



Temple Beth David

Enhanced by Mistake

Kol Nidrei Oct. 2011
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Moshe goes to see his Rabbi. *“Rabbi, last week, oye, I missed saying Birkhat HaMazon, the grace after meals. “Why?” asked the Rabbi. “Because I forgot to wash my hands before the meal.” “That’s twice you’ve broken the law, but you still haven’t told me why.”*

“Because the food wasn’t kosher.”

“You ate non-kosher food?” asked the Rabbi. “It wasn’t a Jewish restaurant.” “That makes it even worse,” said the now angry Rabbi. “Couldn’t you have eaten in a kosher one?” Moshe responds, “What, on Yom Kippur?”

Yom Kippur is probably the most famous holiday that both Jews and non Jews easily recognize. This is the day where Jews fast and say sorry for all the things they have done wrong over the past year. We recognize that there are no wholly pious among us. Even though most of us won’t be eating in a restaurant on this day like Moshe, we know that we fall short some times. There is no one here who hasn’t screwed up, made a bad decision, or made a mistake, especially my husband as I like to tell him. Ah, there I go again, *Al chet shechetanu*, forgive me for the sin I have committed just now for always blaming my husband and not taking personal responsibility.

We all make mistakes, none of us are perfect. Unlike Christianity, Judaism doesn’t present a paradigm of perfection. Our Biblical heroes, on the other hand, struggle with their limitations. Noah gets drunk and passes out naked after saving life on earth in a wooden ark. Hmmm, maybe after spending so many weeks in tight quarters, we can understand that one. Okay I’ll give you a better example, Jacob pretends to be his brother Esau in order to steal his blessing.

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Joseph, the one who saves our people from famine in Israel, tattle tales on his brothers. The great Moses strikes a man in anger and kills him. David, melech Yisrael El, sends an innocent man to his death just so he can marry his newly widowed wife Bathsheva. King Solomon marries many foreign women and ends up worshipping their gods. Our heroes are flawed individuals. They are people who make mistakes. They are far, far from perfect.

And so are we. We all make mistakes. This is the day when we force ourselves to acknowledge them. We say in our confession of sin, “We are not so arrogant and stiff-necked as to say before You, our God and God of all ages, we are perfect and have not sinned; rather do we confess: Aval anachnu chataanu, chatanu, avine, pashanu, we have gone astray, we have sinned, we have transgressed.” There are undoubtedly different kinds of mistakes. There is the kind where we accidently said something insensitive that hurt another’s feelings, there’s the kind where we got lost and were late for an event, there’s the one where our math was off, and the business projections were in error. And then there are life threatening mistakes that can happen. Alina Tugend, states in her book, Better by Mistake, that “Although the definition of mistake can be fluid, I believe it stops being a mistake when deliberate wrongdoing or malfeasance is involved.” She defines mistakes by the intent rather than the consequence. I think most of us would agree that when one purposely seeks to harm another, then the act is criminal and not a mistake. Most of us see mistakes happening when a person has good intentions however he/she misjudges the situation and then there are unplanned consequences. We are talking about to quote Tugend, “mistakes,” “errors,” “slips,” lapses” as well as “blunders,” “goofs,” and “screw-ups”.¹

Maimonides, back in the middle Ages, takes a whole book called Hilchot Teshuva in the Mishneh Torah to categorize sins as opposed to mistakes. He asks (1:2) What are light sins and which ones are severe? He defines severe by those that would make one cut off from the world to come. Sins like murder, betraying Jews, and even slander are considered severe. However, he sees lighter sins as the failure to perform the positive commandments. I imagine he is

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intending things like coming to services regularly, lighting candles, observing holidays, and etc. For Maimonides, teshuva, repentance is of paramount importance because there is no doubt that when one really scrutinizes human behavior there are a lot of things that one can do wrong.

