

# ST ALBANS MASORTI SYNAGOGUE

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## **Fairy Stories, the crooked and the straight**

Lindsey Lohan would like to apologise to all the families who have lost someone to a drink driver.

This was in the papers.

Lohan – she’s an actress and professional party-gurl – got drunk, got in a car and got caught.

Thankfully she crashed her car before she could kill anyone else.

But she still said sorry, to those who have lost their loved ones.

Nonsense really – an apology like that.

I’ve met a family who have lost a daughter to a drunk driver.

The daughter was walking on the pavement when the car hit her.

Silly really.

Desperately, tragically, awfully silly.

And no amount of apology or tears or anything else makes any difference at all.

And the loss of this young woman remains one of the great tragedies I have encountered.

*Kol Nidrei ve-esarei vkonamei*

May all the vows, promises and pledges be repealed, cancelled, voided and annulled.

Dear God, if only.

If only all the wrongs, failings, slips, deceits and sins could really be unwound, like threading the film in reverse back through a movie projector.

Dear God, if only.

Teshuvah – repentance – say the Rabbis in a sparkly mood.

Teshuvah was created before the world.

In other words long before there were jungles to deforest, and species to render extinct and people to hurt – with our words and our bullets and our intoxicated driving.

Teshuvah was already in place.

How else, the Rabbis ask, would it be possible to stand, with the knowledge of everything we have done?

If only Teshuvah really did work like that,

Like the eraser function on my computer’s graphic’s package, removing coloured pixels as I wave my magic mouse across the pad.

If only.

I don’t like the message of the *kol nidrei*.

In fact there is a certain irony that here, in this most grown up of services, when our kids are tucked up safely at home, we make up a fairytale to tell one another.

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But this is no time for fairy stories.  
So let me dispel one of the greatest untruths of our age.  
Saying sorry doesn't work.  
'Say sorry and come and have a cuddle' is a way of bringing up children. It's not a way to treat an adult.  
Saying sorry doesn't undo the damage we wreck on those we love, those we hardly know or the world we live in.  
Not even if you really, really, really mean it.  
Teshuvah is a wonderful idea, but it can't repair that which is beyond repair in this world.  
At its best, say the Rabbis, Teshuvah can wipe out any cosmic debt owed in the world to come.  
But saying sorry doesn't work.

There is a chilling moment in the Talmud<sup>1</sup> – at least it chilled me when I first came across it.  
It is in a seemingly technical discussion regarding what a person is supposed to do if they miss bringing the special *korban* – offering for Succot on the prescribed day. It's OK, the Rabbis say, they can bring it the following day and it still counts. Even – and here the Rabbis are being generous – you can still bring your Succot offering on the Eight Day – Shmini Atzeret, even though Succot only really lasts seven days.  
But if you miss the eighth day – you've had it.  
And then the Rabbis quote a verse.  
I remember the first time I came across it, having to look it up.  
The Hebrew was a bit tricky for me  
*Muvat lo yuchal litkon* –  
It's from the book of Ecclesiastes<sup>2</sup> – the grimmest book in the Torah.  
*Muvat lo yuchal litkon* – That which is crooked cannot be made straight.  
I remember being hit by the forcefulness of the expression.  
I had thought we were discussing sacrificial offerings. Not the vicissitudes of life.

*Muvat lo yuchal litkon* –  
And, elsewhere the Talmud tells us that if you don't get your night-time shema in before the first glimmers of the morning light.  
You can't catch up on what has been lost.  
*Muvat lo yuchal litkon.*

And most chillingly, in the case of an adulterous relationship where the woman conceives.  
*Muvat lo yuchal litkon* – That which is crooked cannot be made straight.  
The child will live with that stigma for their life, and even beyond their own life.

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<sup>1</sup> Chagigah 9a

<sup>2</sup> 1:15

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*Kol nidrei* – let all vows be annulled.

*Teshuvah* – let all sins be deleted from the record as if they never occurred.

These are the wrong messages, for a day like today.

These are the wrong messages for a planet like our own.

There is, I feel, a strong ecological issue at stake.

We are, as a society, slowly starting to take global warming seriously.

But the feeling still seems to be that we can carry on a little longer, burning up the planet, melting the glaciers and wiping out the ecosystem for polar bears, then say sorry and suddenly it will all be OK.

The glaciers will come rolling back, the temperatures will come a tumbling down and we'll all be able to get on with lives as if nothing had ever threatened the very fabric of our existence.

Another Rabbinic text

"When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: "Look at my works! See how beautiful they are—how excellent! See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it."<sup>3</sup>

It won't get better and even if we do say sorry, and even if we do mean it, the Yangtze Dolphin and the Dodo and the rest of 'em really are gone. Forever.

*Muvat lo yuchal litkon* – That which is crooked cannot be made straight.

But the crookedness impacts on our personal lives too.

