

It's Never Too Late to Atone

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Yom Kippur was always my favorite holiday. Even in nursery school, when all the other kids liked Purim because of the costumes, Hanukkah because of the latkes, and Passover because of the long vacation, I was hooked on Yom Kippur. If holidays were like kids, I once thought when I was still a boy, then Purim and Hanukkah would be the most popular in class, Rosh Hashanah would be the most beautiful, and Yom Kippur would be a kind of weirdo, a loner, but the most interesting of all. When I think about that now, “a kind of weirdo, a loner, but the most interesting of all” is exactly how I saw myself then, so maybe the real reason I loved Yom Kippur so much is that I thought it was like me. The thing is that even though I’m not a kind of weirdo anymore, definitely not a loner, and grown-up enough now to understand that I’m not the most interesting, I’m still in love with that holiday.



Maybe it's because Yom Kippur is the only holiday I know that, because of its very nature, recognizes human weakness. If on Passover, Moses and God settled accounts with the Egyptians, on Hanukkah Judah Maccabee beat the crap out of the Greeks, and on Israeli Independence day we fought bravely against the Arabs and won

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our country, on Yom Kippur we're not a heroic dynasty or a people, but a collection of individuals who look in the mirror, are ashamed of what demands shame, and ask forgiveness for what can be forgiven. And maybe that was actually the quality that attracted me to Yom Kippur from the very beginning, that it is the most private of all our holidays, a day when you stand alone before your deeds and their consequences without TV, without bustling cafés and restaurants, without stores crammed with merchandise, without all the rest of the day-to-day noise that makes

them more palatable. It's the holiday when you come face to face with your life as it is, and there's no stupid reality show to divert your attention, no news updates, no chocolate-chip ice cream cone to offer you some consolation.

For me, Yom Kippur was and remains *the* holiday, always. That's why, even though it's been years since I've bothered to wish people a happy new year on Rosh Hashanah, or since I've taken the trouble to dress up on Purim, as Yom Kippur approaches, I still apologize to people I feel I've hurt. It doesn't happen too many times, but when I finally call to ask for someone's forgiveness and I'm waiting in embarrassment for the phone to be answered, still praying deep down that no one will pick up so that I can settle for an apologetic message on the answering machine, I feel with every bone in my body that there's something very healthy about being compelled to ask for forgiveness. So, maybe it's easier to love a holiday that commands you to eat jelly

doughnuts than a holiday that requires you to put yourself in a vulnerable, uncomfortable position, but when you're finally done, you feel that, thanks to that weird holiday, you've gotten rid of a burden that has been oppressing you for a very long time without your even knowing how much.

My strangest Yom Kippur apology story begins when I was 4. One of the kids in my new preschool group was a pretty, sweet girl named Noa. She was quiet and smiley, two qualities I was not blessed with, and when I once accidentally touched her thick blonde hair, it felt like sticky cotton candy. I really wanted to play with her but didn't exactly know how to do it, so after six months of looking at her from a distance, I decided to make a move, and one morning, when I saw her running next to me in the yard, I stuck out my foot and tripped her.

Noa fell and hurt herself. She started to cry, and when the teacher ran over to help her, Noa pointed at me and said, "He did it. He tripped me." The teacher, who liked me very much, asked me if it was true, and I immediately said no. The teacher rebuked Noa, "Etgar is a good boy who never lies. Why are you making up such terrible things about him? You should be ashamed of yourself!" Noa, who'd almost stopped crying, started all over again, and the teacher stroked my head and walked off angrily. Right then I wanted to tell Noa I was sorry and confess to the teacher that I'd lied, but I couldn't find the courage. Meanwhile, another girl helped Noa walk over to the fountain so she could wash her scraped knee, and I remained standing in the yard.

Noa wasn't in kindergarten or in elementary school with me. In high school, during a break one day, a girl in my class mentioned Noa's full name and said she was a real grind, studying in the biology track. It was the first month of school, Rosh Hashanah had already passed, and Yom

Kippur was on the way, and when school ended that day, I waited for Noa near her classroom. She was almost the last one out, orange headphones on her head and a Sony Walkman in her hand. She looked completely different from how I remembered her from when I was 4; she barely smiled and had a lot of pimples on her face, but her hair was still thick and blonde and still looked like cotton candy. I went up to her, legs weak. It's always hard to say you're sorry, but saying it after 13 years is especially hard. I wanted to tell her that since that day in the preschool yard I'd tried hard not to lie, and that every time I felt the urge, I remembered her, her hair in tangles, crying and hurt in the yard, and immediately quashed the impulse and told the truth. I wanted to tell her that soon I'd be a man and go into the army and everything, and that when I looked back on my life, what I did to her then, at the age of 4, was the thing I was most ashamed of, and that even though so much time had passed, I wanted to make it up to her somehow: buy her a popsicle, lend her my sports bicycle for a week, or I didn't know what, something.

But instead of all that, the only thing that came out of my mouth was her name, "Noa," in a very shrill voice. Noa stopped, took off her headphones, and studied me. "I'm Etgar," I said, "Etgar Keret. We were once in the same

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preschool together.” She smiled and said she remembered preschool but didn’t remember me. I told her about how I tripped her and lied, and how she cried because of the affront and a little because of the pain, but she didn’t remember any of it.

“It was a long time ago,” she said, half-apologetically.

“But I remember,” I persisted, “and soon it’s going to be Yom Kippur, and I wanted to apologize.”

“Apologize for something stupid you did when you were 4?” she said and smiled that lovely smile I remembered from preschool, then added, “Were you this weird back in preschool, too?” She laughed and so did I, because the truth is I really was weird in preschool. “Apology accepted,” she said after a brief pause, and then put her orange headphones over her ears and left.

I remember going home from school on that day. I rode my bike, the pedals turned easily, the road felt smooth, and even the uphill parts felt like they were downhill. I never saw her again, but since then, whenever I have a strong urge not to tell the truth, I think of her outside her high-school classroom, smiling broadly, her face full of pimples, saying she accepted my apology. Then I take a deep breath, and lie.

Translated by Sondra Silverston

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