Intention vs Impact:
The Art of a Successful Apology

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On February 28th, 1844, President John Tyler was almost assassinated… by *accident*. The president was taking a pleasure cruise down the Potomac with 400 of his closest friends. Tyler was accompanied by his fiancée and future first Lady, Julia Gardiner, and her father. The USS Princeton was captained by the ambitious and wealthy John F. Stockton. Using his own funds to upgrade the ship, Stockton had aboard two of the largest cannons in the United States. With a captive audience enjoying their lunch, Stockton was proud and eager to demonstrate his technological prowess. But things didn't go according to plan. In the midst of a demonstration, the cannon itself exploded.

President Tyler's father-in-law was killed. The United States Secretary of the Navy was killed. The Secretary of State was killed. President John Tyler was *almost* killed.

Stockton did not *intend* to cause harm. But the *impact* was undeniable. Lives were lost… and the responsibility was ultimately his to take.

Shockingly, despite the risk to his own life and despite the impact on his own family, President Tyler chose to heal the relationship. In fact, Captain Stockton was honored with continued responsibilities by President Tyler. Tyler didn't deny the *impact* but he did acknowledge the *intention*.

Just as Captain Stockton did in 1844, on this Yom Kippur in 2025 we too must contemplate what *we* have done, who *we* have become, and which changes *we* need to make. And just as President Tyler did 180 years ago, it remains essential that we contemplate, separately, impact and intention. Neither one negates the other.

We all know a poor apology when we hear one. Ineffective amends are almost always a result of minimizing impact. The idea that harm was not intentional may be true. It may even be an explanation. But it is not an excuse.

Have you ever received an apology that sounds like:

- But… I didn't mean to.
- I'm sorry if *you* feel that way…
- Obviously, it was just a mistake…. You're being too sensitive.
- Seriously? It was an accident. You can't hold that against me.
- I'm sorry but … I had no choice.

Such apologies leave us empty and angry. Everyone here has received an apology that minimizes impact. Everyone here has delivered a poor excuse for an apology.

Some years ago, Mel Gibson made news in the Jewish community with an apology that, to say the least, didn't hit the mark.

In 2006, the American actor and filmmaker had a confrontation with policemen during which a drunken Gibson allegedly said: "The Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world", and asked a police officer: "Are you a Jew?"

Gibson subsequently said in a statement: "Please know from my heart that I am not an anti-Semite. I am not a bigot. Hatred of any kind goes against my faith….”

This is a classic example of an apology that's all about intention with no acknowledgment of impact. Excuses don't work when it comes to Teshuvah.

Whether he intended to or not, the impact of Captain Stockton's action was disastrous. Whether he intended to or not, the impact of Mel Gibson's words was atrocious.

The person who has been harmed does not have an obligation to forgive. They may not be ready. They may not be safe. But in the event where healing is desired, the conditions for repair will be most ripe when the one receiving amends can hold firm to the harm of *impact* and can simultaneously acknowledge *intention*.

In 2025, we are living in a moment on the national and global stage where we assume the worst of one another constantly. Those with whom we disagree are malicious. Those who make innocent mistakes are unforgivable and canceled. That attitude leaves no space to heal. That rigidity is bleeding into our personal lives as well. We are more broken because of it.

We all know what it's like to apologize, only to have it thrown back in our face. Ineffective healing so often results from minimizing intention.

Have you ever given an apology with all of your heart, owned the impact and received a retort like this:

- You clearly were *trying* to hurt me
- Of course, you knew how that would make me feel
- You were *purposely* undermining me
- The only reason you would have done that is because you're a terrible person
- You *never* care about my feelings.

When our good intentions are called into question, we become defensive or we shut down. There is no healing.

This fall, I spoke with a friend who had a disastrous encounter with her in-laws. Let's call her Dafna. Dafna was new to her marriage when she poured herself a cup of coffee in a spare mug she found in her mother-in-law's kitchen. Unfortunately, Dafna chose precisely the wrong mug. The mug was a precious family heirloom from Tunisia. It was extremely fragile and meant only for display… Dafna's innocent action ended with the mug shattering into shards.

