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How should a Jew seek forgiveness?

Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

Politicians, we well know, are specialists at avoiding responsibility for their actions gone awry and their insensitive misstatements that bring hurt. "If I happened to offend you," one will say, "which isn't at all clear to me, then please accept my apology."

Unfortunately, there's a little bit of the politician in all of us. We have been cautioned to beware of admitting error, fault or failure. It may be construed as a sign of weakness and vulnerability that could lead to our downfall. But the "sin of denial" can often be more weighty and damning than the wrongdoing that was committed in the first place.

It is also too easy to confess collectively a litany of transgressions. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, famously, "Some are guilty, all are responsible." However, our annual "Ashamnu" recitation – that alphabetical list of wrongdoings recited on Yom Kippur – gets us off painlessly. It provides easy deniability and lets us hide in the crowd as we merge our faults into a sea of communal confession. The real challenge is asking for forgiveness personally and directly, without the protection of the community.

The first step is to admit to ourselves that we did something wrong. This actually takes courage because it is so counter-intuitive to our natural survival instincts. But when we own our actions and admit our faults we actually show a sign of strength. That's why we tell children that telling the truth about what they did is praiseworthy even if the deed itself was reprehensible.

Next, we need to forgive our own imperfections. We must acknowledge our foibles and flawed humanity, our clay feet, as it were. However, if we are too harsh on ourselves and unsparing we will not be able to ask forgiveness of another.

This leads us, of course, to the final step, accepting another's request of forgiveness from us. As a friend has written, "If I cannot be perfect, I can hardly expect other people to be." If we want others to cut us some slack we must do them the same kindness.

Finally, repentance and repairing our wrongs is a life-long endeavor, not reduced to an hour or two a few days a year. In fact, it takes regular, daily practice to get good at it. It is always time to utter words of true repentance. It is always time to take stock, settle up our account, and go forth – to a life renewed and repaired and forgiving.

Rabbi Peter Schweitzer presents a view of Humanistic Judaism as a regular contributor to Moment Magazine's "Ask the Rabbis" column. The response printed here may be slightly altered from the version that first appeared in the magazine. You can find Moment Magazine on-line at www.momentmag.com.