

# COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



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## The Courage to Admit Mistakes

**Acharei Mot - 7 May 2016 / 29 Nisan 5776**

Some years ago I was visited by the then American ambassador to the Court of St James, Philip Lader. He told me of a fascinating project he and his wife had initiated in 1981. They had come to realise that many of their contemporaries would find themselves in positions of influence and power in the not-too-distant future. He thought it would be useful and creative if they were to come together for a study retreat every so often to share ideas, listen to experts and form friendships, thinking through collectively the challenges they would face in the coming years. So they created what they called Renaissance Weekends. They still happen.

The most interesting thing he told me was that they discovered that the participants, all exceptionally gifted people, found one thing particularly difficult, namely, *admitting that they made mistakes*. The Laders understood that this was something important they had to learn. Leaders, above all, should be capable of acknowledging when and how they had erred, and how to put it right. They came up with a brilliant idea. They set aside a session at each Weekend for a talk given by a recognised star in some field, on the subject of “My biggest blooper.” Being English, not American, I had to ask for a translation. I discovered that a blooper is an embarrassing mistake. A gaffe. A faux pas. A bungle. A boo-boo. A fashla. A balagan. Something you shouldn’t have done and are ashamed to admit you did.

*This, in essence, is what Yom Kippur is in Judaism.* In Tabernacle and Temple times, it was the day when the holiest man in Israel, the High Priest, made atonement, first for his own sins, then for the

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sins of his “house,” then for the sins of all Israel. From the day the Temple was destroyed, we have had no High Priest nor the rites he performed, but we still have the day, and the ability to confess and pray for forgiveness. It is so much easier to admit your sins, failings and mistakes when other people are doing likewise. If a High Priest, or the other members of our congregation, can admit to sins, so can we.

I have argued elsewhere (in the Introduction to the Koren Yom Kippur Machzor) that the move from the first Yom Kippur to the second was one of the great transitions in Jewish spirituality. The first Yom Kippur was the culmination of Moses’ efforts to secure forgiveness for the people after the sin of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32:34). The process, which began on 17<sup>th</sup> Tammuz, ended on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tishri – the day that later became Yom Kippur. That was the day when Moses descended the mountain with the second set of tablets, the visible sign that God had reaffirmed his covenant with the people. The second Yom Kippur, one year later, initiated the series of rites set out in this week’s parsha (Lev. 16), conducted in the Mishkan by Aaron in his role as High priest.

The differences between the two were immense. Moses acted as a prophet. Aaron functioned as a priest. Moses was following his heart and mind, improvising in response to God’s response to his words. Aaron was following a precisely choreographed ritual, every detail of which was set out in advance. Moses’ encounter was ad hoc, a unique, unrepeatable drama between heaven and earth. Aaron’s was the opposite. The rules he was following never changed throughout the generations, so long as the Temple stood.

Moses’ prayers on behalf of the people were full of audacity, what the sages called *chutzpah kelapei shemaya*, “audacity toward heaven,” reaching a climax in the astonishing words, “Now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book You have written.” (Ex. 32: 32). Aaron’s behaviour by contrast was marked by obedience, humility, and confession. There were purification rituals, sin offerings and atonements, for his own sins and those of his “house” as well as those of the people.

The move from Yom Kippur 1 to Yom Kippur 2 was a classic instance of what Max Weber called the “routinization of charisma,” that is, taking a unique moment and translating it into ritual, turning a “peak experience” into a regular part of life. Few moments in the Torah rival in intensity the dialogue between Moses and God after the Golden Calf. But the question thereafter was: how could we achieve forgiveness – we who no longer have a Moses, or prophets, or direct access to God? Great moments change history. But what changes us is the unspectacular habit of doing certain acts again and again

until they reconfigure the brain and change our habits of the heart. We are shaped by the rituals we repeatedly perform.

