SHEMOT > Mishpatim > Holy Thieves February 10, 2018

HOLY THIEVES:

CAN WE REDEEM OUR MISTAKES?

ABSTRACT

What do we do with pasts that we are ashamed of?

One of the greatest dilemmas in life is dealing with mistakes that we have made: Can we redeem our past sins or even crimes in any sense of the word – where we have hurt others either out of ignorance or malice?

This week’s Torah reading takes up laws of behavior between human beings, and it states: “If a burglar … robs in broad daylight, to kill him would be an act of murder.”

The Torah verses which come before and after this statement are clearly meant to teach us the penalties for stealing. Yet, in the middle of it all, the Torah is also concerned with the welfare of the thief! In the name of true justice, the Torah still recognizes his rights and seeks to protect his life, even though he has committed a crime.

Why does the Torah care so much about the thief?

A colorful Baal Shem Tov story illustrates for us the virtues even of a … thief, teaching us how we have the power not only to correct our ways, but our very transgressions can become tools for good, for they can help us reach spiritual heights which those who have not transgressed can never reach.

**HOLY THIEVES:**

**CAN WE REDEEM OUR MISTAKES?**

1. **Only in Israel (Humor)**

* Only in Israel has the telephone operator been known to respond, when asked for a restaurant number, “Don’t eat there, it’s lousy. My cousin had the worst meal of her life there.”
* Only in Israel has the bus driver been known to give up his seat to a pregnant woman because nobody else did, and then wait for the passengers to notice that the bus wasn’t moving.
* Only in Israel has the bank robber been known to kiss the mezuzah on his way out the door with the loot.

And this brings us to the subject of today’s sermon, which is “Holy Thieves.”

1. **The Torah and Thieves**

As it happens, this week’s Torah reading takes up – among other laws of behavior between human beings – the laws against stealing.[[1]](#footnote-1) And the Torah states:

If a burglar is caught in the act of breaking in [at night], and is struck and killed, it is not considered murder. However, if he robs in broad daylight, then to kill him is an act of murder.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Here, the Torah distinguishes between a burglar that comes in stealthily at night with deadly intent, and one who robs in daytime.

Regarding the latter, the literal expression used by the Torah is: “If the sun shines on him, he has blood,” meaning that if he robs in broad daylight, it is clear that he has no such deadly intent. And so then to kill him is considered murder – that is, “he has blood” which should not be wrongly shed.

The Torah verses which come before and after this statement are clearly meant to teach us the penalties for stealing. Yet, in the middle of it all, the Torah is also concerned with the welfare of the thief! In the name of true justice, the Torah still recognizes his rights and seeks to protect his life, even though he has committed a crime.

Why does the Torah care so much about the thief? We are about to find out.

1. **Holy Thieves (Story)**

In Hassidic literature, a story is told story of a young widow who once came crying to the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Hassidic Movement that her only child was gravely ill. “The doctors have given up hope,” she wept, “Please, please do something to save my child.”

The Baal Shem Tov, whose heart was always open and especially to widows and orphans, reassured her and sent her home promising to do everything in his power. He then proceeded to gather together a *minyan* of ten holy *tzaddikim* to pray for the child’s immediate healing.

But to no avail. As much as they tried opening the gates of heaven, they sadly were unsuccessful. The Baal Shem Tov sensed that the decree in heaven was sealed and could not be reversed by their prayers.

The Baal Shem Tov, however, was not one to give up. He fell upon an idea. He asked his driver to prepare his horse-drawn wagon. And they took off for the forest. There, he directed the driver to a particular spot, a dangerous area where thieves lurked.

When they arrived, the Baal Shem Tov climbed off the wagon, and within a few moment he was surrounded by a band of thieves. But when their leader recognized the Baal Shem Tov, he put down his weapon and with astonishment asked: “What are *you* doing here in the wild?”

The Baal Shem Tov replied: “I am here because I need your help … I need ten thieves to pray for a sick child.” The thieves didn’t understand, but out of respect for the Baal Shem Tov, they complied. And so a *minyan* of thieves was assembled, and they prayed with the Baal Shem Tov.

The child miraculously recovered.

Later, when the Baal Shem Tov was asked by his surprised students, “How were you able to accomplish with ten thieves what you could not accomplish with ten holy men?” the Baal Shem Tov famously replied: “I saw that all the gates in heaven were locked, and I needed someone to break in…”

1. **Personal Application**

This story is not meant to condone theft or any other crime. But it teaches us a very important lesson – that crimes *can* be turned into good deeds.

