

Being Wrong

On, February 1, 2004, many of us were sitting comfortably on our couches, surrounded by snacks and soda, gazing intently at the television. The New England Patriots were playing the Carolina Panthers in Super Bowl 38. Sure, it was an exciting game, but nothing prepared us for the excitement during the Half-Time Show. As you might recall, Janet Jackson was joined onstage by Justin Timberlake for the performance. Towards the very end, Justin pulled back part of Janet's outfit, revealing a part of her anatomy usually covered on national television. And an uproar ensued! The FCC wanted to fine the television station and the musicians, and Decency Laws were written up. Soon after, Justin Timberlake's agent released the following statement: "I am sorry if anyone was offended by the wardrobe malfunction during the halftime performance."

In 1991, John Sununu, the then chief of staff to President George Bush, was caught violating various White House travel rules. He retreated behind the language of obfuscation. "Clearly, no one regrets more than I do the appearance of impropriety," he said. "Obviously, some mistakes were made."¹

Just 36 hours into his administration, President Bill Clinton used similar terminology when he withdrew the nomination of Zoë Baird as attorney general. In January 1997, he acknowledged that the White House should not have invited the nation's senior banking regulator to a meeting where Mr. Clinton and prominent bankers discussed banking policy in the presence of the Democratic Party's senior fund-raiser. "Mistakes were made here by people who either did it deliberately or inadvertently," he said.²

What links these three stories? REALLY BAD APOLOGIES! In fact, it's possible that they don't even qualify as apologies at all. Our public figures, whether in sports, popular culture, or politics, rarely know how to appropriately and gracefully apologize. Many don't take full

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/14/washington/14mistakes.html>

² *ibid.*

responsibility for their actions. It's as if they can't possibly admit that they might have actually done something wrong.

As Moliere once said, "It infuriates me to be wrong when I know that I'm right."

In our culture, we have a very difficult time admitting when we are wrong. It seems to take us by surprise, each and every time, that we're anything less than perfect. Our decisions *must* be right if *we* have made them. We feel this way about our political convictions, our religious and moral beliefs, our assessment of other people, the accuracy of our memories, and our understanding of the world.

But, in a new book entitled, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, journalist Kathryn Schulz examines why we all find it so maddening to be wrong or to be caught having committed an error. We love to point out others' errors, stifling the urge to say, "I told you so!" Schulz also points out that we refuse to see that our mistakes are simply a natural part of being human. Making a mistake has the potential especially to teach us how to do something right the next time. Unfortunately, we find it so difficult to take responsibility for and honestly admit when we've made a mistake.

We seem to be hard-wired with this difficulty, so religion created mechanisms to help us navigate the waters of misjudgments and errors. Just as Catholicism has confession, we, of course, have today – Yom Kippur. This time of year is set aside to encourage us to acknowledge our failings, our imperfections, and our mistakes of the past. Most importantly, we must apologize to those we have wronged. Without this yearly reminder to apologize to ourselves and others, would we continue to apologize to others on a regular basis? Or would we pretend that we are never wrong, that we never cause anyone pain with our behavior or our words?

Yom Kippur encourages us to undertake this act of reflection and to think of times when we might have wronged ourselves or others. This precursor to apologizing is an important first step: the experience of *realizing and accepting* that we are wrong. We realize that our mistakes may be of varying severity. We also recognize that our mistakes may have had varying degrees of impact on others' or our lives. Sometimes our mistakes are shocking, confusing, funny, embarrassing, traumatic, pleasurable, illuminating, or even life-altering.

As the Machzor text reminds us, for sins between us and God, the Day of Atonement atones, but for those between us and another person, the Day of Atonement does not atone. Rather, we must approach those people, *face to face*, and try to make amends. (and, no, the blanket Facebook apology posted on your wall and addressed to all of your friends doesn't count. It actually goes against the whole idea of Yom Kippur repentance!)

Kathryn Schulz, in *Being Wrong*, explains the etymology of the word, "error:"

In ancient Indo-European, the ancestral language of nearly half of today's global population, the word *er* meant to "move," "to set in motion," or simply "to go." That root gave rise to the Latin verb, *errare*, meaning "to wander," or, "to roam." The Latin, in turn, gave us the English word, *erratic*, used to describe movement that is unpredictable or aimless. And, of course, it gave us *error*. From the beginning, then, the idea of error has contained a sense of motion: of wandering, seeking, going astray. Implicitly, what we are seeking – and what we have strayed from – is the truth.

Similarly, the Hebrew word used most often for sin, "*Chet*," is translated as "missing the mark." It's as if you aimed your bow and arrow at a target, really tried to hit the bull's-eye, but missed it. We try to do right, but we often wind up missing the mark.

