

## **SIR OZ**

Thank you for the very warm welcome to OZ. Thank you to everyone who coordinated the luncheon today. It has been an honor getting to know Rabbi Schwartz. Not only in the context as a community Rav, the most senior community Rav, but also, as a colleague at MDS. I have the unique privilege to chat with Rabbi Schwartz and benefit from his wisdom and guidance on a regular basis. Rabbi Schwartz's 36 year commitment to MDS and our partnership with OZ is most appreciated. Thank you.

B'rshut Rabbi Schwartz and Rabbi Varon.

We are one Parsha in and the world is being destroyed! Last week, we read a detailed account of the creation of the world, and now, only one Parsha in, the whole world is being flooded. The entire genesis story is somewhat dismal. God creates humans, only a couple of chapters in, they are defying God and punished. Then one kills another, and the whole Parsha ends with God regretting having created us, foreshadowing the destruction in this week's flood story.

Humans appear to be hopeless failures. We just wrapped up repenting on Yom Kippur. We learn that there are five days when we are not tempted by the satan, the days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot. 5! The whole year. When we are standing at neila, after a day of fasting and praying, clopping our hearts, begging for forgiveness, making commitments: do we really have in mind that it will last a mere 5 days?! Next year, at the same time, we will also repent, the day is set up with the assumption that we will be sinning again. In fact, there is no thought that there will be a year that we do not need Yom Kippur, that we did a good job this year. We were nice to each other, we kept the mitzvot, there wasn't even Lashon Hara or Shatnez, we totally did it all. Never happened, and we aren't even set up with the expectation that it would happen.

According to Chazal, Teshuva, repentance, was actually created even before the world. Fixing mistakes was created before the people who would make those mistakes.

Are we inherently flawed?

Back to our Parsha: Humans have already failed so badly that creation needs a do over. The one Tzadik, the one righteous person, Noach, fails to save anyone else and is only allowed to take his family on the boat. Chazal teach us that even Noach's family only joined him due to his own merit, they themselves did not deserve to be saved. He has not influenced even his own family.

Quite a failure!

Why do we need to read about this failure? Why should the Torah not start from Lech Lecha, when stuff starts working out?! Avraham, a success story! Leaves his father's home for God, cares for others, is willing to sacrifice his son to Hashem, let's start there.

Let's contrast Avraham and Noach. Famously Rashi teaches that Noach was a tzadik for his generation, but had he lived alongside Avraham, that would not be the case. One of the first stories we read about Avraham is his protest in hearing that Sodom would be

destroyed. He lobbies the Lord of the universe to save the city.

Avraham fails to stop the destruction of Sodom, but we do learn something of who a Tzaddik is.

Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist was once asked what the first sign of civilization is in a culture. Students expected an answer such as fish hooks or pottery. Her answer, the first sign of civilization in ancient culture is a femur bone that has been broken and then healed because it means that one person cared for another. In the animal world, a broken bone leads to death. A healed bone is a sign that another person cared for, protected and carried another.

Avraham, the father of the Jewish people, is the first we read about to care for others, not just himself.

Hashem appears to appreciate those who advocate for others. Let's fast forward to another protestor of God's threat to punish: Moshe.

Moshe is able to save the Jewish people when Hashem says they will be destroyed for worshiping the golden calf. He pleads on their behalf.

When Moshe comes down from the mountain, and sees the Jewish people sinning, he takes the luchot, the two tablets, and throws them down on the ground, breaking them. Those luchot, a reminder of the sins of the Jewish people lived in the Aron Kodesh, that traveled through the desert with them, and next to it were the whole tablets.

We all have that story of something embarrassing or a terrible memory that is associated with a broken object. Someone got angry at someone else and slammed a door or knocked something over.

Typically, people hide those away or get rid of them. They bring back bad memories and are a reminder of a failure. Why keep the broken tablets at all and why in such a holy place?

Shouldn't the broken tablets, that represent the horrible sin of the Jewish people, be buried away, left alone, forgotten. Why do we memorialize them in such a holy space????

So our main questions are:

1. Why do we hold on to our stories of failure? The destruction of the world from the flood and the breaking of the tablets?
2. And why, as humans, do we plan to err?