Once we have transgressed, we have the power not only to correct our ways, but our very transgressions can become tools for good, for they can teach us new ways to “break into heaven” – that is, to reach spiritual heights which those who have not transgressed can never reach.[[3]](#footnote-3)

No, none of us are common thieves. But is there anyone among us, indeed any person on this Planet Earth who has never hurt another, intentionally or unintentionally? Is there any person who has not failed or fallen in some way?

I don’t know of any.

As human beings, we all have our share of shortcomings and our share of transgressions. Whether we have lapsed and betrayed ourselves, others or G-d (or all the above), whether we have committed small sins or grave ones, everyone of us knows in his or her heart, what they are all capable of.

So none of us needs to feel alone. King Solomon declared long ago “there is no holy man on earth that has done good and not sinned.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

But, also, let us not console ourselves with that fact.

1. **Other Insights Into Human Error**

This week’s Torah reading deals with *many* of our human ways of harming each other. And it is quite humbling.

Just last week, we were reading about the sublime spiritual experience of the encounter with G-d at Mount Sinai, only to be brought down to earth this week and reminded of our all-too-human frailties, and what we are capable if left unchecked.

Yet, the Torah does not mean to depress us. Quite the contrary. It is telling us that by recognizing our weaknesses and potential failings … by being accountable and assuming responsibility … by rectifying our errors … we actually demonstrate the ultimate human dignity and purpose.

And what is that? To repair a broken a world.

Because we ourselves are broken, when we repair ourselves, we repair the world.

To paraphrase a well-known saying: To err is human, to repair divine.

When we rise to the occasion and correct a mistake of the past, we manifest the majestic Divine Image within us, the Divine Imagine in which we were created. We manifest the ability to transcend our mortality, to go beyond our human frailties, even to go beyond our pasts, and come out stronger than before.

And this is the ultimate redemption of our past wrongs – the power to *transform* our pasts … to use the knowledge coming from illicit sources to open up unprecedented channels of holiness and sanctity.

I’d like to relate two true stories here of people who erred, went off on a wrong path, and then used their past mistakes to reach great heights.

1. **From India to Israel (Story)**

This is the life story of the well-known Jewish writer Sara Rigler. As a young woman, Sara set off for India seeking G-d.[[5]](#footnote-5) There she embraced Hinduism with both arms. She relates trying to pray at the cremation grounds by the Ganges River, as random body parts – hands, legs, heads – were scooped up and dumped onto the burning pyre. She recalls retching from the smell of the burning flesh, yet trying to find G-d through this gruesome experience.

There were many things that Sara did during her 15 years in an ashram that any religious Jew would find odious but, eventually, this path of apparent transgression led her to Jerusalem and to authentic Judaism. A fully observant Jew for many years now, Sara today has built on her past experiences in her writing career, and she is a well-known address for those Jews seeking a way home out of Eastern spirituality.

Was she wrong? According to the Torah, she was of course. Was she right? According to the Torah, she was right too – in seeking and never stopping to seek until she arrived at the truth. And her experiences of the past taught her what was important in life as she poignantly relates[[6]](#footnote-6) in one of her articles:

When the area in which her ashram was located was hit by a storm which rendered many people homeless, Sara’s heart went out to the stricken. Since the ashram had many unoccupied guesthouses, Sara wanted to welcome there those in need. But the guru refused. The reason: “The rarefied atmosphere of the ashram would be brought down by housing ‘you don’t know what kind of people.’”

Sara begged and pleaded. But the guru was adamant – the ashram was meant to be a spiritual retreat, not a social service institution. When Sara hung up the phone, she wept.

There was much spirituality in the ashram but little kindness, Sara concluded, and she went forth to search out path of loving your neighbor that was first paved by Abraham and later legislated by the Torah. And, along the way, she found that Judaism contained just as much spirituality as Hinduism, if not more. Because she learned this first hand, she has been able to communicate it to the lost souls that find their way to her door.

1. **LSD and G-d (Story)**

This second story was related to me by a rabbi who was surprised when a fellow in one of his weekly classes stood up and made the following confession:

“I grew up in an observant home, went to yeshiva, read Hebrew and regularly attended synagogue. Then, as a teenager, I simply drifted off. It wasn’t speaking to me. My family was heartbroken but I essentially rebelled, and left everything that was Jewish. This was in the late 1960s and early 1970s so I adopted a hippie lifestyle, and discovered G-d through my LSD experiences. This is how my spirituality was nourished.

“For many years I was not a practicing or active Jew. Then one day, I was on a plane flying from the East Coast to the West Coast, and I was somewhat high and dozing off in a trance, when suddenly I heard from the back of the plane … *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh.* And I saw there was *minyan* of Jews praying, and I felt drawn to the back of the plane. I jumped up and joined them, and for the first time in many years, I prayed with them. I literally was able to sense right there on the plane the supernal angels and the cosmic forces on a very profound spiritual level that lies in these words – *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh –* in the prayer service.