So, we have missed the mark, we have wandered, we have strayed. When I mention the word "wander," many of you may think of one of today's most popular quotes, taken from JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, "Not all who wander are lost." Wandering doesn't have to be a bad thing. Wandering brings about adventures, learning, discoveries about the world, and, more importantly, about ourselves.

When discussing the comfort of safety, the predictability of not taking risks, and the potential to make mistakes, Kathryn Schulz writes, "Who really wants to stay home and be right when you can don your armor, spring up on your steed and go forth to explore the world? True, you might get lost along the way, get stranded in a swamp, have a scare at the edge of a cliff. Thieves might steal your gold, sorcerers might turn you into a toad, but what of that? To [mess] up is to find adventures."³

³ Schulz, Kathryn. *Being Wrong*. New York: Ecco, 2010. P. 42-43.

Once we know we've done something wrong, one of two things happens – either it becomes impossible to remember the act, or the situation becomes impossible to forget. We either block it out, or we obsess and ruminate over our mistake.. We either can't accept we made a mistake, so we block it out from our minds, or we are so completely stunned by our mistake that we can never forgive ourselves. We may even attach quite a bit of meaning to it and even categorize it in our heads – “Lessons I've learned,” “Things I used to believe,” “Embarrassing moments,” but, never just “Times I was Wrong.”

St. Augustine once said, “*Fallor Ergo Sum*,” I err, therefore I am. Errors are somehow essential to who we are as human beings. We ALL MAKE MISTAKES. And, you know what, it's okay!

We don't need to eat crow, eat humble pie, eat our hat, or eat our words. Rather, we must learn that it is okay to make mistakes. Only then can we take responsibility for them, learn from them, apologize to ourselves and others for them, and – most importantly – how to move on from them.

Interestingly, we often neglect to teach our children how to make mistakes, and how to fail, in a healthy, strong way. A few weeks ago, the New York Times magazine published a wonderful article called, “What if the Secret to Success is Failure?”⁴ In it, we learn about the experiences of David Levin, founder of the KIPP, Knowledge is Power Program, network of schools in New York City.

In 1999, the first group of students to enter KIPP Academy middle school, which Levin founded and ran in the South Bronx, triumphed in the eighth-grade citywide achievement test. The eighth-grade graduates had the highest scores in the Bronx and the fifth-highest in all of New York City. Every morning of middle school they passed a giant sign in the stairwell reminding them of their mission: “Climb the Mountain to College.” And as they left KIPP for high school, they seemed poised to do just that: not only did they have outstanding academic results, but most of them also won admission to highly selective private and Catholic schools, often with full scholarships.

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/18/magazine/what-if-the-secret-to-success-is-failure.html?pagewanted=all>

However, for many students in that first cohort, things didn't go as planned. "We thought, O.K., our first class was the fifth-highest-performing class in all of New York City," Levin said. "We got 90 percent into private and parochial schools. It's all going to be solved. But it wasn't."

Almost every member of the cohort did make it through high school, and more than 80 percent of them enrolled in college. But then the mountain grew steeper, and every few weeks, it seemed, Levin got word of another student who decided to drop out. According to a report that KIPP issued last spring, only 33 percent of students who graduated from a KIPP middle school 10 or more years ago have graduated from a four-year college. That rate is considerably better than the 8 percent of children from low-income families who currently complete college nationwide, and it even beats the average national rate of college completion for all income groups, which is 31 percent. But it still falls very short of KIPP's initial stated goal: 75 percent of KIPP alumni will graduate from a four-year college, and 100 percent will be prepared for a stable career.

Apparently, the students enrolled in the KIPP programs were never taught how to fail and, likewise, how to recover. The teachers and parents, so concerned with showering the students with praise, didn't properly arm them with the skills needed to survive disappointment, challenges, or being imperfect. They were only ever told that they were already perfect. Unfortunately, when presented with the challenges of the real world, the children couldn't achieve perfection. Unable to cope with imperfection, the children felt their only other option was to drop out of school.

You may have heard me refer to myself as a "recovering perfectionist." I say this with a smile, but it is very much true. I had many early elementary school successes and very little early failure. By the time I entered adolescence, I was completely unprepared to cope with what many would consider normal life experiences. I didn't get the part I wanted in a school play, a boyfriend broke up with me, and I got some B's on my report card. Suddenly I didn't know who I was. My whole self-image of a perfect, exemplary student and daughter just evaporated. I spiraled into depression, which, thankfully, my parents recognized quickly and sent me to a caring therapist. Over the next few years of junior high and high school, I learned that I didn't have to define myself by my successes or by my failures. Rather, I am the totality of all of my experiences and characteristics. This lesson was hard-learned, and even to this day, I continue to

wrestle with the critical internal voices that tell me that I have to be perfect. But, this gives me the opportunity to reach out to all of you, to be a role model for successful failures (not such an oxymoron), and to show that making mistakes is normal and not such a big deal.

