Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Vayikra |

Everyone Could Make a Mistake

This Is Considered a Virtue?

In this week's Parsha, the Torah describes what happens when the *Adas Yisrael*, which Rashi explains as the Sanhedrin, makes a mistake. Several verses later, the Torah refers to a situation in which the *Nasi* commits a sin. Praiseworthy is the generation, Rashi tells us, whose *Nasi* is ready to acknowledge that he needs an atonement for his mistake, all the more so when he expresses remorse on his intentional wrongdoings.

How does it make sense that a pious individual like the *Nasi* would commit such great sins in the first place? Furthermore, why is the nation he's leading praiseworthy? The least an individual who errs could do is own up to it. What is praiseworthy about that?

From this passage, we learn two extremely important lessons, both of which teach us something regarding relationships. First, that it's okay to make mistakes; and second, that it's not easy to admit our errors. As we see in these verses, great people could make mistakes too, even very serious ones. And if the entire generation is considered lucky that their leader admitted to making a mistake, all the more so when it's intentional, tells us how difficult it is to do so.

In relationships, mistakes happen all the time. Whether it's misunderstandings or unintentional hurtful comments, these are all mistakes. And even when an individual does something intentional that turns out to be hurtful to their spouse, the intention is almost never to hurt the other spouse's feelings. Nobody thinks to himself, "You know, I haven't hurt you for a long time. I'll come home late/place a big order/throw out a piece of furniture/change my schedule without telling you so I could hurt you." Even if this is someone's train of thought, it emanates from a workup of emotions, a mistake in its own right.

Can You Admit to your Mistakes?

Admitting to our mistakes is not an easy feat. Often, when I ask people if they make mistakes, they'll say, "No. I'm a very thought out person." This reminds me of the joke of a person who was asked this question. He thought long and hard and then said, "Yes. My last mistake was a few years ago, when I thought I had made a mistake, but then I realized that I hadn't."

When someone comes and tells us we made a mistake and shouldn't have done something, our defense shoot up automatically, which makes it even harder to admit. This is all part of our humanness and is perfectly normal.

But if we want to build deeper relationships, especially in marriage, we must understand that everyone makes mistakes and that admitting to a mistake does not imply that we're "wrong." In fact, what you did may have been perfectly right, but if your spouse got hurt as a result, that renders it a mistake. Admitting to a mistake doesn't mean that you're a bad person, only that certain circumstances may have not been taken into account. Thus, saying "I made a mistake," and/or "I'm sorry," simply means, "It wasn't my intention to hurt you."

Just as the Torah says *ashrei ha'dor*, praiseworthy is the generation whose leaders own up to their mistakes, we could say *ashrei habayis*, praiseworthy is the home where its inhabitants do so. This doesn't happen in many homes. Admitting to our mistakes is a sign of strength and confidence. I'm ready to acknowledge that I made a mistake because I know I'm a good person. "If I did something that hurt you, I'm sorry about that." Don't assume that when you apologize you're coming across as a bad person. On the contrary, in most cases when we own up to our mistake we show strength, that we know when we're right and when we're wrong.

People might think that only when they do something that is objectively wrong they must admit to doing so. Why should they apologize when they did what was right? Just because their spouse was tired or overly sensitive or not feeling well and thus took their gesture the wrong way they're obligated to own up to what they did? And the answer is that it's always wise to go with the adage of "be humble to see, courageous to admit, and wise enough to correct." Even if what you did is totally right in your eyes, find the courage to admit that what you did turned out to be hurtful and that you did not intend to hurt your spouse. Doing so conveys how you see yourself—as a good person who's a human being. This will only serve to increase your esteem in your spouse's eyes.

Your Spouse Could Make Mistakes Too

In the same way that you realize your own humanness, recognize that your spouse could make mistakes too. You didn't marry Mr. or Mrs. Perfect. You married a great person who may even be candidate material for the Sanhedrin, but who is human nevertheless. So he makes mistakes. What's the problem with that? If he owns up to his mistakes, how praiseworthy is your home. Instead of attacking him for it, express your appreciation. "Thank you. I appreciate that we could communicate about this." There are many ways to go about communicating about our mistakes, but it starts with a healthy understanding that mistakes are okay, and that admitting to them is admirable.

