



This packet features four sets of content which are designed to support an anti-racist High Holy Day season. Each week features an introduction, piece of media, call to action, and more resources. We encourage you to use them to inspire reflection and personal curiosity in your own communities.

Part 1: Vulnerability / Accountability / Shame

Part 2: How to Apologize

Part 3: Repairing Communal Harm

Part 4: Bystanders and Upstanders

About Not Free to Desist

Not Free to Desist is dedicated to bringing about an anti-racist Jewish community. NFD envisions a world in which all Jewish institutions and funders make a commitment to the concrete racial justice goals as outlined in the seven obligations of the Not Free to Desist letter. With a guiding focus of centering Jews of color in the work, and a commitment to anti-racist policies and practices, NFD seeks to help organizations achieve long-term structural change and a more just allocation of resources.

Part 1: Vulnerability/Accountability/Shame

Elul is the preparatory month before the high holidays. Elul is a month of action, in which we are supposed to seek out anyone whom we might have harmed or caused distress in the last year and apologize, to prepare ourselves for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It gives us a chance to reflect on our own personal journeys and clear the path for a new year. In the coming weeks Not Free to Desist will share weekly reflections to help individuals connect their High Holiday preparation with anti-racism.

Over the last year, we have heard many people ask “What’s the most important skill to have when approaching anti-racism work?” or “How do I even begin?”

One of the most significant things we’ve learned over the last few years is the importance of vulnerability-- there’s no way around it in anti-racism work. As Brené Brown puts it, “Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity. If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.”

When it comes to antiracism, we will all show up in different ways. We will all start our journey’s with varying levels of knowledge, skill or experience. And that’s okay. No matter how we show up we can all start by recognizing the importance of recognizing and embracing our own vulnerability.

Now, practicing vulnerability can be scary, but it can also be one of the greatest tools in our toolbox for racial equity. Our vulnerability can be the root of our compassion, our empathy and our creativity. It is the entryway to centering ourselves in our own power and the basis by which we can connect to others and find allies in this work.

Below we are sharing the poem “Invitation to Brave Space” by Micky ScottBey Jones. We encourage you to read the poem, and consider the following reflection questions:

What are the times when I’ve been most vulnerable during my anti-racism journey?
Where did I find inspiration to be brave?

Is there a time when I have allowed someone else to demonstrate their vulnerability in their anti-racism journey? How can I help someone else be brave?

How can I tap into vulnerability as a way to help build the skills to manifest change?

Part 2: How to Apologize

Elul is the preparatory month before the high holidays. In the coming weeks Not Free to Desist will share weekly reflections to help individuals connect their High Holiday preparation with anti-racism.

According to Maimonides, four of the most important parts of teshuvah are the following:

1. Verbally confess your mistake and ask for forgiveness (Mishneh Torah 1:1).
2. Express sincere remorse, resolving not to make the same mistake again (Mishneh Torah 2:2).
3. Do everything in your power to “right the wrong,” to appease the person who has been hurt (Mishneh Torah 2:9).
4. Act differently if the same situation happens again (Mishneh Torah 2:1).

For many of us, apologizing might feel like a scary or even risky thing to do. To admit to one’s mistakes is to admit fallibility and open oneself to criticism. But in apologizing, we are committing to doing better. It requires that we have faith in our own capacity to change - even incrementally.

Luckily, we can look to the wisdom of others when journeying down the path of teshuva and apology. One such resource is the writing of Mia Mingus, a writer, educator and trainer for transformative justice and disability justice. Mingus writes that transformative justice can be thought of as a framework for getting in “right relation,’ or creating justice together.” At the center of this framework is creating a culture of accountability, which in turn fosters vibrant relationships and communities.

Too often the system of teshuva looks like a recipe -- you do this, then this, then this is what comes out, but it’s actually a complicated system of communal understanding. This includes a lot of messiness-- we often are forced to live in ambiguity. But just because it’s imperfect doesn’t mean it’s not the right thing to do. Teshuva is a communal process -- as individuals we might confront our shame, then allow ourselves to be vulnerable by admitting our fault or transgression.

The Four Parts of Accountability: How to Give a Genuine Apology Part 1 can help us break down the very specific steps in a meaningful apology. We might ask ourselves: Why am I apologizing? How does self-reflection impact our ability to apologize and it’s effectiveness? How can I access my own humility in decenter myself in this apology? Do I, as the person who wronged you, get to decide when it’s repaired?

Apologies in practice might take different forms-- either personal, one-to-one, addressed to a group or the public. The commentator and writer adrienne maree

brown also writes about the relationship between apologies and transformational justice. In considering the nuanced questions related to public transgression and public apologies, Brown asks “can we release our binary ways of thinking of good and bad in order to collectively grow from mistakes?”

We encourage you to read the highlighted work of Mia Mingus and adrienne maree brown and consider the following questions:

- *What is one thing you would like to atone for this year?*
- *Looking at the “four parts of accountability,” which part have you not done yet? Make a plan and do it.*

Part 3: Forgiveness

The common reading of Simon Wiesenthal's, "The Sunflower " is a sober assessment of the limits of forgiveness. I myself, after 9/11/2001, read this story to a full congregation in San Francisco. But now, after the death of George Floyd, z"l, we see another narrative:

Can any crime, no matter how horrific, be pardoned, or are there limits to forgiveness? Are we permitted to forgive crimes committed against others? What is required of those who have committed unspeakable harm, and what do we owe to the victims?

