



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Tzav

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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Tzav

**What Can Mistakes Teach Us
About Life?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Why is it that some cookware is dishwasher safe, while some are not?

Why do some pots require deep scouring and cleaning, while others become stained beyond repair and must be thrown away?

What can cookware teach us about life?

It can teach us about mistakes and how to overcome them. It can teach us that, as with pots and pans, some vessels may be scoured and rinsed, while others must be dismantled and thrown away.

Life is full of mistakes, inadvertent mishaps and unintentional faux pas – a regrettable word, a bad decision, or a misguided action.

Discerning which vessels need deep cleaning and which are best discarded requires knowing how to overcome mistakes.

With the insights of the Baal Shem Tov and the Kloizenberger Rebbe, the Torah’s description of the *korban chatat*, the sin offering, comes to life and teaches us that washing dishes contains secrets deeper than suds.

This sermon also briefly addresses the ISIS attack in Brussels this past week.

WHAT CAN MISTAKES TEACH US ABOUT LIFE?

1. About Brussels (Opening)

Before I speak and cite lessons from this week's Torah reading about unintentional mistakes and what we can learn from them, I want to share a few words about acts of terror against innocent people perpetrated intentionally by monsters ... as happens almost daily in Israel and as happened tragically this week in Brussels.

Two days before we celebrated Purim, the victory over an early Middle Eastern plot against the Jews – which, in many respects, was an attack on all of humanity – we witnessed yet another brutal attack originating in the Middle East against humanity.

Our hearts and souls go out in prayer to the families of the victims. But we stand stronger and more resolute than ever – as in the days of Purim – with total confidence that we will vanquish these enemies of life and all that we hold sacred, just as we did in the days of Purim.

And now, because the surest way to vanquish enemies without is to vanquish enemies within, let me speak about what the Torah has to teach us this week. And let me begin with a little story...

2. Dirty Laundry (Anecdote)

A young couple moved into a new neighborhood. The first morning in their new home, while eating breakfast, the young woman saw her neighbor hanging the wash outside.

"That laundry is not very clean," said she to her husband. "Our neighbor needs better laundry detergent, or a new washing machine."

Her husband looked on, but remained silent.

About one month later, the woman (who had been making similar comments all along) was surprised to see a nice clean wash hanging on her neighbor's line. She said to her husband: "Look! She has learned how to wash properly. I wonder who taught her this."

Her husband replied: "I got up early this morning and washed our windows..."

3. Clean Lens

We often see people through the prism of our own mistakes. We may think another is dirty because we ourselves are dirty. When we are clean, we think everyone else is clean as well.

The simplest way to purify the world and see it through the cleanest lens is to purify ourselves and cleanse our personal lenses.

4. Edison's Mistakes

Have you ever made a mistake? A mistake affects you negatively. When you make a mistake it is very difficult to get back to a positive mindset. The mistake creates a negative vibe ... it bogs you down ... it is like grime covering your shiny diamond.

How to overcome the mistake? How to rid yourself of the grime?

One way is to take the Thomas Edison approach:

Thomas Edison tried two thousand different materials in search of a filament for the light bulb. When none worked satisfactorily, his assistant complained, "All our work is in vain. We have learned nothing."

Edison replied very confidently, “Oh, we have come a long way and we have learned a lot. We know that there are two thousand elements which we cannot use to make a good light bulb.”¹

5. Positive Way to See Failure

This is a very positive way to see failure. And this attitude is exactly what we need to address our question:

What to do when a mistake *does* affect you negatively and does seem to tarnish you?

When our personal lenses are dirtied by the muck of life, how do we clean them so that we may see clearly? Is there a remedy for the very real consequences that come with making a mistake?

Yes, there is. As a matter of fact, there is a holy procedure – called a *korban chatat* – that allows us to wash away the inadvertent mistakes so common to life.

6. The Purpose of a Korban

The Hebrew word for offering, *korban*, comes from the word *karav*, meaning to “come close.” An offering – what some might call a “sacrifice” – is the process of coming close to God, the essence of existence and, by extension, to our essential selves.

Of course, without the Temple, we cannot bring these offerings today and, generally, prayer takes their place.² But we have a lot to learn from what the Torah says about them.

¹ <http://www.moralstories.org/learning-from-mistakes/>

² Talmud Berachot 26b.