If you could spill the milk, someone else could spill it too. Don't get stuck on the why. When we get stuck on "Why did you do this?" "Why did you do that?" we're conveying that we don't allow room for mistakes. It's true that when when make a mistake, we should look back at it in order to learn for the future, but to question another person about their mistake is simply a form of blame and shame. Praiseworthy is the home where mistakes are tolerated.

An individual in my neighborhood who is mentally unwell has been walking around talking to himself for years. One of the things I've heard him say many times is, "So, I made a mistake. So, I made a mistake." He says it in a plea, as if he's answering up to someone. I don't have any knowledge of his background, but one can only imagine that mistakes weren't accepted when he was growing up. For years, he's walking around begging not to be attacked for it.

You and your spouse are both human. You're both allowed to make a mistake. For some people it's harder to own up to their mistake. Understand your spouse if it's hard for them, instead of forcing them to admit to it. Perhaps it's harder for your spouse because he fears your offensive reaction? Make sure you're not contributing to their difficulty. The more you gave your spouse their space, the more you express that mistakes are okay, the easier it'll be for them to own up to it.

Mistakes are Okay, Dear Child

The same is true in parenting—both in the parents

and their children. If Sanhedrin and a *Nasi* could make a mistake and then admit it to *klal Yisrael,* a parent could certainly do so. It's not a contradiction to *chinuch* to tell a child that yes, you erred. What is it like for a child to grow up in a home where his parents are always right and everything is always his fault? If a parent promises something to a child and then doesn't follow through, admitting that he made a mistake will be a much more powerful lesson to the child than giving excuses and absolving himself of the blame. Of course, if the child doesn't respond with *derech eretz* that should be dealt with, but not admitting to our mistakes is wrong. Are you trying to imply that you're an angel? Praiseworthy is the home where parents could admit to being human.

If you could mistakes, of course your child could too. This doesn't mean that the child should be allowed to make the same mistake every day, but that space should be given for error. "I understand that this was a mistake. What can we do next time so that this doesn't happen again?" Making it easy for the child to admit to his mistakes and praising him when he does so is a good recipe for helping him get along in the future.

-Q&A-

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question: I feel that my relationship with my wife is mainly technical. When my wife hears that I'm home, she asks me for technical help. When she calls me on the phone, it's always to ask for a technical favor. It's all about "do this, do that." We don't spend any time on our relationship, which makes me resent coming home. What can I do to improve the situation?

Answer: Instead of waiting for our spouse to initiate a relationship and spending quality time, take the first step. Don't wait for anyone to do what has to be done.

If you've tried taking the first step, only to see that your spouse is too busy, etc., express it. Expressing how you feel about something, however, must be done in the right way and in the right time. When you're walking through the door and your wife asks you to start peeling the potatoes or hold the baby, that's not the right time to say, "That's all I'm good for?" Your spouse is busy right now. She's feeling tense.

If building a relationship is your priority, you can even turn a technical task into building block. When you take that peeler, you could say, "You want me to peel the potatoes? I'm so happy to do it for you. I love making it easier for you." That is a great way to initiate an exchange of feelings between you.

Then, at a calmer time, have a conversation. If you start with blaming, chances are your spouse will get defensive and feel even more removed from you. Instead, you could say, "I love helping you and it means so much to me that the house is run so well, that always fresh food and everything is done so efficiently. I would so much appreciate if we could spend time together. I know it's hard, and I don't mean to say that this should've happened on its own. I know that when you have so many responsibilities it's not easy to initiate this…" There are so many ways to express ourselves in a way that the other person doesn't feel hurt, challenged, or accused. When we communicate in this way, we not only give our relationship a real chance to improve, but we're also not feeling resentful. Doing so gives the other person the space to make changes that are for the good of the relationship.

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