The response of Abraham Joshua Heschel

Over fifty years ago, the rabbi of Brisk, a scholar of extraordinary renown, revered also for his gentleness of character, entered a train in Warsaw to return to his hometown. The rabbi, a man of slight stature, and of no distinction of appearance, found a seat in a compartment. There he was surrounded by traveling salesmen, who, as soon as the train began to move, started to play cards.

As the game progressed, the excitement increased. The rabbi remained aloof and absorbed in meditation; such aloofness was annoying to the rest of the people and one of them suggested to the rabbi to join in the game. The rabbi answered that he never played cards. As time passed, the rabbi's aloofness became even more annoying and one of those present said to him: "Either you join us, or leave the compartment." Shortly thereafter, he took the rabbi by his collar and pushed him out of the compartment. For several hours the rabbi had to stand on his feet until he reached his destination, the city of Brisk.

Brisk was also the destination of the salesmen. The rabbi left the train where he was immediately surrounded by admirers welcoming him and shaking his hands! "Who is this man?" Asked the salesman. "You don't know him? The famous rabbi of Brisk!

"The salesman's heart sank. He had not realized whom he had offended. He quickly went over to the rabbi to ask forgiveness. The rabbi declined to forgive him. In his hotel room, the salesman could find no peace. He went to the rabbi's house and was admitted to the rabbi's study. "Rabbi," he said, "I am not a rich man. I have, however, savings of three hundred rubles. I will give them to you for charity if you will forgive me," The rabbi's answer was brief: "NO!"

The salesman's anxiety was unbearable. He went to the synagogue to seek solace. When he shared his anxiety with some people in the synagogue, they were deeply surprised. How could their rabbi, so gentle a person, be so unforgiving? Their advice was for him

to speak to the rabbi's eldest son and to tell him of the surprising attitude taken by his father.

When the rabbi's son heard the story, he could not understand his father's obstinacy. Seeing the anxiety of the man, he promised to discuss the matter with his father.

It is not proper, according to Jewish law, for a son to criticize his father directly. So the son entered his father's study and began a general discussion of Jewish law and turned to the laws of forgiveness. When the principle was mentioned that a person who asks for forgiveness three times should be granted forgiveness, the son mentioned the name of the man who was in great anxiety.

Thereupon the rabbi of Brisk answered: "I cannot forgive him. He did not know who I was. He offended a common man. Let the salesman go to him and ask for forgiveness."

No one can forgive crimes committed against other people. It is therefore preposterous to assume that anybody alive can extend forgiveness for the suffering of any one of the six million people who perished. According to Jewish tradition, even God Himself can only forgive sins committed against Himself, not against man.

It leaves us to contemplate: In the case of crimes against the collective, that offend our humanity, how do we repair the communal harm?

Part 4: Bystanders and Upstanders

In the story of The Rabbi of Brisk, shared last week, we read of an incident in a train compartment in which the Rabbi of Brisk and card playing traveling salesmen are traveling. Then, “one of them suggested to the rabbi to join in the game.” Another “took the rabbi by his collar and pushed him out of the compartment. For several hours the rabbi had to stand on his feet until he reached his destination, the city of Brisk.” One man attempted to apologize to the Rabbi. It appears that this man was the salesman who had pushed the rabbi out of the train compartment.

But what about the other guys?

The ones who witnessed the Rabbi being pushed out of the compartment and then witnessed the crowds greeting the Rabbi? Did they take the train home with the salesman who pleaded with the rabbi’s eldest son? What story did they tell their families? We saw this thing, they might say, it was terrible. What could we do? What should we do now?

The last nine minutes of the life of George Floyd.

The salesmen did not know the rabbi of Brisk. He cannot forgive them and they cannot apologize. But, they are part of his story. Were they embarrassed by the story? Contribute about their inaction?

Our knee was not on the neck of George Floyd. Are we embarrassed by the story? Contribute about our action or inaction?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “No Time for Neutrality,” in Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity.

“The root of any religious faith is a sense of embarrassment, of inadequacy. I would cultivate a sense of embarrassment. It would be a great calamity for humanity if the sense of embarrassment disappeared, if everybody was an all-rightnik, with an answer to every problem. We have no answer to ultimate problems. We really don’t know. In this not knowing, in this sense of embarrassment, lies the key to opening the wells of creativity. Those who have no embarrassment remain sterile. We must develop this contrition or sense of embarrassment.”

If our embarrassment of White Supremacy leads to the opening the wells of creativity then this will be a Shana Tova

If our embarrassment of Global Warming leads to the opening the wells of creativity

then this will be a Shana Tova

If our embarrassment of Housing Inequality leads to the opening the wells of creativity
then this will be a Shana Tova

May our embarrassments become blessings. Shana Tova.

Appendix

You can explore more resources on vulnerability and brave spaces here:

<https://www.citybureau.org/notebook/2019/12/19/safe-spaces-brave-spaces-and-why-we-gon-be-alright>