

Since my trip to Reykjavik this past summer, I have become enamored with all things Iceland which is how I came upon the story of Noel Santillan, a 29-year old New Jersey man who became an overnight celebrity in the Land of Fire and Ice all because of a very small spelling error. You see, Santillan arrived at Keflavik Airport one February after a long international flight, eager to reach his hotel in the country's capital, and thus typed "Laugarvegur" Street into his rental car's GPS. Six hours and 270 miles later he started to have the sneaking suspicion that something might be wrong – an intuition that was confirmed when a local woman explained that he was actually on Laugavegur Street in the northern part of the country, one letter "r" and roughly 430 kilometers away from his intended destination. Hearing of Santillan's adventure before we set forth for Europe, my friend Jen and I saw it as a cautionary tale and were exceedingly careful when figuring out directions. As for Santillan? He embraced the unintended detour, dining upon hakarl (a local delicacy of putrefied shark), visiting the region's herring museum, and bonding with residents of the small fishing village who embraced him wholeheartedly!

When is the last time you actually celebrated a mistake? That you didn't react with shame or defensiveness or self-flagellation, that you didn't downplay the blunder or blame it on someone else or let it claim more psychic space than it deserved but rather owned and embraced the error, maybe even treasured it a bit? For most of us, it's been quite some time.

Society tends to send mixed messages about failure, seeing it as critical to the kind of experimentation and innovation so valued in the realm of technology but as a fatal flaw when it comes to the everyday world of interpersonal relationships. Yet just as each unsuccessful iteration of a particular prototype helps lead the way to its new and improved beta test model, so too do we develop our courage and character and capacity for meaningful connection with others by taking risks and making ourselves vulnerable, by caring deeply – even when it leads us to act from a place of passion rather than conscience, by leaping in and trying our best rather than sitting it out safely. To be sure, not all of our failings derive from such lofty aspirations – there are times when pure ego or anger, lack of discipline or smallness of self lead us to act in ways that we later regret. Still, I would contend, the majority of the times that we hurt others (and are hurt by them in return) are caused not by feeling too little but rather by feeling too much. Mistakes are the cost of fully living out our humanity.

The Hebrew word *chet*, most famous from the *Al Chet* litanies of Yom Kippur, is often translated as "sin" but really has the far gentler meaning of "missing the mark." We take aim in different areas of life, constantly setting intentions for the kind of parent or child or sister or friend we wish to be, imagining how we want to best conduct ourselves at home or at work, as members of the Jewish community and as citizens of a global world. And then we let our arrows soar, some of them reaching the bulls-eye and others falling far short. Each High Holiday season we have the opportunity to put up a fresh target, wiping the slate clean and perhaps also reprioritizing a bit as we choose new focuses for our aim. There is no dishonor in having missed but how very good it feels to get a new start!

As we gather together for Rosh Hashanah later this week, I wish you all *Shana Tova* – the very best and sweetest of new years.

Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi Annie Tucker