I am sorry to tell you that this is a holiday defined by apologies. Teshuvah is a process of repentance and renewal with hopes of making amends for past wrong-doing and paving a better path forward. Anyone who delves deeply into the themes of repentance and atonement will be scouring their memories for possible slights and mishaps in the past year. If you haven’t apologized already, then you better get it done before the deadline! But I always wonder whether an apology is really the best choice when it could only lead to exacerbating an injury. Especially in cases when the aggravated party is a friend or family member, is it always a good idea to remind others of our past mistakes? In such cases, is saying we are sorry the best choice when doing so actually is a selfish way to clear our own consciences? Perhaps the act of apologizing alone is not enough – let us analyze the elements that are needed for an authentic demonstration of regret. It is telling that in our modern times there are apology experts and consultants, who work with politicians and celebrities on the art of public apology. But we don’t need a modern consultant to guide us – Maimonides explains the elements of an earnest apology.

* One must first express regret. A good apology begins by saying explicitly what one is sorry for doing – note this is not shame for how someone else felt, but ownership of the root cause of what was hurtful.
* Next, it is necessary to take responsibility for the wrongdoing. When we explain why our actions were wrong, we show understanding and potentially empathy for the perspectives of others.
* Thirdly, we make restitution. We can ask about repairing the damage and rebuilding trust in a relationship. This shows that an offending behavior had an impact that needs to be addressed. Sometimes our efforts to repair may be rebuffed at first or altogether – restitution cannot be rushed or forced on the other person.
* Afterwards, the conversation can turn to future steps. A genuine promise to change or not repeat the addressed error shows self-awareness about the cause of past mistakes.
* Only then can we reach the final step, asking forgiveness. This is tricky because if we have already caused offense in another person, it can be unfair to put the burden of forgiveness on them too. This means we might not expect forgiveness immediately, and so must be willing to wait for the other person to be ready to forgive. In Jewish tradition, we make such a forgiveness request three times and no more.

In recent years, apologies and the intentional process of repentance have gained more attention. Some of this comes from an evolution of our societal expectations for each other. Political correctness, awareness of difference, and shifts in hierarchy power structures have introduced more care into relationships at work, with strangers, and within our homes. These changes have also given us the opportunity to reexamine past encounters through our modern lenses. Gender norms, situations, and language that may have been excused or glossed over in the past are now correctly identified as microaggressions, misconduct, and assault. The #meToo movement has empowered survivors and bystanders who may have been silent in the past to reveal their experiences – and we need to listen. Even our Jewish world is not immune from this realization. Ethics reviews and listening campaigns in the URJ and many movement organizations have revealed past acts that are reprehensible and painful. There is need for apology and teshuvah.

But what does an apology look like after so many years and for previous actions now recognized for their serious impact? Some offenders passed away long ago – others may dismiss the allegations as a product of their time or as beyond the realm of current memory. In many cases, because these concerns were not addressed when the incidents occurred, the accused have gone about their careers, sometimes to heights of success or prodigious results. Allegations of misconduct are serious and must be accounted for accordingly. But to what degree do these acts overshadow other aspects of the perpetrator’s career?

In other words, we must consider not only the individual, their position, and crime, but also their legacy, produced content, and place in our history. Consider the case of an actor who won acclaim for portraying endearing characters or the producer who created films of epic scope. We can call them out for their wrongdoing or fire them from future positions. We can even cancel them, to use modern parlance, and seek to destroy their fame and reputation. But what do we do with their past work? Do we scrub all records of their careers, remove all copies of their art from our shelves and disallow stores from selling or streaming the movies the now unveiled deviant created throughout their lives?

To offer additional examples, consider the case of Shlomo Carlebach – a renowned composer of Jewish liturgical music. His compositions have been featured during Shabbat services and holidays at synagogues including this one. He was celebrated as a singing rabbi and a prodigious teacher of Torah. He was even an advocate for Female leadership in Orthodox settings. After his death in 1994, Lilith magazine, a Jewish feminist publication, catalogued allegations of sexual impropriety against him. Many Jewish communal leaders were even aware of his controversial behavior but neglected to act out of fear of disturbing his influence. As the veracity of these allegations came to light, we faced a question: how do we respond now? Do we continue to play his compositions in our synagogues? How do we separate the work from the person? One House of worship, Central Synagogue in New York announced a one-year moratorium on Carlebach’s music. Other synagogues sought new compositions to replace the Carlebach tunes in liturgical repertoire.

 Here is another example that hits a bit closer to home. As many of you know I grew up as a camper and staff member at the flagship Reform Jewish Summer camp, Olin Sang Ruby Union Institute, or OSRUI, in Oconomowoc, WI. My years at camp were fundamental in my eventual decision to pursue becoming a Rabbi – in this, I am not alone. Alumni of OSRUI are represented by an outsized margin among graduates of HUC. And so it is with great joy that I seized the opportunity to serve as a member of faculty at camp in recent summers.

The longtime camp director of OSRUI, Jerry Kaye led the camp for 48 years until his retirement in 2017. The recent report on sexual harassment by the URJ names Jerry specifically for making unwanted advances toward adult women during his tenure. Publicizing this report is necessary to provide closure to everyone affected and to encourage other survivors to come forward. Hopefully, Jerry Kaye and others named in the report will pursue steps of teshuvah.

Most reports of sexual misconduct are disconcerting and I hear them as calls to action. When I heard this report about a man I know and with whom I interviewed and interacted, though, the news felt different. Does the reality of some of his behaviors change the impact Jerry had on the world of Jewish camping and the inspiration of so many to pursue positions of leadership in our movement? How do these stories change the way Jerry is remembered and memorialized? One outcome is that the building constructed and named for him upon his retirement as a gathering place on camp has been stripped of his name. Summer camps now include training and safety measures to protect everyone with channels for reporting and oversight. But is preparing for a better future sufficient to make up for communal errors of the past?

In current times, we not only have the benefit of a more informed social conscience, but also great advances in modern technology. We can now decry allegations of abuse on social media and share news stories immediately with the world. Any google search of Carlebach or Kaye will immediately remind us of these incidents and help us remember what they did. But if every incident is forever captured on the sticky surface of the internet, is it possible to fully make teshuvah? If an abuser realizes the error of their ways and seeks counseling to grow and evolve, should their past be engraved on the virtual world for every future employer new acquaintance to discover?

In the early chapters of Genesis, sibling rivalry is invented between Abel and Cain with mortal consequences. Cain is allowed to live after he murders his brother, but his sentence is to bear a distinctive mark, that wherever he should go, his crime will be evident to others and a reminder to himself. Later in the Book of Numbers, Miriam speaks against Moses and his choice of wife. For her insolence or distrust in God, she is punished with leprosy, a visible scaly affliction, marking her for her crimes. But unlike Cain, Miriam bears the mark for a week before she is healed and able to return to the community.

 These are but two imperfect examples from our textual tradition that we might use to guide our practice of apology. We recognize that as our culture progresses, much of how we interact changes with it. But the essence of Maimonides guide to Teshuvah remains relevant in our modern world. There is no singular correct way that we can make restitution when we are in error. Furthermore, we cannot expect others to follow the same rubric when we feel offended or hurt. But when we agree to shared communal values, we may move closer not to a world without need of apology, but to a world where we can collectively grow together.