MISTAKES WERE MADE, BUT NOT BY ME
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A man observed a woman in the grocery store with a three-year-old girl in her basket. As they passed the cookie section, the child asked for cookies and her mother told her, “No.” The little girl immediately began to whine and fuss and the mother said quietly, “Now Julie, we just have half of the aisles left to go; don’t be upset. It won’t be long.”

He passed the mother again in the candy aisle. Of course, the little girl began to shout for candy. When she was told she couldn’t have any, she began to cry. The mother said, “There, there, Julie, only two more aisles to go, and then we’ll be checking out.”

The man happened to be behind the pair at the check-out, where the little girl immediately began to clamor for gum and burst into a terrible tantrum upon discovering there would be no gum purchased today either. The mother patiently said, “Julie, we’ll be through this check out stand in five minutes, and then you can go home and have a nice nap.”

The man followed them out to the parking lot and stopped the woman to compliment her. “I couldn’t help noticing what a wonderful parent you are - how much restraint and self-control you practiced with little Julie…” The mother broke in, My little girl’s name is Tammy...I’m Julie.”

Yep, I’d say the past couple of weeks have sorely tried the patience of just about everyone in America. Between gasoline prices hitting the roof and the economy melting down it’s as if we don’t know which way to turn to find relief from this persistent low grade anxiety that tells us something is very, very wrong. Few of us feel like we have a grasp at all on what really needs to be done to make it better. One comic wryly noted recently, “Gasoline prices have gotten so high these days, street gangs are having to do walk-bys.”

When a Times/Bloomberg poll last week asked whether the country was “generally going in the right direction” or “on the wrong track,” 79% said “wrong track” and only 13% said “right direction.” On the one hand most
Americans don’t believe the government should bail out financial firms with taxpayer money, but on the other hand voters want the government to do something to prevent a financial collapse, even though they don’t like the idea of footing the bill.

For thousands of years Jewish tradition has called these very days, the Yamim Noraim – the “Days of Awe” – but noraim doesn’t only mean “awe,” in Hebrew, it also means “fear.” And when the stock market took its largest drop in history last week, even those of us who know absolutely nothing about money, felt the fear that swept the country.

And fear is such a terribly debilitating emotion – it blinds us to the values that matter most in our lives, frightens us into poor, ill-thought out decisions, obscures the truth of what we really have and who we really are behind a fog of half-truths and distortions, and misinformation. A hundred years ago Railroad magnate E.H. Harriman warned us, “It is never safe to look into the future with eyes of fear.”

Rudyard Kipling once wrote, “Of all the liars in the world, sometimes the worst are your own fears.” No, I’m not pretending that the economy isn’t in serious, serious trouble. Even someone as economically challenged as I am knows that.

Shirley MaClaine once said, “Fear makes strangers of people who would be friends.”

How perfect that right in the midst of the fears that this election season has evoked in so many of us on all sides of the political spectrum, here we are – gathered together once again for Yom Kippur – our Day of Atonement. Yom Kippur which could be, should be our day of “At-Onement” as well if we let it.

Novelist Kathleen Norris once wrote, “Life is easier than you think; all that is necessary is to accept the impossible, do without the indispensable, and bear the intolerable.” Sounds like the past couple of weeks to me. What a relief to be here once again. This is a place of refuge today – a “sanctuary” in the most important sense of the word. A safe place – a holy place – a place to look deeply within and remember the best that lies within us all. To check
our fears at the door, and open our hearts to the strangers who would be friends.

Did you hear about the latest telephone poll taken by the California Governor’s office? They asked whether people who live in California think that illegal immigration is a serious problem:

29% of respondents answered: “Yes, it is a serious problem.”
71% of respondents answered: “No, no es una problema serios.”

Strangers who would be friends. Seriously, the latest news stories are reporting that because of the economic melt down so many immigrants are no longer able to send money back home that there is actually a reverse immigration taking place.

People of all colors, from all backgrounds, from every political party, young and old are desperately trying to figure out what the future of our country will be and what role they can play in that future. That’s why the most moving moment of the Summer Olympics for me wasn’t when Michael Phelps won those races (as cool as that was) – it was a moment during an incidental interview with Kobe Bryant when he said, “The day my USA jersey arrived in the mail, I held it up and then I just started to cry – I was so proud to represent my country. I was so proud to represent my country.”

That is what America was, has been and always must be – a country where we all feel proud to cherish our privilege of being citizens.

Thousands of years ago, when Cain, the very first brother in the Torah kills his brother Abel and then asks God the infamous question, “AM I MY BROTHER’S KEEPER?” from that moment on we have known that the answer is YES. YES, we are responsible. But just like Cain, we do everything we possibly can to deny it.