Most of us here do not want to make a mistake, say something hurtful, or make an error, however sometimes the fear of being wrong can create an even worse situation. In effect, it can be wrong to be too fearful of doing wrong. Some of us have the tendency to strive for perfection and this can paralyze us personally and professionally. In the Tugend's book *Better by Mistake*, she shares a quote "Excellence involves enjoying what you are doing, feeling good about what you've learned, and developing confidence. Perfection involves feeling bad about 98 [out of 100] and always finding mistakes no matter how well you are doing."² How many times have we seen an event or project go fairly well but we nitpick the few things that weren't perfect. Yes, dinner was good but the noodles were a bit overcooked and the napkins just didn't match. We think we are doing a service to ourselves and others by hyper focusing at what wasn't a hundred percent but we can unintentionally undermine morale and our own confidence. The problem with perfection, Tugend writes, is "that the fear of making mistakes is a cudgel that hangs over so many of us, preventing us from not only taking risks in our personal and professional lives, but even more important, really accepting- not just giving lip service to- the truth that we all are human and imperfect."³ In essence, if we see ourselves as never making a mistake and our self image is caught up in this mind set, we are more likely to blame others for our short falls, less likely to learn from our experiences, and also less likely to take risks and try new adventures.

In order to live full and complete lives, we all have to be willing to take chances and this will also include making mistakes. If life is the proverbial baseball game, we have to get into the batter's box in order to have hope of hitting the ball. Sitting in the dugout of life, we will never hit that homerun. However up at home plate, we may strike out but at least there's a chance of the bat making contact. At least that is what I tell my son. At least you tried, at least you struck

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out swinging. For us as grownups, this means studying for tough exams, trying to get into a good school, applying for a job, writing that book, taking on a difficult work project, and just challenging ourselves. It means not being afraid to take a leap of faith and to be willing to make some mistakes along the way.

Al Franken in his book, “Oh, the Things I know” 202, says: “Mistakes are a part of being human. Appreciate your mistakes for what they are: precious life lessons that can only be learned the hard way. Unless it's a fatal mistake, which, at least, others can learn from.” Hopefully none of us are going to be in the position of making a fatal mistake, but despite the humor of Al Franken, he has a point. Our mistakes don't have to be final word on who we are or what we become. They can present an opportunity for improvement, change, and rebirth, if we are willing to view them in this way.

Our Biblical patriarch Jacob is a great example of one who made mistakes but became a better man for them. As a youth, he is one day he making red lentil stew when his brother Esau comes in famished. Observing the state of his brother, Jacob takes advantage of him by offering him lunch in exchange for his birth right. Now even though Esau may have shortchanged his birth right, Jacob still did wrong. What was worse, Jacob later on tricks his blind father into believing that he is his brother. Dressing in Esau's clothes, he masquerades as his brother, lies to his father, in order to gain his brother's blessing. When Esau learns of this latest deed, he is so upset that Jacob flees to his uncle Laban's home. Now if the story ended here, we would not be talking about Jacob. We wouldn't be talking about Israelites and it's doubtful we would be here praying in this sanctuary tonight. While at his uncle's home Jacob learns what it's like to be tricked, he learns what it's like to work hard, and it changes him. Twenty years later, the night before he is to meet up with Esau, Jacob struggles with a divine being, God, his past, or his conscience. Whatever it was that Jacob was struggling against, he ends up prevailing. The Torah tells us that the angel changes Jacob's name to Israel, and he limps away from the confrontation. Once Esau sees his brother after all these years, they both embrace in love and

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forgiveness. The man, whom we as Israelites descend from, is one who transcends his past, rises above it, and becomes a better person. We as Jacob's descendants are Israel, people who struggle with God as we struggle with becoming better people.

Teshuva or repentance is an essential part of learning from our mistakes. Dr. Louis Newman, a leading scholar in ethics, presented on a conference call of how we can use our past wrongs as springboard for change and as an opportunity for growth. He reminded me of a selection in the Talmud Ber. 34b, where Rabbi Abbahu said, "In the place where penitents stand, even the wholly righteous cannot stand." Meaning those who have struggled with themselves have a special standing before God even more than those who have been completely righteous. In other words, someone who has overcome their desire, want, or need deserve more credit than those who didn't. I, for example, was never a smoker. I may have had a cigarette here or there in my youth but not regularly and neither was I ever addicted. I, standing before you saying I don't smoke any cigarettes, is really no great victory. However for my husband it is different. When we met he smoked a pack or two a day. I didn't realize how hard quitting smoking can be until I saw what he went through. There was the physical withdrawal that was terrible for days and continued for a couple of weeks. Even after the physical withdrawal, he had to overcome the psychological addiction. It took months for him to feel that he was okay not having a cigarette. When my husband says he doesn't smoke cigarettes, he deserves a lot of credit. It's the same thing with an alcoholic, one who had done drugs, one who overeats, one who never exercises, and etc. When such a person makes a change, they deserve more credit than one who never struggled with themselves in such a way. In the midrash to Psalms 90:12, Rabbi Abbahu bar Ze'era said, "Great is repentance, for it preceded the creation of the world." Teshuva came before creation itself, it can defy the way we believe things ought to or should occur. Repentance has the power to recreate our reality, if we take it to heart.