This week's Torah reading, *Parshat Tzav*, spends a vast portion of the, well, portion discussing various types of offerings and instructing us how exactly they were meant to be used as instruments to overcome distance and come close. It describes offerings of thanks and offerings of ascension ... daily offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings and peace offerings.

I would like to focus today on one of them – the *korban chatat* (the sin offering), which brought one close after an inadvertent transgression. (A different offering was brought for an intentional transgression.)

7. Korban Chatat

What was a *korban chatat*?

It might clarify things for us to understand that the word *chatat* comes from the word *chet* meaning “mistake.”

If you ever attended a soccer match in Israel, you would hear the crowd screaming “Chet! Chet!” whenever a player made a foul.

8. Pot Cleaning

Keeping this in mind, it makes sense to read that, after instructing the Jewish people regarding the *korban chatat*,³ the Torah then instructs them/us how to clean the pots in which the *chatat* was cooked.

This was the process:

The animal intended for the *korban chatat* was brought to the kohen, the priest in the Tabernacle/Temple. The animal was slaughtered and part of it was offered as a sacrifice on the altar. Another part was cooked and eaten by the priest. Afterwards, says the Torah

³ Leviticus 6:17-20.

*The earthenware vessel in which it was cooked shall be broken, but if it was cooked in a copper vessel, it shall be scoured and rinsed with water.*⁴

Note that the Torah demands that the pot be cleaned according to the material from which it was made. Just as some cookware in your kitchen are dishwasher safe while others must be hand-washed, so too some vessels may be cleaned, while others require breaking.

Earthenware pots, says the Torah, must be broken. This is because, in the cooking process, the *chatat* juices seep into the porous clay and it can never really be cleaned. So it must be destroyed.

Copper vessels, on the other hand, are more impermeable, and these may be cleaned – specifically, they must be scoured and rinsed.⁵

9. Earthenware vs. Copper

According to literal understanding, earthenware has to be destroyed because it is porous and cannot be cleaned adequately. Copper, on the other hand, is impermeable and therefore may be cleaned with thorough scouring and rinsing.

And now we must ask why does the Torah choose to mention this technicality? What does the washing of earthenware and copper vessels teach us about our personal lives?

Perhaps the answer lies in the Hebrew words for earthenware, *cheres*, and copper, *nechoshet*.

Cheres can be read as *cherish*, meaning “deafness/silence.” The Talmud⁶ teaches that *cheres*, earthenware, is symbolic of the ignorant, those deaf to the divine knowledge of Torah. Thus, we may understand that earthenware vessels are symbolic of vessels of ignorance.

⁶ Sanhedrin 52b.

Nechoshet, copper, on the other hand, is related to the word *nachash*, meaning “serpent/snake.” *Nechoshet* is reminiscent of serpentine conniving, the shrewd slithering of the snake. This is the exact opposite of ignorance. If you look in a dictionary, the word “serpentine” is synonymous with “shrewd, wily, complex, cunning, treacherous.” The snake is very wise, very learned, very familiar with cosmic knowledge. The snake distorts the information at his disposal in scheming ways and weaves convoluted (yet all too often logical) arguments. Look no further than the Garden of Eden story.

With this understanding, this Torah passage has considerable personal relevance – teaching us how we today may overcome inadvertent mistakes and cleanse our material vessels.

10. Personal Relevance

Throughout the day, the vessel of our life simmers with the influence of *chatat*, inadvertent mistakes.⁷ We think this, say that, do the other – not on purpose, but simply because we are human.

Though these mistakes are unintentional, they nevertheless affect our vessel. By the mere act of living we are interacting with a corporeal world – all of which affects our spirit and purpose. This is what a mistake, an inadvertent sin does – it tarnishes our vessel, it makes us distant from God. To correct that we need to reverse the process and come close (*makriv*) to the divine.

The 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, explains:

All year long, we inadvertently think thoughts that are foreign and alien to our soul’s purpose. All year long these *chatot*, these inadvertent sins, cook in the vessels of our being.

⁷ See Keter Shem Tov, #419 (Hashalem, Kehot 2004, p. 260). Shefa Chaim (From the Kloizenberger Rebbe) on Tzav (Tzans 2006, vol. XIII, pp. 215-231).