She was mortified. She turned bright red. She cleaned up the spill, admitted fault, and offered to pay for a new mug.
The *impact* was real. But clearly, there was no *intention* to do harm.

If the family wanted to heal the relationship, they might have said, "Thanks for the apology, dear, we did love that mug, but we know it was an accident. It could have happened to anyone."

But instead Dafna was blamed. The family proceeded as if the action was malicious. They said to her, “Why did you *choose* to smash our inheritance? You have no respect for this family! How could you be so cruel?!”

All over a coffee mug! You won't be surprised to learn that Dafna’s marriage didn't last very long.

So many conflicts between parents and children, spouses, siblings, friends, and colleagues come down to this: does the one asking forgiveness own the **impact**? Does the one receiving an apology acknowledge good **intentions**?

To be clear, the Jewish Tradition is overwhelmingly focused on impact. Judaism is, unquestionably, less interested in what we think and more interested in what we do.

The thinker and scholar, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously, "A Jew is asked to take a leap of *action* rather than a leap of *faith*.” In other words, on Yom Kippur, no matter how good our *intentions* may have been, we are accountable for our *impact*.

This fact is one of the hallmarks of what makes a Jew, *literally* a Jew. That is to say that we descend, spiritually and morally, from Judah and not from Reuben. Thus why we are called “Jewish” and not “Reubenish.”

In the Book of Genesis, we hear the epic story of Jacob's sons. The 10 oldest boys are deeply jealous of their younger brother, Joseph. Joseph is Daddy's favorite. Joseph gets privileges. Joseph gets recognition.

And we all know how the story goes… the 10 oldest brothers end up selling Joseph into slavery. They pretend that he is dead, and they break their father's heart.

Reuben, the oldest brother, has no ill will. Consistently we can see that he has good *intentions*. When the others are conspiring to kill Joseph, Reuben does not *intend* to participate.

Genesis 37, verses 21 and 22 :

*But when Reuben heard it, he **tried** to save him from them. He said, "Let us not take his life."*

*And Reuben went on, "Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves"—**intending** to save him from them and restore him to his father*.

Reuben walked away from his little brother in the pit. He *intended* to come back. He *intended* to make it right. He *intended* to subvert the scheme.

But he didn't. Instead, Reuben came back to an empty pit. The *impact* of Reuben's absence was Joseph's enslavement.

And Reuben **never** took responsibility. Fast forwarding many many years, Joseph has risen from slavery to become the viceroy of Egypt. His brothers have no knowledge of what has become of him. They come to Egypt begging for food.

Joseph, seething with anger for what has been done to him, takes revenge.

And what does Reuben do? Does he apologize? Does he say that he shouldn't have abandoned Joseph in the pit?

The opposite. Ruben effectively says, “This is all **your** fault. I didn't *intend* for this to happen. This is on the rest of you.”

In chapter 42 of Genesis, verse 22, The Torah says:

*Then Reuben spoke up and said to them, “Did **I** not tell you, ‘Do no wrong to the boy’? But **you** paid no heed.*

On Yom Kippur, we need to remember that we are not the children of Reuben. We are the children of Judah. Good intentions are nice. But *impact* is what matters most.

When Benjamin is held captive for a crime he never committed, Judah takes accountability for *impact*. Judah puts himself on the line:

Chapter 44, verses 32-34:

*I beg you to let **me** remain as a slave instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers.*

Judah does not talk about his intentions. They are irrelevant. Judah is responsible for the harm he caused. Our tradition valorizes Judah for a reason. If we are to make true amends, we have to be honest about our *impact*. No excuses.

Reuben didn't *intend* harm for Joseph. But he caused incredible harm. He is responsible for the impact.

Captain Stockton did not *intend* to harm President Tyler's family. But he did. He is responsible for the impact.