In order for true repentance to occur, one must confess what they have done wrong according to Maimonides. One must first confess, i.e., take personal responsibility for their act and truly feel

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remorse. Next they must correct the situation, pay back the money, fix the damage, and etc. And then finally according to Maimonides a person who truly makes Teshuva is one who is in the same situation as before, with the same desire, however doesn't act on it.

Personally, I remember getting a C in my college history class. I was crying to my father on the phone. Calmly, he said, "Nancy I remember you telling me how you never went to class, what did you expect?" At that moment, I remember my hubris in thinking that because I didn't like the professor, I thought that I didn't need to waste my time. When confronted with the consequences of my non attendance, I told myself that no matter how dull a professor was that I would try from that point onward to learn all I could from my classes. My senior year tested me in this regard when I took a philosophy of linguistics class and I truly had the most boring professor. However, I didn't miss a class and when my classmates were taking it easy, I made sure to get straight A's in all my classes. I learned a lesson and how to set better priorities for myself. With my kids, I also try to look at mistakes as opportunities to grow and learn and to do better in the future.

What I've been trying to say here today to you, those of us who are hard on ourselves, those of us who hate making even minor mistakes, is that we can embrace them. We can and we should acknowledge them, understand why we did what we did, take steps to make sure we don't make the same mistakes again, and be willing to grow and learn from them. In the Torah, when Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai the first time, he sees our people worshipping a golden calf. Just three months after being freed from Egypt, our people are violating the first and second commandment given to them, "I am Adonai your god and you shall have no other gods but me." Moses throws down the tablets of God's laws and shatters them. After our people repent, Moses goes back up the mount and receives a set second of tablets. According to the Talmud, not only were the second intact set placed in the ark but also the shattered ones as well. Our people carried them throughout the desert and into the promised land, the Torah as a reminder of their past mistake.

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Our mistakes help us learn and grow and if we are willing to learn from them we can become better people and live lives of greater fulfillment. Even as we express remorse for the mistakes of our past, we still need to live and take chances in our present.

I want to end this sermon with some inspirational words by excerpt from the speech by Theodore Roosevelt "Citizenship In A Republic", delivered at the Sorbonne, in Paris, France on 23 April, 1910, called "In the Arena"

It is not the critic who counts;
not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles,
or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.
The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena,
whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood;
who strives valiantly;
who errs,
comes up short again and again,
because there is no effort without error and shortcoming;
but who does actually strive to do the deeds;
who knows the great enthusiasms,
the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause;
who at the best knows in the end
the triumph of high achievement,
and who at the worst, if he fails,
at least fails while daring greatly,
so that his place shall never be with those
cold and timid souls
who neither know victory nor defeat."

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May we have the courage to act and live and when we make mistakes may we become better people because of them.

Notes:

¹ Better by Mistake by Alina Tugend, pg. 12

² Better by Mistake by Alina Tugend pg. 30)

³ pg. 5

Talmud - Mas. Menachoth 99a

Which thou didst break, and thou shalt put them in the ark.17 R. Joseph learnt: This teaches us that both the tablets and the fragments of the tablets were deposited in the ark.

The broken tablets were kept in the Tabernacle and the Children of Israel carried them with them whenever they went to war (Tosef., Sot. 7:18). King Josiah, foreseeing the destruction of the Temple, hid the Holy Ark with the broken tablets in order to guard them against desecration at the hands of the enemy (Yoma 52b).

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