Our job then is to clean out the vessel. How? There are two ways: 1) an earthenware vessel, symbolic of ignorance, must be broken; 2) a copper vessel, symbolic of serpentine negativity, must be scoured clean and rinsed.

How is ignorance broken? Through humility. As King David says in Psalms: *The offerings of God are a broken spirit; O God, You will not reject a broken and crushed heart.*⁸

When we are distant and ignorant, and we wish to come close to our divine purpose, then the first step is to shatter our ignorance. When, like earthenware, the mistakes of the past have seeped into the fiber of our being, our task is to break those fibers, to be humbled, and emerge anew.

When we realize how much we have yet to learn and how much we are ignorant of, this breaks our complacency and turns us into thirsty inquisitive students, lapping up every drop of divine wisdom.

As well, the serpentine elements of our lives, those parts that are cynical and cunning like a snake, must be scrubbed and rinsed until only the best and purest is left.

What does it mean to be scrubbed and rinsed? It means to bathe and cleanse yourself – to beautify yourself in the pure and aromatic waters of Torah.

The great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, explains that the Torah's word for scouring – *morak* – finds an echo in the Book of Esther, where the king's concubines are described as undergoing cosmetic treatments – *merukei'hen*.⁹ The ladies bathed and then perfumed themselves with lotions and creams until they were appealing to the king.

The Talmud¹⁰ has a slightly different take on the scouring process, opining that the pot must be cleaned inside and out as one would wash a goblet, and that this should be done with hot and/or cold water.

⁸ Psalms 51:19.

⁹ Esther 2:12.

¹⁰ Zavachim ibid.

The Kloizenberger Rebbe¹¹ adds that since water is a symbol of Torah, the surest way to clean out any cunning or convolution is by immersing oneself in the pure waters of Torah.

11. Clean Break

Sometimes you have to break yourself, your bad habits and patterns, to be the person you want to become.

Sometimes you have to scrub your being, rinsing your mind and heart, refocusing yourself, to see the person you really are.

The challenge of life is know what to clean and what to break.

This is the relevant and personal Torah message of the *korban chatat*, brought when one transgressed inadvertently. For when this inadvertent sin is allowed to cook in our being, our vessels must be cleansed one way or another. We do this by breaking the ignorant parts of ourselves and scrubbing the conniving parts of ourselves.

Like a grape must be squeezed and its skin broken to become wine, the vessel of ignorance must be broken before a vessel of divine knowledge can take its place.

As well, the parts that are cynical and cunning must be scoured with innocent knowledge until every snaky residue is gone.

¹¹ Shefa Chaim ibid.

12. Purim to Pesach: Self Cleaning (Conclusion)

Now that we have finished celebrating Purim, we turn our focus to Passover, which is less than a month away.

One of the essential Passover mitzvot is cleaning and scouring our lives of any *chametz*, the ego – all the arrogant, uprising, blown up, leavened product that gets in the way of who we essentially are.

The surest and easiest way to implement change is to isolate one thing at a time. With Passover approaching, and its cleaning commencing, each and every one of us should make two lists:

- the first list should note the earthenware, ignorant items in our lives, which should be dismantled and thrown away;
- the second list should note the copper items in our personal lives, the ones that are knowledgeable but require scouring and rinsing so as to be pure, not convoluted but focused on the task at hand

In the process of our personal cleaning and growth we can be faced with two challenges:

1. Ignorance. Simply not being aware of certain truths. This is resolved through education, acquiring new knowledge. This requires *bittul* – humility – to “break” and discard the vacuum created by ignorance, and filling it with relevance.
2. Distorted, even conniving, intelligence. Being quite educated and aware of a situation, but self-interest clouds our vision, often causing us to be manipulative. The antidote to that is not more information, but to “cleanse” – to scour and purify – our minds and hearts – and redirect them to pure ends.

If, in your personal cleaning, you find, for example, that you don't have a mezuzah on your door because you don't know what a mezuzah is all about, then dispel and break that ignorance through learning about a mezuzah.

If you know what a mezuzah is about, but, are employing logical (if convoluted) arguments to convince yourself that mezuzah is irrelevant to this modern time, or that it will differentiate you from your neighbor, or that it is religious superstition ... then you have to scrub out the grime of such thinking.

The scouring and rinsing of your copper vessels will turn grime into rhyme. And you will never see a dishwasher in the same light again.

Shabbat Shalom!

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