



THE RULE OF THREES: A JEWISH WAY TO SAY YOU'RE SORRY

The High Holidays are a season of forgiveness—a time dedicated to improving ourselves and making amends with God and the people we've wronged in the past year. Some might see this exercise as trite: Why would we need to be reminded to say we're sorry to our friends? Others might see it as disingenuous if we all do it at the same time every year, but sometimes we need that external push to actually do it. It isn't easy to face the mistakes we've made and the rifts we've created between ourselves and our loved ones. In fact, it can be really hard, says Marjorie Ingall, coauthor of the book, *Sorry, Sorry, Sorry: The Case for Good Apologies*. **“Apologizing is a courageous act, because we're overcoming all of our own animal instincts and all of our own self-protectiveness when we do it.”**

It's easy to push off apologizing for something, but that doesn't mean there isn't any unresolved tension after hurting a loved one or that tension isn't affecting us subconsciously. We often carry the stress of a relationship left in disrepair, even if we don't realize it. A sincere apology can alleviate that stress and improve our mental and physical health. ([Time Magazine, 8 Ways to Apologize Well](#)). To remind us to start working on mending our relationships, synagogues around the world blow the shofar each morning throughout Elul, the Hebrew month preceding Rosh Hashanah.



By Max Hollander

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Yet, while a good apology can offer tremendous benefits, overdoing it by relentlessly seeking that closure can cause more harm than good. At one point, apologizing too much can look less like a desire to repair a relationship and more like a need to please others or address your own self-hatred. The tendency often is associated with mental health conditions like:

- Anxiety
- Childhood trauma
- Depression
- Low self-esteem
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Perfectionism



[\(Therapy in a Nutshell, How To Stop Saying Sorry Too Much\)](#)

It's easy to tell ourselves we are bad people when we need to apologize to someone, but that isn't healthy either. Judaism actually sets a limit on apologies. **According to Jewish law, when seeking reconciliation with someone, one need only apologize three times (Talmud Tractate Yoma87a).** Later scholars added that each apology should be different, specific to the mistakes you made and come with a promise to improve (Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chaim 606:3 and Bach, Orach Chaim 606:1). Apologies that tailor to the people we've hurt, acknowledge what we did wrong, admit responsibility and include a plan for the future reflect what many modern psychologists have identified as the most effective apologies [\(8 Ways to Apologize Well, Time Magazine\)](#).



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This isn't meant to guilt the other person into accepting it. They might not be ready to accept our apology. But it can prevent the negative feelings associated with seeking apologies from consuming us. Over apologizing can have a negative impact on our self-esteem and keep us in the past, which is not the goal of an apology. Saying you're sorry should be an experience of respect for the person you wronged while maintaining a healthy level of self-respect so you can move on together ([How to Let Go of the Past and Embrace Your Future, VeryWellMind](#)).

Still, it can be hard to find the right words when we apologize. Julie Corliss, executive editor of the Harvard Heart Letter ([The art of a heartfelt apology, Harvard Health Publishing](#)), offers some suggestions for wording our apologies in ways that are most heartfelt and effective.

EFFECTIVE WORDING

"I'm sorry I lost my temper last night. I've been under a lot of pressure at work, but that's no excuse for my behavior. I love you and will try harder not to take my frustrations out on you."

"I forgot. I apologize for this mistake. It shouldn't have happened. What can I do to avoid this problem in the future?"

INEFFECTIVE WORDING

"I apologize for whatever happened."

"Mistakes were made."

"Okay, I apologize. I didn't know this was such a sensitive issue for you."

WHY IT WORKS

Takes responsibility, explains but does not excuse why the mistake happened, expresses remorse and caring, and promises reparation.

Takes responsibility, describes the mistake, makes the person feel cared for and begins a conversation about how to remedy the error.

WHY IT WON'T WORK

Language is vague; offense isn't specified.

Use of passive voice avoids taking responsibility.

Sounds grudging, thrusts the blame back on to the offended person (for "sensitivity").

Created by Julie Corliss, Executive Editor, Harvard Heart Letter



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These reflections on the pitfalls of seeking forgiveness and how to properly apologize also apply to the ways we can approach forgiving ourselves. As we prepare for the new year and reflect on the year that has passed, we all have some work to do. We need to look at ourselves, acknowledge what we did wrong and the ways we hurt ourselves, and find healthy ways of loving ourselves. To learn more, see our [Reading Between the Lines](#) High Holiday Resource.



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