

Va Yikra 2012 March 24, 2012 / 1 Nissan 5772
Rabbi Aaron Krupnick

This week I would like to talk to you about courage - the courage to live by your values, ideals and convictions... I want to talk about having the courage to keep on going even when you make mistakes, even when you fail, and I want to talk about the shame that follows you after you make those mistakes...

This week the Torah portion takes an inordinately long time focusing on guilt or sin offerings in its list of sacrifices; it focuses in on our making mistakes - right out front, there in the beginning. And it makes us wonder why the Torah would start on such a negative note. Why assume the worst? Now from a Torah perspective, a sin can be committed in one of three ways: You could be guilty because you had in your mind that you wanted to do something bad, on purpose. Then, either you were caught or you just admitted it to yourself and confessed and want to make it right. OK, but that's not what the sin offering was for. For that you had to go and make amends to the person you had wronged. (No offering - not turning to Gd - can get you off the hook - just like on Yom Kippur.) Another way of sinning was you didn't even know that you were breaking any law or commandment. According to Torah law, you are off the hook for a guilt offering since you had no idea that it was a sin in the first place. But in between there is a third category: You tried to do the right thing, but in the process you failed and did something wrong. It wasn't your intention, you really wanted to get it right, but you missed the mark. You tried - but you failed. That's what the sin offering is for here in the Torah. In fact the word for sin is "chet", which literally means to miss the mark. You put the arrow in the bow, you pulled it back as far as you could, you aimed, you fired, and you missed. Not only did you miss the target, but the arrow

went through the neighbor's window and straight into their favorite painting on the wall. Now you feel terrible about it. You are ashamed of your mistake: So what do you do...? What's the narrative in your head? Well, if you're like a lot of people, you might say to yourself, "I shouldn't have taken up archery in the first place." "What business did I have playing with bows and arrows? I knew I'd never be able to pull that off..." Well, the sin offering was the Torah's way of saying, don't be afraid to try - there's a remedy, a fix for when you fail. Don't be afraid to try, even if you fail.

Interestingly, if you look at the way the Torah starts the discussion about the guilt offering, it starts with the sins of the High Priest and the Community leaders. They are the first ones who have to make these offerings. And why does the Torah start with them? Well, perhaps it's the Torah's way of saying, "You know... everybody makes mistakes." That's true...but I see it a little differently... Maybe it starts with the leaders because the Torah wants us to know that they got to be leaders precisely because they were not afraid to make mistakes; they were not afraid to fail. Maybe the Torah is trying to teach us that the only way to be a leader, in any aspect of your life, personal or professional, is to take chances, to sometimes succeed and sometimes fail. So Torah says: Let's put failure right up front where we can all see it. Tradition is saying, "Let's get this straight: You are going to fail... but you can get passed it, and here's how... Bring an offering to Gd, admit your mistake, even though it was unintentional, and move on. Try again." To me the Torah puts failure up front to remind us that if you are ever going to get ahead in the world, if you ever going to come close to living up to your full, Gd-given potential, you can't walk around afraid to fail.

I read this fabulous, and extremely helpful quote by Teddy Roosevelt on this subject. He said, "It is not the critic who counts- it is not the man who sits and points out how the doer of deeds could have done things better, and how he

falls and stumbles. No, the credit goes to the man in the arena whose face is marred with dust and blood and sweat... But when he is in the arena at best he wins, and at worst he loses... but when he fails, when he loses he does so daring greatly."

And that's what life is really all about, about daring greatly, about being in the arena. So the Torah says, "OK, you made a mistake. We can deal with that. Here is a way of getting past the guilt." But, unfortunately, it doesn't stop there. People are afraid to enter the arena because they are afraid of feeling shame if they fail. You still have to deal with shame, the shame that comes with failure. The shame that keeps you from trying again...When you walk up to the arena and you put your hand on the door and you think - "I'm going in - I'm going to try this," shame is the gremlin that says, "No. You are not good enough; you're not pretty enough or smart enough or powerful enough to pull this off...You screwed up once already, what do you expect?" You have to move past the dear of shame. Shame is not guilt. Shame is a focus on the self, guilt is a focus on behavior. Shame is "I am bad", guilt is "I did bad." We put the guilt offerings right up front to teach us that guilt, sin, failure can help us grow - it can motivate us to do better. Guilt is good when you take that sin or failure and hold it up against the measure of success you are really hoping for. Guilt is adaptive, it helps us cope with life and move forward after we make mistakes. "I lost, but I'll do better next time." But shame keeps us from ever moving forward. The fear of shame keeps us from taking risks outside our comfort zones. So it's no wonder that shame is highly correlated with addiction and depression, violence and aggression, bullying, eating disorders... the list goes on and on.

I read a study recently that said that while shame is universal - everyone with a conscience feels shame at some time or another - the way it plays out is actually gender specific. The fear of shame that comes with failure in men is

the fear of appearing weak. For women, it's a little more complex: For women who try to balance home and family and work, the fear is the shame that comes from not having it all together. And maybe that's why the Torah starts with these sin offerings, with failure - to show us that you don't need to be ashamed if you fail, if you appear weak or vulnerable - that you don't need to be ashamed if you don't have it all together. Everyone, starting with the leaders of the People would come to the Mishkan and offer these guilt offerings for mistakes they made, and they didn't need to be ashamed. And to this day we try right here to create that same kind of place: A place you can come when you are feeling weak and vulnerable and know that that's OK. A place you can be yourself even if you don't have it all together, a place you can come where people appreciate you and care for you even when you make mistakes, a place where you can move past the shame that keeps you from trying again. A place that renews your courage to get back into the arena and live daring greatly once again - trying your best to be your best...