



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

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IN THE PARSHA

Forgiving Fallibility

“I was wrong. I am sorry. Please forgive me.” These are rare words indeed, but I heard them pronounced clearly by a woman I once worked for, and whom I still admire.

She was the superintendent of a small school district just outside of Washington, DC. Several of the school districts in that geographical area were under a federal court order to guarantee desegregation of the races in the public schools. Believe it or not, the court found that even as late as the early 1970s, proper integration of the races was still not achieved in many of these schools.

The superintendent, whom I will call Dr. Cassidy, had selected a group of school system employees to serve as part of a specially trained team to deal with the tensions in the community that were caused by the implementation of this court order.

I was then working as a school psychologist in this school district, and was one of those chosen to serve on this team. We had spent several weeks training

for this sensitive human relations project. She had initially assured us that federal funding for our salaries was guaranteed, and that we could be confident that our jobs were secure once certain formalities were finalized.

One Monday morning we were summoned to an urgent meeting. She informed us that the funds were not available, and that we would be denied not only our future salaries, but even remuneration for the time we had already spent. It was then that she uttered the words, “I was wrong. Please forgive me.”

I have subsequently witnessed many situations in which a leader made a terrible mistake impacting upon the lives of others. But, almost invariably, those leaders shirked responsibility, blamed others, or concocted ludicrous excuses for their failures. Very few had Dr. Cassidy’s courage.

This week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Vayikra* (*Leviticus* 1:1-5:26), describes an individual who demonstrated just such courage, and who indeed was expected to do so.

Chapter 4 of our Torah portion lists a number of individuals who occupied special roles in the ancient Jewish community. They included the High



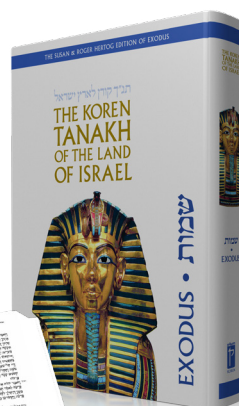
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Priest; the judges of the central court or *Sanhedrin*; and the *Nasi*, or chieftain. Of the latter, we read:

“In case it is a chieftain who incurs guilt by doing unwittingly any of the things which by the commandment of the Lord his God ought not to be done, and he realizes his guilt... He shall bring as his sin offering a male goat without blemish... Thus the priest shall make expiation on his behalf for his sin, and he shall be forgiven.” (*Leviticus* 4:22-26)

The Hebrew for the first phrase in the above quotation, “in case,” is “*asher*.” *Rashi* notes the similarity between the word “*asher*” and the word “*ashrei*,” or “fortunate.” Based on that similarity he comments: “Fortunate is the generation whose leader is concerned about achieving forgiveness for his unintentional transgressions. How much more so will he demonstrate remorse for his intentional misdeeds.”

Fortunate indeed is the community which is blessed with leadership that can acknowledge error unambiguously. Even more fortunate is the community whose leaders ask for forgiveness.

Our commentators note that it is to be expected that leaders will commit moral errors. Rabbi Obadiah Sforno, the

medieval Italian physician and Torah scholar, comments that it is unavoidable that men in positions of power will sin. He quotes the phrase in *Deuteronomy* 32:15 which reads, “Jeshurun grew fat and kicked,” indicating that when one becomes “fat” with power he will “kick” sinfully. How similar is this insight to Lord Acton’s famous quote: “Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

If the Torah assumes that misdeeds by leaders are unavoidable, it also expects that those leaders will humbly acknowledge their misdeeds and beg forgiveness for them. That is the lesson of the passage in our Torah portion.

However, the process cannot end with the leader’s apologies. His followers must accept his sincere regret, and, much more difficult, must bring themselves to forgive him. In the passage in our *parsha*, it would seem that it is the Almighty who forgives a leader, and not necessarily the people.

My personal experience has taught me that just as it is difficult for people, especially those in power, to confess their shortcomings and to appeal for forgiveness, so is it all the more difficult for people to grant forgiveness to those who have offended them.

Yet, our sages point out that the Almighty wants us to be as forgiving as He is. Thus, there is a verse in the book of the prophet *Micah* which reads, “Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression...?” Upon this verse, the *Talmud* comments: “Whose

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iniquities does God forgive? Those of he who remits the transgressions of others.” (*Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashana 17a*).

So, let’s return to the story with which I began this column. Dr. Cassidy proved herself to be capable of confessing that she was mistaken, and of asking us to forgive her. But I also remember our reaction, the reaction of the small group of hard workers who learned that they were not only out of a job, but would not even be getting paycheck that they earned.

Our reaction was one of great anger. I imagine that the feelings in the room were close to those of a lynch mob. We vented some of those feelings, but then moved on to feelings of frustration and impotence. We asked Dr. Cassidy to leave the room so that we could plan our next step rationally, which she did.

I won’t report on the details of the long discussion which ensued. Suffice it to say that we moved from anger and frustration to acknowledging Dr. Cassidy’s good intentions, to empathizing with her dilemma, and finally, as a group, deciding to express to her our understanding and

forgiveness.

She reentered the room, and was visibly touched by our compassionate response

I must conclude by telling you dear reader, that although happy endings are generally confined to fairy tales, this particular story did have a happy ending.

Perhaps emboldened by the support she felt from our group, Dr. Cassidy renewed her efforts to obtain the grant from the federal agency, enlisted the assistance of several regional congressman, and obtained the funds available for this training program.

The lessons of ordinary life often parallel the lessons of the Torah. For a society to advance, its leaders must be self-aware and courageous enough to recognize and confess their failures, and to seek forgiveness from those whom they have affronted. Equally important, those who have been affronted most find it in their hearts to sincerely forgive.

Then, and only then, can problems be solved, and greater goals achieved. ■

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