

Psychotherapist Brett Williams, wrote a book with a catchy title, “You can be right, or **you can be married.**”

It almost doesn't really matter what he writes in the book, the title reveals the truth. When nurturing relationship, what we know to be right **may not matter**. Worse, what we feel is right may, in fact, be **wrong**. Impossible, but true!

We gather tonight to welcome Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the single most intense holiday of the Jewish calendar. Atonement is not something **we** do. If we earn it, it's something God does for us. It is the proverbial wiping clean the slate from sin and iniquity. Atonement **ensues** from doing *T'shuvah/repentance* and correcting our misbehavior and unmanaged character issues.

We are very lucky to have this as part of our tradition. Although we may not have been very successful in dramatically changing ourselves from years past, we practice **making the effort**. We may not be clear about what we're needing to fix, but we're here to figure it out.

What is it about us that makes it so difficult to recover from our mistakes? What is so terrifying about Yom Kippur?

That maybe **I was wrong**. That maybe **I** was the problem in that relationship. That maybe it was **my** ill-informed tweeting, or emailing, or phone calling that spread illegitimate gossip that unjustly harmed a person's reputation. That maybe it was **my** own stubbornness that put wedges between me and my friends. It is sometimes difficult to take responsibility for our own mistakes.

“When I made that mistake, I had a different understanding of what I was dealing with. I was young. I made the best decision I could with the information I had at the time. I had to be that person before I could become the person I am today.” Yom Kippur is the day we study the ways we’ve deluded ourselves and then try to change the script.

Kathryn Schulz wrote a wonderful book called “Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error.” In it, she explores many ways we are **regularly wrong**, and how we deal (or don’t deal) with it. It is an illuminating read. As counterintuitive as it sounds, her conclusion is the essence of Yom Kippur, “[accepting] **Being wrong changes our lives for the better.**”

I had to read the following paragraph a few times until I got it. And know this was written in 2010:

“A whole lot of us go through life assuming that we are basically right, basically all the time, about basically everything: about our political and intellectual convictions, our religious and moral beliefs, our assessment of other people, our memories, our grasp of facts. As absurd as it sounds when we stop to think about it, our steady state seems to be one of unconsciously **assuming that we are very close to omniscient.**”

Assuming we’re “omniscient” might be the reason God had the wisdom to give us Yom Kippur.

It is very easy to feel we’re right, to insist we’re right. But it’s a trap. It’s ironic we have an instinct to reject being wrong when embracing our error is the key to growth.

Schulz writes, “To err is to wander, and wandering is the way we discover the world; and, lost in thought, it is also the way we discover ourselves. **Being right might be gratifying, but in the end, it is static, a mere statement.** Being wrong is hard and humbling, and sometimes even dangerous, but in the end, it is a journey and a story.”

Addressing being wrong is liberating and changes our lives for the better. And one area where we desperately need to improve our ability at being wrong is in dealing with **people with differing points of view.**

I have to share here a British YouTube commercial a friend sent me. It is from 2017 and was setup as a social experiment, where the individuals participating had no idea what their involvement was for, or what was going to be asked of them. Before starting, each individual was asked pointed questions about their opinions on social and political issues. The participants were all firmly apart from one another.

The participants were then paired with people who had the most directly opposing views. They began by meeting and building a kind of mystery Ikea furniture project. After they'd built a table and two chairs, they sat and discussed a bunch of ice-breaker prompts, like, “Describe what it is like to be you in five adjectives,” and “Name three things each of you have in common?”

There was a remarkable statement made during this experiment. One woman said, “We know each other better than people who've known each other for 10 minutes should.” The pairs then started to notice and vocalize what

they saw as **special** in the other person. Some described their struggles in life, and were quite revealing, showing a level of trust had been built. Each partner listened with compassion and empathy as they discovered a new delightful soul sitting in front of them. Then came the last part of the experiment.

They had to add to their building project. What had started out as a table turned into a nice sized 90-degree angle bar. And here is where the commercial really begins. The groups found two bottles of chilled Heineken beer to place on the bar. And were then instructed to watch a short film.

Each pair were confronted with the blunt oppositional view their partner expressed **before they'd met**. The anti-feminist with the staunch feminist. The climate-change denier with the climate change activist. The Transgender-phobic man with a transgender woman.

As the film ended, a voice announced, "You now have a choice. You may go, or you can stay and discuss your differences over a beer." In other words, you may retreat to the world you lived in befriended only by your old convictions, **or** you can sit and explore this new human connection. Each couple came together, discussed their differences, laughed, and I presume, lived happily ever after. And drink Heineken.

I realize this was a commercial, but it is a beautiful visual of what it takes to overcome being wrong, even between people who have dangerously opposing views. Have face to face encounters. Bond with one another over shared human challenges and reality. Building something together builds trust. Once there is shared investment in another

person, humanity is created. When we see another as a human, they can become one of “our own.” And then we can discuss differences over a beer. It may be a little fantasy, but it’s also true. Rather than retreating from people with whom we disagree, perhaps we ought to find ways to build relationship and relearn how to discuss differences. Our Torah teaches this very point which we will read later today at Mincha:

Leviticus 19 reads, “*al tisna et achicha b’lvavech; hocheach tochiach et amitecha; v’lo tisa alav chet/ Do not hate our **brother** in our heart, but rather rebuke your **fellow**; and do not incur a sin upon/because of him/her.*” To rebuke someone for something they’re doing that is problematic takes guts, but is oriented around the words “brother,” and “fellow/friend.” To truly communicate with a human being, there needs to be a real sense of trust. **It is neigh impossible to hear someone if we don’t feel they care about us.**

Human caring is an elixir. Patience, presence, and trust can penetrate very stubborn and religiously held beliefs and allow people the power of being heard. Hearing another’s perspective gives us a chance to catch a glimmer of the possibility that perhaps we’re wrong. And this was the magic that turned around lifelong White Nationalist Derek Black.