Besides which, Moses' intercession with God did not, in and of itself, induce a penitential mood among the people. Yes, he performed a series of dramatic acts to demonstrate to the people their guilt. But we have no evidence that they internalized it. Aaron's acts were different. They involved confession, atonement and a search for spiritual purification. They involved a candid acknowledgment of the sins and failures of the people, and they began with the High Priest himself.

The effect of Yom Kippur – extended into the prayers of much of the rest of the year by way of *tachanun* (supplicatory prayers), *vidui* (confession), and *selichot* (prayers for forgiveness) – was to create a culture in which people are not ashamed or embarrassed to say, “I got it wrong, I sinned, I made mistakes.” That is what we do in the litany of wrongs we enumerate on Yom Kippur in two alphabetical lists, one beginning *Ashamnu, bagadnu*, the other beginning *Al cheit shechatanu*.

As Philip Lader discovered, the capacity to admit mistakes is anything but widespread. We rationalize. We justify. We deny. We blame others. There have been several powerful books on the subject in recent years, among them Matthew Syed, *Black Box Thinking: The Surprising Truth About Success (and Why Some People Never Learn from Their Mistakes)*<sup>1</sup>; Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margins of Error*<sup>2</sup>, and Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made, But Not By Me*<sup>3</sup>.

Politicians find it hard to admit mistakes. So do doctors: preventable medical error causes more than 400,000 deaths every year in the United States. So do bankers and economists. The financial crash of 2008 was predicted by Warren Buffett as early as 2002. It happened despite the warnings of several experts that the level of mortgage lending and the leveraging of debt was unsustainable. Tavris and Aronson tell a similar story about the police. Once they have identified a suspect, they are reluctant to admit evidence of his or her innocence. And so it goes.

The avoidance strategies are almost endless. People say, It wasn't a mistake. Or, given the circumstances, it was the best that could have been done. Or it was a small mistake. Or it was unavoidable given what we knew at the time. Or someone else was to blame. We were given the wrong facts. We were faultily advised. So people bluff it out, or engage in denial, or see themselves as victims.

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<sup>1</sup> Portfolio Books, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Ecco Books, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Mariner Books, 2008.

We have an almost infinite capacity for interpreting the facts to vindicate ourselves. As the sages said in the context of the laws of purity, “No one can see his own blemishes, his own impurities.”<sup>4</sup> We are our own best advocates in the court of self-esteem. Rare is the individual with the courage to say, as the High Priest did, or as King David did after the prophet Nathan confronted him with his guilt in relation to Uriah and Batsheva, *chatati*, “I have sinned.”<sup>5</sup>

Judaism helps us admit our mistakes in three ways. First is the knowledge that God forgives. He does not ask us never to sin. He knew in advance that His gift of freedom would sometimes be misused. All he asks of us is that we acknowledge our mistakes, learn from them, confess and resolve not to do them again.

Second is Judaism’s clear separation between the sinner and the sin. We can condemn an act without losing faith in the agent.

Third is the aura Yom Kippur spreads over the rest of the year. It helps create a culture of honesty in which we are not ashamed to acknowledge the wrongs we have done. And despite the fact that, technically, Yom Kippur is focused on sins between us and God, a simple reading of the confessions in *Ashamnu* and *Al Chet* shows us that, actually, most of the sins we confess are about our dealings with other people.

What Philip Lader discovered about his high-flying contemporaries, Judaism internalized long ago. Seeing the best admit that they too make mistakes is deeply empowering for the rest of us. The first Jew to admit he made a mistake was Judah, who had wrongly accused Tamar of sexual misconduct, and then, realizing he had been wrong, said, “She is more righteous than I” (Gen. 38: 26).

It is surely more than mere coincidence that the name Judah comes from the same root as *Vidui*, “confession.” In other words, the very fact that we are called Jews – *Yehudim* – means that we are the people who have the courage to admit our wrongs.

**“Honest self-criticism is one of the unmistakable marks of spiritual greatness.”**

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<sup>4</sup> Bekhorot 38b.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Samuel 12: 13.