The broken tablets represent a sin, but next to the whole ones they have strength, they represent fixing things, repenting, and becoming stronger.

We are programmed to make mistakes. In order to do good, there needs to be free will, and we need to be able to choose, and inevitably, we will sometimes choose wrong, but there is only right if there is also wrong. If we do not at times choose wrong, there is little celebration when we choose another path. And our mistakes help us become better.

This jives with what we know about learning and the brain. Research shows that concept-error learning (intentionally making mistakes and correcting them) can improve meaningful learning, memory, and test

performance. Curricula is now built this way in schools. We teach children that we fail forward, we do not fail and stop. Some of the very best discoveries, such as penicillin, were the product of an error.

We need room to err, a safety net. The rainbow that Hashem put in the sky after the flood represents the promise that even if we totally fail again, destruction is not an option.

The same goes for holding Yom Kippur on the calendar. We recognize that we will likely sin again, but we are also relying on God forgiving us again, on us growing stronger and better because we fixed our mistakes. Hashem gave us the gift of repairing our mistakes as part of the deal, there is an assurance that we can always do teshuva.

Human beings need room for making mistakes, and learning from them is central to raising children and educating them. We cannot expect our children to not make mistakes, they need to know what we do when that happens, how we fix those mistakes, and then learn

from them. If you are joining us later today to talk about raising resilient children, we will return to these ideas.

What's even harder is that parents need to model what happens when we make mistakes. Do we brush them under the carpet? Or do we own up and repair and apologize and commit to grow and get better. No parent is perfect, children are watching what we do when we get upset and mess up.

Our holy Torah, the guide for our lives, opens with errors, and sets us on a trajectory of improvement. The Torah is not like our family photo albums or social media pages that we curate our memories with happy, pretty looking times, the Torah starts with the real struggles. It would be like a family album that had reminders of the fights we got in, or the failed vacation trips and family simchas with all their glory, including the arguments and family complications, not just the posed pictures. Imagine a wedding album that included photos and snippets of an uncle's mean joke, or the dress that needed to be totally redone and the speech that made everyone uncomfortable?? We do not do

that, we clean up our mementos and memory archives. But remembering and learning from what went wrong is central to the Torah. What went wrong in family relationships, as a nation, in our leaders. It would not fit in on social media. We will err and as a result will grow. This is a message that, as Jews, we hold dear.

Rav Hutner wrote that all light is preceded by darkness and good is only appreciated in contrast to the bad. That is why national stories, such as Yetziat mitzrayim, begin in gloom. Seder night, we start with the degradation of the Jews and therefore have a greater appreciation for our national freedom. The whole tablets are more dear because they rest next to the broken ones. The world is more precious because it was destroyed and Avraham is even greater in contrast to Noach. He is the father of our faith, because he is different from others.

The greatness of Avraham and then Moshe, is more clear in contrast to Noach. There is an upward trajectory of humanity. The whole tablets were created after the shattered ones led to repentance. The shattered tablets are beautiful because they represent the Jewish

people moving on from sinning. The whole tablets are more appreciated because they are **not** the broken tablets. Those things that we work the hardest on, those are the ones we cherish the most. We invest ourselves and we change.

Our minds are created in an ever evolving way, everything we learn, hear or do changes our actual brain. We recall the destruction of the world, the low point of humanity as a warning and a reminder that we can change. We have the capacity for greatness and that exists in contrast to evil.

It struck me as we completed sefer Devarim and restarted the Torah on Simchat Torah that the Torah concludes with no true ending. The Jewish people are on the banks of the Jordan river, about to start a new journey. It is truly a beginning. It marks potential. The Torah does not end with B'nei Yisrael settled in their land with the temple built, it ends at the start of the next journey. We are always at the start of the next journey, and the work, Hamelacha - Meruba, it is great. Our focus

is on where we are headed, learning from the past, but not dwelling on it, failing forward.

The story of the flood should stand as a reminder to us that our actions can destroy the world. And that leaders can fail at bringing others on board. As Rabbi Sacks famously taught, it is not enough to be good, we must encourage others to be good. The lessons of these failures? Failing is part of growing and what we do with failure is what can define us as individuals and as a people.