Everyone has justifications. Unless you're a complete psychopath it is safe to assume that you don't do anything with the specific intention of torturing your spouse.

Deep down your wife knows that you didn't mean

to hurt her by coming home a half-hour after you said you'll be home, but she wants to hear it from you. You caused her pain, albeit unintentional pain - so own up to it, admit it. Avoiding an apology won't get you anywhere. So much of the tension and argument is really not about why he came home late, or why she forgot to pick up his shirts from the dry cleaners. All your spouse really wants is an apology. Admit your error and it all disappears.

THREE OTHER WORDS

And the truth is that you don't even have to go so far as to say you were wrong, sometimes you weren't wrong! And sometimes you're not ready to admit that you were wrong, but you can still say that you're sorry, and it will get you almost as far as saying that you were wrong. The whole debate just dissolves, and all the tension can be rendered nonexistent with just three words. Because those words are all that your wife really wants to hear. Of course she won't say that, she may not even know it herself. But try saying these words "I am sorry" and you'll see how everything disappears.

WRONG OR SORRY?

Generally, when you apologize, you shouldn't try to justify your actions. Just admit that you were wrong. Now, because we have egos, it is very hard to differentiate between when we're wrong or not. But try to be objective; let's go back to the shirts at the dry cleaners. Your husband asked you to pick up his shirts, you said that you would, and you forgot. So he's right, you said that you would, and you didn't!

Now, of course it's true that you forgot and you're only human and he forgets too, and ten years ago he forgot your birthday. It's all true. But the fact is that you said that you would pick up the shirts and you didn't. That was wrong of you. It doesn't mean that you are the wrong type of human being, that you are evil and worthless. It just means that you did something wrong.

So you have two options now, either you can acknowledge your guilt and apologize, and perhaps offer to get the shirts at the earliest opportunity, end of story. Or, you can begin rehashing every single time in your marriage when either one of you forgot something and explain why your husband is so terrible of a human being that he doesn't really deserve to wear a shirt, let alone have it dry cleaned! So which option will you choose?

APOLOGIZING DOESN'T HURT

Avoiding apology will only bring you heartbreak. As unreasonable as your husband is, he'll understand that you forgot. Everyone forgets! But give him that understanding; give him the reassurance that you value his feelings. Say "I'm sorry for what I did, I should have been more considerate, I apologize". It doesn't have to hurt, it's true; you are sorry.

But don't pretend that nothing happened. Avoiding the apology won't make you look any better, it will only make you look worse. So what's the big deal? Just say it.

WHEN YOU'RE COMPLETELY RIGHT

Ok, so you're ready to apologize when you're wrong, but what about when you're completely right? Let's say you go to a shiur every night. Every night you get home at the same time, 9:45. One night you get home and your wife attacks you: "Why didn't you call me?! I needed something from the supermarket! You're so inconsiderate! You were passing by and you didn't think that maybe you should call and offer to stop for me?!" Now, before we go any further; you're completely right. There was no reason for you to call. You never call and your wife knows that. If she wanted something she should have called you.

But for whatever reason, maybe she's overtired, maybe she's overworked, maybe a little bit of both, or possibly a lot of both! Whatever it is, right now she is feeling very hurt by the fact that you didn't call to offer her help. Justifying yourself won't help. "I never call you before I come home." might get you a response of " I know! You never think about me, you don't care!" Situations can escalate so quickly if we're not careful, and there's such an

easy way to stop a fight in its tracks. Just say I'm sorry.

I'M SORRY THAT YOU'RE BEING A JERK

You don't have to say that you were wrong, just that you're sorry, "is there anything I can do to make it better?" Saying I'm sorry doesn't mean that you're wrong. And if you're not wrong, your wife knows it. "I'm sorry" means that you feel bad that your spouse is in pain. You're sorry she's feeling upset or angry and you would like to please her.

But don't say it like that! Don't tell her "I'm sorry you feel this way". When you say that you're really saying "You're completely wrong and you're acting like a baby, I'm sorry that you're feeling like that." That's not an apology, it's a provocation, it's just fuel for another fire. Just say I'm sorry, אבל אשמים אנחנו, accept the blame and let the other person feel better.

SELF JUSTIFICATION

Occasionally it may be appropriate to justify yourself, but that doesn't detract from the apology in any way. Apologize, say that you're sorry. And then a few minutes later when the air has cleared somewhat you can explain what caused the misunderstanding. But let the apology be an apology.

