

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 10/26/18

Lech Lecha 2018

I think that one of the most important lessons we can teach our children is to learn from their mistakes. We all make mistakes. Rather than allow them to mire us in a sense of failure, we should own up to them, admit we fell short of the mark, and consider how to both make amends and learn from the experience. That's common sense. But of course it's not so easy.

This week's Torah portion shows just how hard that can be. In the section of parshat Lech-Lecha that we read today we learn of Sarah's decision to have her maidservant, Hagar, marry Avraham. It seemed like a good idea at the time... Having been unable to conceive after many years of marriage to Avraham, Sarah figured that her maidservant would marry Avraham and bear children who would, in a sense, be hers too. Hagar indeed conceives, whereupon her relationship to Sarah begins to sour and Hagar treats Sarah as her inferior. Surprisingly, Sarah then directs her anger toward Avraham: "Sarah said to Avraham: My fury is upon you; I placed my maidservant in your bosom, and when she saw she was pregnant, she belittled me." But, of course the truth is that Sarah chose to create this uneasy situation in her home and, therefore, she is responsible for compromising her own status. Perhaps she should have seen it coming, but after it did she didn't have to think too deeply about how it came to pass. But she doesn't. She blames her husband. And maybe Abraham was partly responsible. Maybe he could have defended Sarah when Hagar crossed a line. But he basically says, "Whatever..." In fact, that's exactly what he says, "Your maid is in your hands. Do whatever you think is right." So she throws Hagar out.

But of course the story does not end there. Hagar flees and Gd sends an angel to protect her. The angel says, "Go back and live with her harsh treatment, but know that I have special blessings in store for you." The Torah text does not blame Sarah for acting harshly; nor does it blame Hagar for having a change in attitude toward Sarah. It does not blame anyone.

When I read this story, I was immediately reminded of the original "blame game;" I'm taken right back to the Garden of Eden. Gd tells Adam and Eve not to eat the apple. Eve does, of course, and gives it to Adam. Gd confronts them; Adam blames Eve. Eve in turn blames the snake. Everyone has someone else to blame. Fingers are being pointed in every direction... And then the Torah spends the rest of the time trying to convince people to stop pointing fingers and take responsibility for their own actions and choices. Everyone needs to own up to their mistakes.

This, in essence, is what Yom Kippur, our holiest day of the year is all about. In Tabernacle and Temple times, it was the day when the holiest man in Israel, the High Priest, made atonement; first for his own sins, then for the sins of his "house," then for the sins of all Israel. We no longer have a High Priest nor the rites he performed, but we still have the day, and the requirement to confess and pray for forgiveness. Moreover, if the High Priest, a leader of the community can fess up, well so can we. Yom Kippur reminds us that admitting you are wrong is one of the cornerstones of the Jewish system of practice and belief.

We all know this to be true: accepting responsibility is one of the most important factors in defining a person's true character. When that responsible moment comes, what you do - or don't do - is an indication of the type of person you really are. We talk about courageous leadership, and it takes courage to admit you've made a mistake, a wrong decision or hurt another person in some way. But the

more that I reflect on this fundamental spiritual truth, the more I wonder if our kids think that's true? When was the last time they, or we, saw someone in authority admit they made a mistake?

On March 4, 1987, President Reagan addressed the American people from the Oval Office about the Iran-Contra Scandal and took responsibility for his Administration's participation. He famously said: "Now, what should happen when you make a mistake is this: You take your knocks, you learn your lessons, and then you move on. That's the healthiest way to deal with a problem... You know, by the time you reach my age, you've made plenty of mistakes. And if you've lived your life properly - so, you learn. You put things in perspective. You pull your energies together. You change. You go forward."

I'm not talking Republican or Democrat, right or left. There is always more than enough blame to go around. I am talking right and wrong. When you have done something wrong, you own it, you try to make it right, and you learn from your mistakes. These are fundamental truths worth repeating, worth modeling, and worth looking for, not just in political leaders, but in leaders in our own community, and indeed in our own homes. While I am a firm believer in the separation of "Shul and State," I also believe that our Jewish values can uplift our country, our community, and our families. Ours is not an inward faith, but a living faith that can make a real difference in the world when we live by the standards that have guided our People for thousands of years. Courageous leadership, on every level, means taking responsibility for what we do, right or wrong, owning up to our errors, and trying to make it right. That is the way we can fulfill Gd's plan for peace - in our country, in our community, and in our homes.