

Holy Mistakes

As we approach the Selikhot section of the service, the liturgy where we ask forgiveness for the ways we have missed the mark, I was thinking about presidential primary season. There are many unpleasant things about this seemingly endless process of picking presidential candidates, but one aspect of it that I find truly disturbing is something which all candidates, whatever their party, seem to share: a profound unwillingness to admit mistakes. I realize that I have no idea what these people are like in their personal lives, and whether or not they own up to things they've done wrong in the realm of family and friends.

But in public, responding to what they seem to think people want to hear, there is a profound unwillingness to say "yes, I really messed that up, and here's what I learned from it." When candidates for public office or elected officials do admit mistakes, it tends to be only after intense and fierce hounding, to the point that admitting wrongdoing can no longer be avoided. And too often the biggest mistakes, committed by politicians of all political stripes, are never admitted to be failures of judgment at all: catastrophes like starting misconceived wars, signing terrible bills into law, and the like.

All of this saddens me not because I think people who hold or want to hold elected office are terrible people; not at all. It saddens me because this is apparently what is deemed appropriate in our culture, especially our political culture. There is an assumption that we want leaders who are certain about everything, who need to pretend to be perfect, when of course no one is.

Luckily, most of us here are not running for political office. We can - and should - admit mistakes. The gift of this next 25 hours is that it gives us time and space to think about where we've missed the mark over the past 12 months; to reflect on mistakes we've made, and how we can do things better.

For some of us, it's not in our nature to readily admit mistakes. We are terrified of not being perfect, or perhaps we have the uncanny ability to be able to see others' imperfections quite clearly, while our own escape us. This is where the liturgy can help us. We can use the "*al hayt*" that we recited silently during the Amidah, and which we'll recite together in a few moments to help jog our own conscience. Have I erred in the realm of speech? In business? In how I treat my body? How I treat others? Engaging with this list, all voiced in the plural - "for the wrong that we have done before you"—helps us see that we're not alone in missing the mark. People before us, people here in this room with us—have made similar mistakes. Not only is it okay to admit them - it's what we're supposed to do.

Some of us fall on the other end of the spectrum. We too easily beat ourselves up, we constantly worry that we've done wrong, we're consumed with a sense of shame. This orientation can be as problematic as never thinking we've made a mistake at all. Making mistakes is not shameful; it's human. Shame can be paralyzing. We can let our mistakes define us, creating a box that we can't get out of. Shame can be, ironically, an obstacle to *teshuvah*.

There is a powerful Hasidic teaching that there is a spark of holiness in everything in creation—in trees and animals and stones, and also in every human action—including sins. And what is that spark? It is *teshuvah*—the possibility of turning from transgression, from mistakes, towards the good. Every time we miss the mark, we are given a sacred opportunity to make a repair, to bring a bit more wholeness into the world.

Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav built on this teaching, saying that “if a person has fallen a thousand times, it means that he or she has also tried rising a thousand times, thus making the fall an indispensable part of each new beginning” (a teaching from Eliezer Shore, “Sin and New Beginnings: R. Nachman of Breslov,” *Sh’ma*, August 2013).

Our mistakes are not something to be avoided, to be covered over with denial or lacquered with shame. We simply need to recognize them, and to know that they are not the essence of who we are. In resolving to do better, to find a different way, to move beyond that which demeans us and others, we can discover something holy.

Rebbe Nachman also said, “If you believe that you are able to ruin things, then believe that you are able to fix them.”

So, over these next 25 hours, may we search our hearts, may we find those places where we've gone astray, and embrace our mistakes. May we find the Godly potential for change within them, and know that we are able to do better.

Rabbi Toba Spitzer
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