Wendy Mogel, author of the critically acclaimed books, “The Blessing of a Skinned Knee” and “The Blessing of the B Minus,” shares the following insights:

Well-intentioned parents perceive the world as so competitive and dangerous — there are only 10 good colleges, the drugs are stronger, sex more dangerous — that they wish for their child to go straight from sweet third grader to junior statesman. They hope that with the right strategy their child can skip the stage of adolescence — of risk-taking, bad choices, oversleeping and sketchy friends — entirely.

So they get very involved and become very helpful on one hand and become overly reactive and suspicious on the other. Normal teen ups and downs seem like tsunamis. And here’s the outcome: instead of typical teen moodiness, arrogance and annoyance-with-parents these overhandled, overstressed kids feel anxious, demoralized and helpless, and some become very angry. Instead of taking it out on their parents — who already seem so vulnerable — they take it out on themselves in the form of eating disorders, self-injury, homework strikes and anxiety and gloominess about the future.

Then when these teens get to college they are unprepared to manage without their handlers. The deans call those who have been overprotected “teacups” and those who have been fried from overscheduling and overwork “crispies.” Some get into top schools but come home before the end of first semester.⁵

So, as a perfectionist, I was more of a “crispie.” I needed to learn how to take care of myself and not let life’s ups and downs destroy me.

⁵ <http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/12/the-blessings-of-a-b-minus/>

We must teach the next generation that it is okay to make mistakes and how to take responsibility for them. But we must also give ourselves permission to do the same. Each time I meet with a Bar or Bat Mitzvah student, in preparation for his or her big day, I tell each one the same thing: I promise you that I will make a mistake. This is plenty therapeutic for me, let me tell you, but it also releases so much of the student's anxiety. I also say it in front of the parents, so that the whole family knows that perfection is not the goal. Each one of us on the bimah must also do our very best, but we need never be perfect. Mistakes happen, and it is okay.

I'm not saying it's easy to admit when you've screwed up. I'm not saying that it doesn't hurt when you are reprimanded, downsized, embarrassed, or publicly corrected in some way. It does hurt, but it does not have to destroy you.

Though even Charlie Sheen came across as contrite when he was recently on Jay Leno and said, "I would have fired my *tuchas*, too," (and he didn't say *tuchas*) I invite you to contrast the examples at the start of my talk with the following apology, which came from Tiger Woods, in February of 2010, following the revelation of many acts of infidelity over many years.

I want to say to each of you, simply, and directly, I am deeply sorry for my irresponsible and selfish behavior I engaged in.

I know people want to find out how I could be so selfish and so foolish. People want to know how I could have done these things to my wife, Elin, and to my children. And while I have always tried to be a private person, there are some things I want to say.

Tiger Woods offered a rare form of public apology that actually admitted to wrongdoing, to unethical behavior, and to a promise of changed action in the future. He continued:

Elin and I have started the process of discussing the damage caused by my behavior. As she pointed out to me, my real apology to her will not come in the form of words. It will come from my behavior over time.⁶

⁶ http://articles.cnn.com/2010-02-19/us/tiger.woods.transcript_1_elin-behavior-core-values?_s=PM:US

I am also aware of the pain my behavior has caused to those of you in this room. I have let you down. I have let down my fans. For many of you, especially my friends, my behavior has been a personal disappointment. To those of you who work for me, I have let you down, personally and professionally. My behavior has caused considerable worry to my business partners.

Tiger Woods owned up to his unacceptable behavior, apologized with honesty and integrity, and much of the public was able to start forgiving him. Perhaps he was even able to begin forgiving himself. Recognizing the fact that we all make mistakes does not mean to we can shrug everything off and not take responsibility for our errors, but we also can allow ourselves the opportunity to rebuild after we err. We can be resilient, we can be courageous, and we can appreciate the wandering that we do between errors and successes.

As American psychiatrist, G.E. Vaillant writes, “It’s all too common for caterpillars to become butterflies and then maintain that in their youth they had been little butterflies.” We tend to be so quick to forget the ugliness, the awkwardness, the ignorance, and the natural part of learning that comes with experience. Remember the fact that you were once a small caterpillar making mistakes and learning from them. Perhaps there are times when you still feel like a caterpillar. Keep this in mind and maybe it will help the butterfly inside you – and your children – soar that much higher.

In this New Year, O God, may we learn that we are perfect in our imperfections.

May we always try our best and our hardest, and also accept when we reach our limits.

May we learn to accept our mistakes with grace, being sure to apologize and mend the brokenness that our errors may cause.

And, maybe, this will truly help us come closer to being the incredible, inspiring, holy human beings You created.

Amen.