

**Being Wrong**  
***Yom Kippur***  
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**Rabbi Leslie Gordon**  
**Temple Aliyah, Needham, MA**

My older sister Rickie was my first playmate. We played Barbie dolls with elaborate plots, we played school, we made up entire story lines and re-enacted them over and over. Sometimes one of us would say something that would not advance the plot line or was just the wrong line. “*Pretend that didn’t happen*” we would call, and just like that we would reset the scene. To this day, if one of us says something stupid, or misses the exit on the highway, or commits any manner of harmless mistakes, we’ll evoke that childhood power, “*pretend that didn’t happen.*” (For the record, we know there is no such power.)

The power of this day is kapara, atonement, that process that we sometimes describe as wiping the slate clean, undoing something we wish we had not done or said.

But kapara is not a magic formula and our goal today is not pretending something did not happen. That’s not religion, that’s playing at magic.

In the Mishna we read,

מכפר הכפורים יום אין יכפר הכפרים ויום אחטה האומר



*One who says, I will sin and Yom Kippur will bring me atonement, Yom Kippur does not bring atonement.* We cannot bank on Yom Kippur that way. We can't decide it's safe to sin, because eventually Yom Kippur will wipe that sin away. It doesn't work that way. If we are sincere, if we're not trying to game the system, atonement on Yom Kippur is possible – but even so, atonement is on offer only if we first engage in t'shuvah. These are two terms that are often confused: Kapara and t'shuvah. Kapara is literally plastering over, the covering of our sin. T'shuvah is the process of turning, or returning from our errant or misguided behavior. The process includes acknowledging we have erred, apologizing to anyone we may have harmed and resolving not to repeat the same mistakes. The measure of our success (according to Rambam) is when we are faced with the exact same opportunity to make the same mistake, but this time we get it right.

And when we have completed our t'shuvah, God's response is kapara, atonement. Yom Kippur, this day of atonement, is a propitious time for this kapara, but first comes the work of t'shuvah. There is no automatic do-over. There is no kapara without t'shuvah first.

Yes, our errors can be covered or plastered over. But we cannot excise them from our history. They are not magically erased. The goal of t'shuvah is not to undo what we regret. It does not unsay what should not have been said and it does

not turn the clock back. We cannot *pretend that didn't happen*. Instead, the goal of t'shuvah is to return to that moment where we went wrong and learn from it.

A recent study out of San Francisco State University found that regret was the most common negative emotion and the 2<sup>nd</sup> most common emotion of any kind, after love. It is present in every domain of life, leading the researchers to conclude that regret constitutes an essential component of the human experience.

Writer Daniel Pink contends that the reason for the ubiquity of regrets is their utility. Regret doesn't just make us human. It makes us better.

This idea is explored a book I highly recommend: *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error* by Kathryn Schulz. It is not a how-to guide (which believe me, I do not need). Rather, Schulz writes, "I am interested in error as an idea and as an experience, in how we think about being wrong and how we feel about it." I would describe the book as a celebration of being wrong. (This book is awesome.) This is counter intuitive, I know. As Schulz writes, "A whole lot of us go through life assuming that we are basically right, basically all the time, about basically everything.... To be fair, this serene faith in our own rightness is often warranted. Most of us navigate day-to-day life fairly well...which suggests we are right about a great many things."

But discovering we are actually wrong not only surprises us, it feels terrible. "In our collective imagination, error is associated not just with shame and stupidity

but also with ignorance, indolence, psychopathology and moral degeneracy.” In this, Schulz suggests, we are meta- mistaken: *We are wrong about what it means to be wrong*. Wrong about what it means to be wrong. As Benjamin Franklin wrote, “Wrongness is a window into normal human nature – into our imaginative minds, our boundless faculties, our extravagant souls.... however difficult or humbling our mistakes may be, it is ultimately wrongness, not rightness that can teach us who we are.”

Here’s my favorite of Schulz’s insights. (She refers to it as an important if perverse point): “there is no experience of being wrong.... there can’t be any particular feeling associated with being wrong because while it’s happening, you are oblivious to it. When you are simply going about your business in a state you will later decide was delusional, you have no idea of it whatsoever. The sentence ‘I am wrong’ describes a logical impossibility. As soon as we know we are wrong, we aren’t wrong any more since to recognize a belief as false is to stop believing in it”.

