

Shabbat Parashat Shmini 5784
Shabbat Hachodesh
Rabbi David Englander
“When Leaders Make Mistakes”

I want to spend a few moments revisiting two concepts within our Jewish tradition, one directly out of not this week’s Torah portion but which was read just a couple of weeks ago, and another axiomatic statement of the rabbis that reminds us of a core value that we are called on to uphold and also to support others who do so as well.

A couple of weeks ago in Parashat Vayikra, which is to say one of the earliest texts in all of our Jewish tradition and on top of which oodles of other interpretations, applications, and commentary have been added, the Torah speaks of what happens when someone makes an inadvertent mistake. The term for this in the Torah is “bishgaga” and in this room that might ring a bell because just before the Hazzan chants Kol Nidre we say “ki chol ha-am bishgaga” - the entire people, every one of us, has erred. If we can’t think of a way that we made a mistake on purpose we are reminded in that moment that all of us have committed errors b’shoigeig, unintentionally, for which we are also responsible.

And we did not have to wait for the rabbis to interpret who this applies to. The Torah is specific and even in Parashat Vayikra mentions four different categories of people each who has a way to atone for mistakes made unintentionally. They include the High Priest, the whole community which refers to the highest court, the Sanhedrin, the leader or Nasi, who is the political head of the community, and the fourth is an ordinary individual. No one was deemed infallible and in fact it was quite the opposite, it was programmed into the system that while intentional mistakes and violations of law were to be avoided and also punished severely, unintentional mistakes were inevitable and the way back from them to a state of better moral or ritual equilibrium was not nearly as steep, but still had to be accomplished so that anyone - from priest to Israelite and from king to judge - could take better care to avoid it in the future. As I like to say to our staff, if we are going to make mistakes, let’s try to make new ones instead of repeating the ones we have already done.

Rabbi Sacks points out that when the Torah speaks of three of these people or groups making mistakes it says “Ki” - if one of them should err unintentionally. It is inevitable that they will but the Torah holds out the possibility that with enough positive attention, elevated awareness, and tremendous effort people can at least strive to avoid even unintentional sins of any kind. But when it comes to the Nasi, the one who is at the head of the political structure of ancient Israel, and is involved in many no-win scenarios, decisions that no one else could make, and quandaries where the Rumsfeldian “known unknowns” and “unknown knowns” stack up to the point where even the best decision in a given tense moment may turn out to be the wrong one. For him the Torah does not only say “ki” it says “ka’asher” - not if, but when this leader makes a mistake, because they are unavoidable, they come with the job, title, and responsibilities.

Here’s the second value, implied by the Torah but stated succinctly by the Rambam in the Mishneh Torah. In the laws of Gifts to the Poor (7:6) it is taught: If a poor person who is unknown [in the area] has said, "I am hungry; please feed me," They do not check into his background lest he be an impostor, but rather they feed him immediately. If someone comes asking for clothing, or, probably, money beyond what they need for an immediate meal, then it is within the community’s purview to investigate the need, both to see if they are being misleading about it, or even better, to see what other community resources could be offered to really assist this person to be healthy, to get back on their feet, and hopefully to thrive. To repeat: if someone is hungry, feed them. As best you can even if it is expensive, inconvenient, and even if you have your doubts as to how direct they are being with you about their need. Hunger is not to be messed with - no one should be hungry on our watch.

So you have probably already connected the dots between the unintentional mistakes made by leaders which are considered inevitable, even if we try to avoid them with safeguards, policies, and procedures which are meant to be followed but in the complexities of life and as we saw this week especially in the complexity of war can break down. No one who looks at what happened to the convoy of workers from World Central Kitchen can say in good faith that Israel sent deadly missiles flying toward them on purpose. It was a mistake, a tragic one, and the difference between Israel’s leadership and so many others is that they said so, clearly and directly. And they really will work to make sure it never happens again, not so they can make new mistakes, but so that their values can

be upheld and so Israel can strive to be worthy of its name, unique among nations as the only Jewish state in the world.

I don't know what if anything you have read about World Central Kitchen but from all I can find the organization and its founder chef Jose Andres should be held up as paragons of taking knowhow and translating it into meaningful and helpful action. Many thousands across dozens of disaster areas have been fed, cared for, and felt their basic humanity affirmed because of their tireless work. That they were willing to put their values into practice even in such a dangerous place - made dangerous not mainly by the IDF but by the failures of the government in place there - is praiseworthy. I'm sure someone out there knows of some critique of WCK but in this week of sadness of their team I think it is necessary to state publicly that the loss of their workers was a tragedy, because of it there will be people who will go unfed, and that we hope they can get back to their important work not only in Gaza but wherever they are needed. May we emulate their mission which is to feed hungry people first and ask questions later - that is a Jewish value too and by what are we to be guided if not by these traditions.

Based on what I wrote to our congregation on Friday, if an organization, government, or individual condemned Israel for this terrible mistake that they acknowledged, but has not spoken up with equal energy for the hostages, or against Hamas targeting civilians, or declared it intolerable that they use human shields which makes it almost impossible for Israel to go after only combatants, or did not use equally powerful and direct language to describe the inhumane *government funded and sanctioned* acts of October 7th that started this war in the first place, then we know this tragedy is only a conduit for one-sided critique of Israel. Israel can do no right other than perhaps sitting back and doing nothing, and her enemies can do no wrong including grave atrocities against women, children and the elderly. Their silence is truly deafening.

We pray once again that no one stoop to the level of those who see any human as less than that, and praise leaders who share credit for success but take responsibility for mistakes. As Rabbi Sacks timelessly taught us, "What matters is not that leaders never get it wrong – that is inevitable, given the nature of leadership – but that they are always exposed to prophetic critique and that they

constantly study Torah to remind themselves of transcendent standards and ultimate aims. The most important thing from a Torah perspective is that a leader is sufficiently honest to admit their mistakes.” That is an ideal toward which to strive and on which to reflect during this still beautiful and hope-filled Shabbat together.

Shabbat shalom.