We didn't *intend* to forget our anniversary. But we did. We *impacted* our spouse nonetheless. We are responsible.

We didn't *intend* to use a harsh tone or a word that hit a raw nerve. But we did. We impacted our friend nonetheless. We are responsible.

We didn't intend to take the well-deserved credit away from a co-worker. But we did. We *impacted* them nevertheless. We are responsible.

When we all say the *Ashamnu*, when we say *Al Chet*, when we beat our chests, the question is not how good our *intentions* may have been… it is how we *impacted* those around us nevertheless. No matter how good our intentions are, to be Jewish is to be radically accountable for impact.

That being said, our tradition also has a sacred place for acknowledging intention. In fact, we have a word for that, *Kavanah*.

For those who wish for healing and reconciliation, the acknowledgment of good intentions, *Kavanah*, is the surest path forward.

In prayer, we are effective when we not only say the words on the page, but when we have intention behind them… *Kavanah*. The 11th-century philosopher Bahya Ibn Pakudah named this poignantly. He said: "Prayer without *kavanah* is like a body without a soul".

In the ten commandments, the first nine are about behavior or impact (stealing and murder, adultery and truth-telling, etc.). But the tenth commandment is about *Kavanah*… thou shalt not covet. 9/10 of the tradition is focused on impact. But that 1/10 matters as well. What we feel inside… whether we are motivated by jealousy and envy and hate… that carries weight as well. It made the list of the Big Ten, after all.

In the extreme, *kavanah* is the difference between murder and manslaughter. That difference is important not only in Western law, but in Jewish law as well. It's a game changer.

In the Torah there is a fascinating concept called the *ir Miklat,* the city of refuge. These are six cities which are to be built in the land of Israel, designed specifically to create safety for those who were unintentionally responsible for the death of another.

In chapter 21 of Exodus, verses 12 to 13, the Torah explains:

(12) *One who fatally strikes a person shall be put to death. (13) If they did not do it by design…I will assign you a place to which they can flee.*

In the Book of Numbers, chapter 35, examples are given of what sorts of unintentional actions would warrant admission into an *Ir Miklat*.

*"If he pushed him **without** malice aforethought or hurled any object at him **unintentionally**, (23) or **inadvertently** dropped upon him any deadly object of stone, and death resulted…"*

What is the difference between a person who the Torah punishes for murder, and a person who the Torah secures in a City of Refuge? *Kavanah*. Intention.

The impact is not denied. Even though a person did not intend manslaughter… they must leave their home and begin anew in the city of refuge.

However, for healing to be possible, an honest recognition of good intentions…*Kavanah*, must be accounted for as well.

On Yom Kippur, we are in the position of asking for *forgiveness*. We are also in the position of being asked to *forgive*.

Our father did not intend to imply that he loved that one more. He has owned his impact. He is truly sorry. Can we recognize his good intentions?

Our sister did not intend to spoil the surprise we planned. She has owned her impact. She is regretful. Can we acknowledge her good intentions?

Our instructor did not intend to embarrass us in front of the class. They have owned their impact. They are deeply remorseful. Can we acknowledge their good intentions?

When we receive an apology, a true apology, one that does not include excuses, one that does not use the word *but* even once, one which is sincere and authentic, we have a choice. The impact is unquestionable. And … if we want the relationship to repair, are we ready to name that the *Kavanah* was not malicious but rather misguided?

Intention does not negate impact. Impact does not nullify intention.

The Jewish tradition is overwhelmingly more focused on impact. We are a people of action. We are the children of Judah. Whether or not we intended it, we are accountable for all that we've done.

Nevertheless, our Masorah honors the import of intention, *Kavanah*. Life without *kavanah* is like a body without a soul. The soul of our relationships, whether with friends or with family, depends on *Kavanah*.

This Yom Kippur, may we be radically accountable for the impact of our actions.

This Yom Kippur, may we be compassionately understanding about the intentions of those we love.

May our impact be healing. May our intentions be pure.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah.