

Lech Lecha, 5781
Rabbi Zev Wiener

Apparently, even Patriarchs can miscalculate. After an inhospitable greeting by a famine in the land of Israel, Avraham Avinu evacuates to Egypt, introducing Sarah as his sister in order to avert danger. While Avraham's behavior likely seems appropriate and understandable to our sensibilities, the great Torah commentator Ramban (12:10) takes issue with it, noting:

”ודע כי אברהם אבינו חטא חטא גדול בשגגה”

“And know, that Avraham Avinu committed a great sin inadvertently.”

The bluntness is astounding. No attempt to sugarcoat; no attempt to justify or make excuses; just plain and simple, Avraham Avinu made a mistake.

This is so powerful. In some circles, alleging that a great person, whether Biblical or contemporary, made an honest mistake, is tantamount to heresy, as it reduces such figures in the eyes of the masses. The notion that a great person could misjudge, say the wrong thing, or succumb to a moment of weakness wholly undermines his or her greatness, to the point that he or she becomes unworthy of admiration. And yet, as the Ramban makes clear, such an approach lacks nuance and robs a person of the ultimate opportunity for greatness. It is possible to deeply revere someone as being infinitely greater than oneself, and to still acknowledge such a person's fallibility. Indeed, I do not believe that the Ramban admired Avraham Avinu any less than anyone else -- quite the contrary: as Jews, there is nothing more admirable than one's ability to acknowledge one's mistakes, and try to fix and learn from them, as Avraham Avinu did with his subsequent tests.

Our lot in this world is not perfection, and the Torah has no interest in those who are perfect, as the Talmud teaches (Berachot 25b), "לא ניתנה תורה למלאכי השרת" -- *the Torah was not given to angels*. In fact, the entire reason we were put on this earth is to try, stumble, and try again. It is critical that we notice our mistakes, as these guide us towards the specific mission of our soul in this world. It is precisely in the areas where we are *not* perfect that we find our highest calling. In fact, numerous sources in the mystical tradition teach that even our sins contain an element of Divine inspiration.

While we have no right to err intentionally, once a mistake has irreversibly happened, we must look for the spark of holiness latent within the opportunity to grow from it.

The Talmud (Shabbat 55b) teaches that there were four people in history who never sinned -- Binyamin the son of Yaakov, Amram the father of Moshe, Yishai the father of David, and Kil'ab the son of David -- and yet, none of these four individuals is particularly well-known, focused on, or revered in our tradition. And for understandable reason. If you show me a person who always had it easy, who never had to overcome failure, there is not much to necessarily be admired. But show me a person who messed up, who lived with the shame of having made the wrong choices at some point, and yet managed to move forward and improve -- that is something for me to deeply admire. There is no greater כבוד שמים, honor for Heaven, than when a person stumbles and improves: *מקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין - צדיקים גמורים אינם עומדין* -- *in the place where one who has repented stands, (even) a wholly righteous person may not stand* (Berachot 34b).

This is a message that affects the entirety of a Jew's life. How many people live in hypersensitive fear of anyone pointing out something that they messed up? How many people receive a critical email, and immediately attempt to find excuses, to beat themselves up, or to lash back in defensive fury? Just as a cat that thinks it's a bird will live a very disappointed life, a human who fails to understand the sanctity inherent in fallibility and what it means to be a human -- to get things wrong, to miscalculate, to act out of character -- will inevitably face much agony and frustration, living a life of excessive inner harshness towards oneself and others.

The most successful people in life embrace their mistakes, knowing that there is no other way to achieve greatness. They know how to tune out the misleading noise from Twitter mobs who attempt to permanently destroy a person over a single inadvertent misstatement. And they recognize that the secret to true love -- whether with family or friends -- is the ability to divulge our mistakes without being made to feel worthless, and to in turn give that same gift to those we love. May we learn from our holy forefather Avraham, the ultimate personification of love and kindness, to see the good and potential in everyone and everything -- even our mistakes.