Derek Black is the son of Don Black, the man who started the White Nationalist website Stormfront. Raised literally in a clan of White Nationalism, Derek’s Godfather was David Duke. Derek was intelligent and even as a young teen brought his own savvy to Stormfront, propagating in the 2000’s the very tropes about immigrants, Jews, Hispanics,

Blacks, and Muslims that later became national conversations around the election in 2016. Derek was dug in. But he was also intellectually curious.

Although homeschooled his whole life, he was permitted to go to a liberal-arts college in Florida. It was the first time he'd ever met non-whites in a social environment, and he found he liked some of them. Eventually, someone discovered who he was and what he regularly wrote on Stormfront, and a very public discussion took place on the school message board. And it wasn't pretty.

But there was a young orthodox Jew named Matthew Stevenson who decided to go about addressing Derek in a different way than most. Matthew wondered if Derek had ever gotten to know Jews personally before. Whereas others were threatening him and calling for his expulsion, this Jewish student decided to invite Derek to Shabbat dinner.

Matthew had a nice Shabbat group that came over every Friday night, and he made one rule: "Let's try to treat him like anyone else," and to not confront Derek on his activities or writings. Miraculously, the friends abided, and it was a lovely evening. Derek decided to come back the following week. And the next. And the next.

Over time, Derek and Matthew grew to like each other even if there remained some challenges to fully trusting one another. As the Washington Post article reads:

"Some members of the Shabbat group gradually began to ask Derek about his views, and he occasionally clarified them in conversations and emails throughout 2011 and 2012. He said he was pro-choice on abortion. He said he

was against the death penalty. He said he didn't believe in violence or the KKK or Nazism or even white supremacy, which he insisted was different from white nationalism. He wrote in an email that his only concern was that "massive immigration and forced integration" was going to result in a white genocide. He said he believed in the rights of all races but thought each was better off in its own homeland, living separately."

And then comes the rebuke:

"You have never clarified, Derek," one of his Shabbat friends wrote to him. "You've never said, 'Hey all, this is what I do believe and this is what I don't.' **It's not the job of someone who's potentially scared/intimidated by someone else to approach that person to see if they are in fact scary/intimidating.**"

"I guess I only value the opinions of people I know," Derek wrote back, and now he was beginning to count his Shabbat friends among those he knew and respected. "**You're naturally right that I deemphasize my own role,**" he wrote to them.

Bingo. Despite having been brought up surrounded by a particular set of beliefs, over time trust and friendship allowed this young man to address the truth about his beliefs and activities. Derek Black's certitude was unraveling.

In his final year of school, Derek finally wrote back to the student body and directly addressed and clarified his positions. He had evolved, and realized he felt repudiation for the extremist views he was raised with, and he

confessed as much to the public, like our confessional *vidui* at Yom Kippur.

It was a dramatic transformation that led to difficult consequences in his personal life. His family essentially disowned him, including his parents, as they couldn't find a way to reconcile what they felt was utter betrayal to their family and cause.

For Derek Black, the consequence of having been wrong led to personal catastrophe. He had to lose everything, almost as a kind of sacrifice, to become the *mensch* he wanted to be. Stories of this nature abound in Schulz's book.

There's almost a formula: When a person makes the effort to leave a toxic situation, there is a period of suffering, anxiety, and vulnerability. But what lies on the other side is truth and our better selves. And isn't that why we're here?

I like the analogy of real *t'shuvah/repentance* to the seed. When a seed is planted, it can take time before the water and earth penetrate the husk and coax it to break open. Once it does, the seed **rots and falls apart**, what we might interpret as suffering, but what nature sees as the way in which the seed **fertilizes new growth**. From the rot comes new life. From our suffering the consequences of owning up to our mistakes, comes a renewed **next-level you**.

And this is why we have the customs of Yom Kippur. We refrain from eating/drinking, bathing, refreshing ourselves with creams and ointments, wearing leather shoes, or having relations with our partners. In other words, we refrain from doing anything that refreshes life so that we

can just sit in our own thoughtful considerations long enough to “start rotting.” Come tomorrow afternoon, we’ll be feeling our own rotting. We’ll be ready for a shower, to brush our teeth, and break-fast, but that is just where the work of new growth begins.

The more honest we can be with ourselves, the more we confront how we’ve been wrong, the more real the choice becomes of either embracing our new potential growth **or** we can walk backward into the static safety of who we’ve been. Our choices will have consequences on our groups of friends, how we relate to family, and how we walk through the world. We may suffer the transition, but with each step we achieve a little more atonement and grow more firmly into becoming the *mensch* we were always meant to be.

And so today let us embrace that being wrong changes our lives for the better. Let us make space for people we disagree with and invite them to our Shabbat table. Let us breathe a little more deeply into our relationships and relearn to ask more questions than to offer answers. And, as George Elliot said, “It’s never too late to become what you might have been.”

Gamar Chatimah Tovah, may we all be inscribed for a year of hope, healing, and discovery of new ways to grow our better selves. Shannah Tovah.