Ian McEwan's novel, *Atonement*, makes the same point.

The title is a joke.

The book is really about the impossibility of putting back what has gone wrong.

In the beginning a vase is broken by a couple – it started as simply as that.

A small girl sees.

She leaps to conclusions and when the man tries to apologise for the breaking the vase, he stumbles and the small girl exploits that mistake too.

And then she becomes deliberate in wanting to do the man harm.

It's such a gently trod path, you can see how easy it is for one step to follow the other.

But by the time the girl has realised what she has done, by the time the reader has caught their breath, it's far far too late.

*Muvat lo yuchal litkon*.

Too many lives have been impacted, like ripples extending from a pool.

It is too late to rein in escaped ripples.

It is always too late to rein in escaped ripples.

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<sup>3</sup> Midrash Kohelet Rabbah, 1 on Ecclesiastes 7:13

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In the movie version of McEwan's novel there is a heart-rending moment, just after the point when you start to feel there is to be no happy ending. Several of the key scenes in the film appear again, but this time running in reverse. The vase reconstitutes before your eyes. The mistakes are miraculously undone. And for a moment you think it's going to be OK. But no.  
*Muvat lo yuchal litkon.*  
The novel ends without a happy ending. Sorry isn't good enough.

I was once, and I remember it well, let down by a friend. She apologised. She meant it, I offered forgiveness. But our friendship was broken. I never trusted her again. I never relied on her friendship.  
*Muvat lo yuchal litkon*

Gloomy isn't it; sitting here with the clumsy attempts of our life before us. The missed opportunities, the outright failures. The sins of omission and commission. The sins of negligence and recklessness and deliberation. And it's so good to sing the ol' song  
*Kol nidrei* – as if everything might be made better.

I wonder if our reliance on a childish notion of; 'Now say you are sorry and come and have a cuddle.' Might actually be getting in the way of our changing in the year to come. I wonder if, on Kol Nidrei night, we spend too long telling people we are sorry, and not nearly long enough committing ourselves to not making the mistakes in the first place. No, of course we can't be perfect. We are all human after all. But we can be a lot more careful. This is something to aim at in the coming year. Be more careful, for if we break the vase or spoil and destroy God's world, through laziness, selfishness and carelessness. There will be no one else to repair it.  
*Muvat lo yuchal litkon.*

We need to be more careful, and instead we are becoming more and more hasty. We live in a society that inclines to the instantaneous. Instant food, instant responses, instant gratification.

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This desire for the instantaneous breeds carelessness  
And it's all very unjewish.

Judaism is a training in delayed gratification.  
It's a training in living a careful life.  
It is an exercise in, and here, the English word is quite perfect – observance, looking carefully and responding more carefully still.

Before we eat we say a blessing.  
We even check an ingredients' label.  
If we eat meat we pause before we return to eating milk – the idea is to sensitize ourselves to what it is to take an animals life for the sake of our own bellies.

We have rules on how to use language.  
Lashon Hara – gossip, is to be avoided.  
The insidious creep of pain caused by the, 'did they didn't they' speculation about the McCanns is not a Jewish way of speech.  
We should abstain from it.

We have rules on how to use money, how to treat refugees,  
We even had rules on how to put on shoes and socks.

So many rules that the Rabbis were accused of being pointless legalists.  
But all the rules have a very significant point indeed.  
The point is this.

Our actions count.  
Every one of them is important.  
Even cosmically important.  
The way we put on our socks, the food we eat, the way we treat strangers and most certainly the way we use language are all important.  
There is, as Daniel Matt, one of the leading writers on the Zohar put it, a terrifying potential in each and every one of our actions.  
So it behoves us to be careful, to pause, to reflect before we leap into action, to treat our lives more gently, to take care.

To take care.  
That's another perfectly judged English phrase  
'Take care', in English, equates loving something, and being cautious.  
Love and caution going together – that is the Jewish way.


The great Medieval scholar, Rambam taught;<sup>4</sup>  
A person must see themselves as half worthy and half guilty.

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<sup>4</sup> MT Hil Tesh 3:4

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And so too all the world, as if it were half worthy and half guilty.

A person sins one sin, behold they tip themselves, and tip the whole world, onto the scale of guilt.

A person performs one good deed, behold they tip themselves, and tip the whole world, onto the scale of merit.

Everything counts.

Everything is capable of tipping the scales.

We would do well to watch a little more carefully the language we use, the food we eat, the way we use and abuse money.

We must become more observant, more careful

Because - all our singing and fairy stories aside.

- Because every action has the power to tip over the scales of the whole world
- Because *Muvat lo yuchal litkon* – That which is crooked cannot be made straight.
- Because we should see to it that we do not spoil and destroy God's world; for if we do, there will be no one else to repair it.
- Because saying sorry doesn't undo the pain we cause our fellows

And next year, we would do better with less to seek to erase.