The reason that Teshuvah - repentance is one of the most difficult things to do, from the White House to Wall Street to Main Street, is simply that it first requires us to admit that we have been wrong. About anything. And after decades of scientific and psychological studies of the human brain and how we are wired up, it is now an incontrovertible fact that the three most
difficult words in the English language for anyone to say, whether a native speaker or not, are these:

"I WAS WRONG." "I WAS WRONG"

The scariest book I have every read wasn’t written by Stephen King, or Jonathan Kellerman, or Dean Koontz. It was written last year by two social psychologists - Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson and it’s called MISTAKES WERE MADE - BUT NOT BY ME. Appropriately subtitled, “Why we justify foolish beliefs, bad decisions, and hurtful acts.” It is a frightening indictment of how easily every one of us clings to our own most cherished self-deceptions and the astonishingly powerful ability we have of self-justification in the face of all evidence to the contrary.

Self-justification is not as simple as merely lying - it grows out of the complex psychological need we all have to feel OK about who we are. Yet it is as simple as this: we believe we are fundamentally good, compassionate, loving and competent people. We make a mistake which clashes with that image - the difference between our self-image and our behavior creates emotional dissonance. The solution? Deny that it was a mistake in the first place.

Understanding how powerful the human mechanism for self-justification is answers the question so many ask when they see a ruthless dictator, greedy corporate CEO, religious zealots who murder in the name of God, priests who molest children, people who cheat siblings out of their inheritance, or the excesses of Abu Ghraib - “How in the world can they live with themselves?” we ask - and the answer is exactly the way the rest of us do every single day with every mistake that we make.

No, we aren’t dictators, murderers, rapists and thieves. But when was the last time you heard anyone say, “I can’t believe how stupid I was to vote for X,” or “to believe that.” Our need for self-justification is so strong that when faced with disconfirming evidence we will inevitably find a way to criticize, dismiss, distort, or invalidate the messenger rather than admit we were wrong.
It was the irreverent comedian Lenny Bruce who during the famous televised Kennedy-Nixon debates in 1960 said: "I would be with a bunch of Kennedy fans watching the debate and their comment would be, "He's really slaughtering Nixon." Then we would go to another apartment and the Nixon fans would say, "How do you like the shellacking he gave Kennedy?" And I realized that each group was already so committed to their candidate that it didn't matter what they actually said.

In fact, if their candidate looked into the camera and said, "I am a thief, a crook, and a liar, I am totally unqualified for this position and I now realize that I am the worst choice you could ever make for the presidency," his followers would say, "Now there is an honest man for you. It takes a big guy to admit that. That's the kind of guy we need for President."

Neuroscientists have recently shown that biases in thinking are built into the very way our brains process information so much so that once our minds have been made up, it really is incredibly hard to change them. We will simply find any justification possible to confirm that we were right all along.

It's the same mechanism that allows gangs to justify bullying weaker children, employers to intimidate employees, husbands to abuse wives - aggression begets self-justification which begets more aggression. Research shows that it is the people who think the most of themselves who, if they cause someone pain must convince themselves that the other person really deserved it all along.

Why does all this matter? Take a boy who goes along with a group of fellow 7th graders who are taunting and bullying a weaker kid who did them no harm. The boy likes being part of the gang but his heart isn't really into the bullying. So later he feels some dissonance about what he did. "How can a decent kid like me," he wonders, "have done such a cruel thing to a nice, innocent little kid like him?"

You might think that such logic would lead to an apology or a confession of wrong doing. But that's just not the way we work. What is much more likely is that to reduce the dissonance he will convince himself that the victim is neither nice nor innocent. "He is such a nerd and crybaby. Besides, he would have done the same to me if he had the chance."
Once the boy starts down the path of blaming the victim, he becomes more likely the next time he sees him to actually beat him up with even greater ferocity. By justifying his first hurtful act he sets the stage for more aggression without the guilt.

In fact in the horrifying calculus of self-deception, the greater the pain we inflict on others, the greater the need to justify it to maintain our feelings of decency and self-worth. Our victims must have deserved what they got, so we hate them even more than we did before we harmed them which in turn encourages us to inflict even more pain on them. From Nazi Germany, to Abu Ghraib, to Israelis and Palestinians, to Democrats and Republicans and you and me.

This happens every single day to your children on the playground. It happens every single day in the boardroom as companies attack and undermine competitors with the same logic. It happens every single day in the bedroom as a powerful spouse victimizes a weaker one and then justifies the victimization as “you made me do it” or “she deserved it.”

Thomas Carlyle once said, “The greatest of faults is to be conscious of none.” Surely you remember the famous interview with President Bush at the end of his first term. With all that had gone on in our country and world during those four years, including the President’s assertion that finding and destroying weapons of mass destruction and the clear and present threat they represented to American security was the reason for invading Iraq which of course turned out not to exist in the end - when the president was asked which mistakes he had made during his first term he regretted most, he replied he couldn’t think of any mistakes he had made at all. “Mistakes were made- but not by me.”