That pivotal moment when you realize you have been wrong? To describe that, Schulz invokes an iconic image: Remember the coyote in the Road Runner cartoon? Remember when he unknowingly runs off the cliff, looks down and realizes there is no ground beneath his feet? Yikes...(boom).

My friends, when we do t'shuvah, genuine t'shuvah that considers the possibility that we are not always right: in that terrible moment of realizing, *I have been wrong*, when we look down to see there is nothing beneath our feet...at that very instant – yikes, we may be terrified, but at that very instant a world of possibility opens.

Yehuda Amichai:

From the place where we are right  
flowers will never grow  
in the spring.  
The place where we are right  
is hard and trampled  
like a yard.  
But doubts and loves  
dig up the world  
like a mole, a plow.  
And a whisper will be heard in the place  
where the ruined  
house once stood.

Wrongness can be, as Schulz argues, a vital part of how we learn and change. It can provide us the opportunity to revise our understanding of ourselves and the world.

But wrongness does not automatically guarantee growth and learning. (That would be too simple.) This is where t'shuvah comes in. When I run off the cliff I can respond in one of two ways. I can construct a reality in which I wasn't really

wrong. I was provoked or circumstances compelled me, or anyone would have lost her temper in such a circumstance -- but that is a false sense of security, and it will crumble beneath my weight. My other choice is to look in the mirror and say, "I got this one wrong. It's not that circumstances compelled me. It's not that I was provoked and could not help myself. It's not that mistakes were made, in the passive voice. No, instead, *I* misjudged, or *I* misspoke or lost my temper or did not take into account someone else's needs. *I* did that. *I* was wrong, and I am ready to not be wrong anymore. There is nothing holding me up right now, no solid ground below my feet. I do not want to misjudge or misspeak or overlook the feelings of others. So it's time for me to pivot, to find solid ground by taking responsibility for my wrongness. To learn from my mistake and to turn to better behavior. This does not have to be a moment of Yikes, but of liberation: Here's my chance to get it right.

Why is it so painful to see that we were wrong? Rabbi Daniel Klein writes: "I have come to think that we carry an irredeemable sense of being unworthy that is paradoxically connected to, and maybe even is caused by, our sense that we are or should be perfect....The brokenness is the shocking, shameful and somehow a definitive statement of the self when held up to the impossible standard of delusional perfection."

But perfection has never been the goal. Our most elemental narratives in the Bible are replete with flawed characters (David Weiss Halivni: There's not one biblical character I'd want my children to marry.) Think for one minute and you'll come up with a list of biblical heroes who fail spectacularly: Sarah's cruelty to Hagar, Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery, Moshe hitting the rock, and we're still recovering from reading about the akeidah last week. Wrongness is so much part of who we are that even in the Talmud we are counseled not to strive for perfection but to seize on our wrongness as an opportunity for t'shuvah, a more worthy goal.

Rabbi Abbahu said: *In the place where penitents stand even the wholly righteous (tzadik gamur) cannot stand.*

A person who has sinned and repented, done t'shuvah – such a person is accorded a higher status than a person who never sinned at all. We have to agree that this Talmudic teaching is in the hypothetical realm since I cannot believe that even Rabbi Abbahu knew a single person who never erred. But even in the hypothetical world, why is the penitent, the one who did t'shuvah privileged over the hypothetical tzadik gamur?

Because t'shuvah strengthens us – it's like physical therapy for our souls.

T'shuvah rebuilds damaged tissue, develops new muscles: Muscles of humility and

patience and the self-effacement that makes room for the needs of others. T'shuva makes the ground solid under our feet again.

In just a few minutes we will turn to the memorial prayers of Yizkor.

Yizkor always feels to me like a moment to check in, to touch base with those I have lost. We want the opportunity to grow from our sense of loss, to revisit those we loved and key in on what we have learned from them. We do not want to ignore our loss, to move on, or *pretend it never happened*. Although there is some sadness in revisiting those memories, far sadder is the idea of sweeping them away. When our hearts break we do not pretend that love that friendship never happened. Yizkor is another expression of our need to find solid ground beneath our feet again. We want to grow from the love we have known, not sweep it away. We seek the solid ground of knowing that love.