“This began a journey in my return to Judaism where I began to pray regularly, keep Shabbat and keep kosher, and today I am more observant than my family. Now, what I would like to ask you rabbi is this: Without LSD back then, I would not be a practicing Jew today. It was that which brought me to G-d again. So is LSD bad?”

The rabbi who was just asked this question in front of 40 to 50 people knew that they were looking to see what he would say. Would he endorse LSD?

So the rabbi said, “What’s LSD? Does that stand for Let’s Start Davening?”

No, seriously, he didn’t say that.

The rabbi answered like this:

The issue is not LSD or any other drug, but the journey that we’re on and the path that brought us there to this time and place. And what you are really asking is if we are meant to annihilate our past? The answer is no – we are meant to transform it.

Imagine, said the rabbi, someone who falls into a coma. After months of trying every possible intervention the doctors have given up hope. Until one doctor suggests injecting this comatose person with a massive dose of drugs, as a last ditch attempt to shake up his system and revive him. The high risk effort works and the man comes back to health. Would anyone suggest that using the drugs is a healthy approach for a healthy person?! Of course not. These drugs have the power to kill any healthy person. But in an instance of desperation to save a life, you do whatever it takes.

Many Jews today, continued the rabbi, are in a spiritual coma when it come to their own religion. The fact is that some Jews were revived through non-Jewish and even alien methods. We do not understand G-d’s mysterious ways, but perhaps to save spiritually comatose people, it is necessary to employ such bizarre experiences – which you would never offer to any healthy breathing human being.

This does not condone any transgressions or the use of any drugs. Indeed, the Talmud warns us[[7]](#footnote-7) that one who says, “I shall sin and then repent” is “not given the opportunity to repent.” But *after the fact*, we cannot dismiss the results of these unorthodox methods (even as we reject the methods themselves).

Redeeming the past means throwing away the peel – the unhealthy and inappropriate methods used, and extracting the fruit – the healthy result of reviving the soul from its comatose state. All of our past mistakes can be similarly redeemed.

1. **Repentance as a Path of Return**

What do we do with our pasts?

This is a typical question asked by manypeopletoday. As I said earlier, there is no person who has not made a mistake in the past. As human beings we are inherently imperfect, and we have our ups and downs. Many of us have made some serious mistakes and some less serious, but the fact is, life is made up of mistakes.

So what do we do with them all? What is the Torah approach?

Of course, if your past has been a healthy one, there’s no discussion. A healthy past is something you build upon. But when you’re dealing with a past that often includes sins or even crimes in any sense of the word – where you have hurt others either out of ignorance or malice – then what do you do?

What you do is transform those mistakes into good deeds. Let them be learning tools at the very least. This is what the Jewish concept of repentance is all about.

Repentance of past wrongs is called *teshuva* in Judaism and that literally means “return” – return to G-d, return to your authentic self, and return to the Divine Image within that makes you human. And true and complete *teshuva* transforms “transgressions into merits.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

True *teshuva* does not mean annihilating the past. It means recognizing and not judging or invalidating who you are and what you searched for. If your past brought you somewhere good, you cannot disown it. But you are not meant to embrace it and glory it in it either. You must acknowledge the mistakes you made, resolve not to repeat them, and use them as springboards to better and greater things.

And when you do, the springboards built from previous errors will catapult you to greater spiritual heights than you ever dreamed of. And then even “crimes (not the crime itself, but the growth that it yields) will become good deeds.”

This is why the Torah actually seeks to protect thieves. Believing that, given a chance, even thieves will find the Divine Image within, return to their true selves, return to G-d, and transform their crimes into holy deeds.

May we do the same. May all our mistakes, errors, sins and transgressions become mere stepping stones to goodness. And may we reach ever greater heights of holiness with every step we take. Amen.

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1. Exodus 21:37 and 22:1-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Exodus 22:1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “In the place where *baalei teshuvah* stand, even *tzaddikim* cannot stand.” Talmud, *Berachot* 34b. Rambam, Code of Jewish Law, Laws of Teshuva 7:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ecclesiastes 7:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “From India to Israel: One Woman’s Journey,” by Sara Rigler, see: <http://www.aish.com/sp/so/48893542.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Mataji vs. Mother Theresa” by Sara Rigler, see: <http://www.aish.com/sp/so/48892787.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Talmud, *Yuma* 85b. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Talmud, *Yuma* 86b. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)