All of us have ego-preserving blind spots. And with most of us those blind spots don’t allow us to admit that we have prejudices or are irrational or mean spirited toward others. We totally believe that our dislikes are rational and well-founded.

My favorite part of the Museum of Tolerance is the beginning. You are in a room of interactive exhibits designed to identify people you can’t tolerate -
blacks, Jews, gays, short people, fat people, blonds, disabled, arabs, Hispanics, and you watch a video on the vast variety of prejudices that inflict people. Then you are invited to enter the museum proper through one of two doors: one marked “PREJUDICED” and the other marked “UNPREJUDICED.”

The second door is locked, just in case anyone misses the point. And yes, every single day people do. I know someone who was there when four Hasidic Jews were pounding angrily on the UNPREJUDICED door, demanding to be let in. The point is that all of us are mostly blind to our own prejudices.

Why else would there be so much anger, so much venom, so much passion, so much heat generated by this current presidential election? Over 50 years ago Gordon Allport wrote a brilliant book entitled, The Nature of Prejudice in which he described perfectly the classic response of a prejudiced man when confronted with evidence contradicting his beliefs:

Mr. X says, “The trouble with Jews is that they only take care of their own group.”
Mr. Y responds, “But the record of the United Way shows that Jews contribute to the general charities of the community much more generously in proportion to their numbers than others.”
Mr. X replies, “You see, that shows they are always trying to buy favor and intrude on Christian affairs. They think of nothing but money, that’s why there are so many Jewish bankers.”
Mr. Y responds, “Actually a recent study shows that the percentage of Jews in the banking business is tiny, far smaller than the percentage of non-Jews.”
Mr. X again: “You see what I mean? They don’t go in for respectable businesses; they are only in the movie business or run night clubs.”

Mr. X doesn’t even try to respond to Mr. Y’s evidence - he just slides right into another reason for his dislike of Jews. Once people have a prejudice, just as once they have a political ideology, they don’t easily drop it, even if the evidence indisputably contradicts a core justification for it. Instead, they just come up with another justification to preserve what they believe in the first place.
Oliver Wendell Holmes said, “Trying to educate a bigot is like shining light into the pupil of an eye - it constricts.” And my friends, even though I am describing a psychological reality that effects every single one of us, I would bet that none of us think we’re bigots.

This is why it is such a gift when someone loves us and respects us enough to point out our own blind spots. I wrote a Torah commentary a few weeks ago talking about the many gay and lesbian weddings I have been privileged to participate in over the past few months and encouraging people to vote no on proposition 8. In the midst of my impassioned championing of gay marriage, I characterized its opponents as “small minded,” and even used the word “evil.”

Someone had the courage to call me on it - to write and chastise me for being so small minded and such a bigot myself that I could characterize anyone who disagreed with what I consider to be the fundamental civil rights issue of our time with such sweeping generalizations and name calling.

And they were right. I read what they wrote and I was embarrassed. So I took a deep breath and I wrote back and apologized and thanked them for making me look at myself in a new way. I realized just how easy it is to demonize those who disagree with us. True teshuvah, true repentance is so difficult because it requires us to let go of the powerful grip of self-justification. To let go of the need to be right. The most difficult thing to do is also the most important thing to do - to realize that being wrong is not the same as being stupid. Nobody wants to feel stupid.

In the final analysis the test of our character is not whether or not we make mistakes, it is what we do when those mistakes are made. It is our ability to say, “When I, a decent, smart person make a mistake, I remain a decent, smart person, and the mistake remains a mistake until I do something about it.

Didi always taught Gable “How do you turn one mistake into two mistakes? By not acknowledging that you made a mistake in the first place.” For the minute you admit that it is a mistake, only then can you do something to make it right.
Lucy has a score to settle with Charlie Brown. She chases him, shouting, “I'll get you, Charlie Brown! I'll get you. I'll knock your block off!” Charlie Brown, who has been running full speed, stops, turns around and says, “Wait a minute! Hold everything! We can't carry on like this! We have no right to act this way . . . The world is filled with problems . . . People hurting other people . . . People not understanding other people . . . Now, if we as children can't solve what are relatively minor problems, how can we ever expect to . . . “

Whereupon, Lucy interrupts Charlie Brown in mid-sentence, hitting him with a left to the jaw, knocking him out. Says Lucy, “I had to hit him QUICK! He was beginning to make sense!”

Over twenty-five hundred years ago the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu observed:

A great nation is like a great man:
When he makes a mistake, he realizes it.
Having realized it, he admits it.
Having admitted it, he corrects it.
And he considers those who point out his faults as his most benevolent teachers.

May we and all our leaders have such humility and wisdom in the year ahead.

Amen