ACCEPTING AN APOLOGY

We turn to the other side of the coin now; how to accept an apology. Accepting an apology is almost as much of an art as apologizing itself. I'm not explaining this so that you can go home now and tell your spouse how he should accept your apology. The first part of what we discussed was so that you know how to apologize, when you need to apologize. But what about when your spouse needs to apologize to you? That's what we're explaining now.

So the first thing to know is: Never debate the sincerity of an apology. He said he's sorry? Accept it. "No, you're not really sorry…" And if you argue with him he'll become "really sorry"? It's hard enough to apologize as it is. So now we have to mean it too? He did the right thing, he said he was sorry, now move on. Don't get stuck on things.

JUST LET GO

And then there are people who accept your sincerity, but they're not sure they can accept the apology just yet. They have to take it home, weigh it and measure it, and then maybe they'll be okay with accepting it. "I'll try to forgive you, but this was just so painful for me that I'm not sure I can forgive you just yet."

If you're unwilling to accept an apology, you're being cruel. Both to the person who is apologizing and to yourself! Holding onto a resentment will leave both of you miserable. It's just so liberating to say, "Thanks, I appreciate the apology, you made me feel better, I forgive you." Even if you're still in pain; accepting an apology is the first step in healing your relationship. Even though it's tough. What your spouse did to you is nowhere near as damaging as what you're doing by holding onto the resentment. In fact, we're taught that the great tragedy of the עשרה הרוגי מלכות came about because Yosef never officially acknowledged and accepted the apology of his brothers.

ADDING FUEL TO THE FIRE

Sometimes someone will apologize, and instead of accepting the apology, his partner will fan the flames to grow the fight: "You're not sorry, you always do this!" So here someone is making an effort to be nice to you and apologize, and you're doing everything in your power to ensure that that person will never want to apologize again! So let's not be like that.

CHINUCH: APOLOGIZING TO YOUR KIDS

Parents may find it hard to apologize to their children, they may feel that it's below their dignity to lower themselves to their children and apologize. Or they may feel that they're actually undermining their authority as a parent by apologizing. This couldn't be further than the truth. If a parent apologizes when he did something wrong, not only have you not lowered yourself; actually you have just raised your prestige in the eyes of your child.

Your child looks at you and says, "Wow, my father respects

me enough to apologize". You're only getting your children to respect you more. Nobody respects an egoist who can't admit that he made a mistake. If you can look your child in the eye, and say "Chaim, I made a mistake when I yelled at you before, and I regret that I was not careful before yelling at you, please forgive me." If you can say that, that's the healthiest thing you can do for a child.

DON'T BE MEEK

Some people think that when they apologize, they must get down on their hands and knees. Apologizing is so difficult for them that their voice begins to shake; they blush, and can't get the words out. That's certainly not the way to apologize to a child. It's not how to apologize to an adult either, but certainly not to a child.

You can apologize with confidence. You know that you're not a psychopath, the pain and harm that you inflicted was unintentional. The fact that you're apologizing doesn't show that you're a horrible human being. Your mistake proves that you're human, but your apology proves that you're super human. So keep your chin up, and do what has to be done. Your home will be a happier one as a result.

Q&A

Please feel free to send questions on any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question: My son can be characterized as "the Fragile Child" whom you describe in your lectures and books. How do I give him the special attention he needs while not arousing the jealousy of my other children. Also, how do I guide him so that he's not so overly sensitive when he grows up?

Answer: We'll answer the second question first. You can't make him "see reason" and "snap out of it". One's core personality never changes. If someone is overly sensitive as a child, he may very well be overly sensitive as an adult too. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. If a sensitive child is treated right, he will grow into a mature sensitive adult.

Treating him right doesn't mean giving into everything he wants and always blaming the other children so that he will never get blamed. When it comes to dealing with a sensitive child we need to make sure that he feels loved and respected, more than we have to with any other child. But that doesn't mean that he gets any preferential treatment in front of the other children. For example when it comes to doing homework, you can insist that Avrumy and Mendy come inside right now and do their homework. But don't do that to your sensitive child. Call him over beforehand and ask him when he thinks it would be a good time to do his homework. Then later when Avrumy and Mendy want to know why only they have to do their homework "right now" you can explain that their sensitive brother already did it.

So it's not about treating him better than any of the others, giving him all of the ice cream and never punishing him. It's about building his sensitive soul and nurturing a relationship that's much deeper than the one you can have with your other children. If you guide him in the right way he will grow up to be a secure and confident adult, with his sensitivity.

**For more on this topic, see Sample Q&A book published at Keiravtuni 8*

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