

**It Is Never Too Late**  
**Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie**

What if the injured party is dead? How, then, do you repent?

My grandmother was a take-charge Jewish woman, a business executive in the 1930s long before such things were common. She was a committed Jew with no patience for traditions she thought meaningless. She was a Zionist when Zionists were hard to find. Devoted to her family but also to her family business, she hired housekeepers to help with her children when Jewish mothers did not do such things.

In the last year of her life, I was a rabbinical student, overwhelmed with work, concerned with my own family and - inevitably - with myself. I kept telling myself: Call Bama (which is what her grandchildren called her). She had not been well, although none of her illnesses seemed life threatening. I didn't call her, and she died suddenly. And I have been asking myself for 35 years: Why didn't I call?

The challenge at the Holidays is sometimes not the big sins - violence, evil thoughts, and lewd associations - but the smaller ones: unwilling and unintentional sins.

How do I repent at this season for the sins against my grandmother? How do I move forward?

To some extent, I don't because I can't. The sin stays with me.

But I can do this: I set aside some time to reflect about her life and her accomplishments, about her love for her family, and about how much of what I have become derives from who she was.

And I think about those who are important in my life whom I have been neglecting. And I call them.

[Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie is President of the Union for Reform Judaism. [www.urj.org](http://www.urj.org)]

We can all understand and relate to what Rabbi Yoffie is talking about. We have all had the best of intentions about so many things: visiting people, making a donation to a charity, volunteering for an organization whose work we respect. But there are so many other things that pull on our time, so many obligations that seem to take precedence over these simple acts of loving kindness.

It is especially true at this time of year, as we think about how do live a more holy life, that we can look a little more closely at the importance of these acts of loving kindness.

When the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the Jews were lost. The Temple had been the centerpiece of their spiritual and religious lives. Through animal sacrifices, they acknowledged God's presence in their daily lives, expressed appreciation for their abundance and atoned for their sins. In fact the only way they could atone for sins was by sacrificing an animal.

We have a midrash that helps us understand the importance of those sacrifices and what took their place.

*Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai* once was walking with his disciple *Rebbe Yehoshua* near Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple. *Rebbe Yehoshua* looked at the Temple ruins and said: *Oy lanu*, Whoa to us! The place which atoned for the sins of the people Israel through the ritual of animal sacrifice lies in ruins!' Then *Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai* spoke to him these words of comfort: 'Be not grieved, my son.

There is another way of gaining atonement even though the Temple is destroyed. We must now gain atonement through deed of loving kindness.' For it is written, 'Loving kindness I desire, not sacrifice.' [*Hoshea 6:6.*]

These very acts of loving kindness that we have difficulty finding time for, they are the ways we currently atone for our sins. This is especially important at this time of year as we think about those people we have hurt and look to make amends to them.

Rabbi Yoffie gives us good advice about how to make up for our neglect. He says, it's important to set aside some time to reflect on the lives and accomplishments of people we admire. In addition, we can think about the people who are important to us and call them.

Our own President, David Frolich has additional advice for us. I was very inspired by his words in our last bulletin.

'When someone is recovering at home from an acute illness or trauma, how many times have I said to myself, I should call them, or go visit them? I should bring them a meal because I know it is difficult to fix meals when recovering at home... How many times have I said I should call them if only for 10 minutes, or visit them and bring them something small like some of Terri's great chocolate chip cookies? And then I see the e-mail from the Congregation titled, "Sad News" and I say to myself I blew it again.'

We have all had David's and Rabbi Yoffie's experiences. But this year we can do something different. We can take David's suggestion and reach out to people who need our help. We can do the mitzvah of *bikkur holim*, of visiting the sick, bringing well-needed and well-deserved light in someone's life. We can also do these acts of loving kindness to atone for our sins.

Please join David and me and others in our community in visiting those who will very much appreciate our company, our time and our attention. Call or email David and let him know that you want to join this effort. You will be glad that you did.

Shabbat Shalom.