



Covenant & Conversation



Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

ACHAREI MOT-KEDOSHIM • אַחֲרֵי מוֹת־קְדוּשִׁים

STUDIES IN SPIRITUALITY

BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS 7"צ

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.

"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah.

An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

The Courage to Admit Mistakes

● This summary is adapted from this week's main essay by Rabbi Sacks, available at www.rabbi­sacks.org/covenant-conversation/acharei-mot/the-courage-to-admit-mistakes/

In Mishkan and Beit HaMikdash times, Yom Kippur was the day when the holiest man in Israel, the Kohen Gadol, did *teshuvah*, first for his own sins, then for the sins of his "house," then for the sins of all Israel. From the day the Temple was destroyed, we have had no High Priest nor the rites he performed, but we still have the day of Yom Kippur, and the ability to confess and pray for forgiveness. **It is so much easier to admit your sins, failings, and mistakes when other people are doing likewise.** If a High Priest, or the other members of our congregation, can admit to sins, so can we.

The effect of Yom Kippur – extended into the prayers of much of the rest of the year by way of *tachanun* (extra prayers), *vidui* (confession), and *selichot* (prayers for forgiveness) – was to create a culture in which people are not ashamed or embarrassed to say, 'I got it wrong, I sinned, I made mistakes.' That is what we do in the litany of wrongs we enumerate on Yom Kippur in two alphabetical lists, one beginning *Ashamnu*, *Bagadnu*, the other beginning *Al chet shechatanu*.

The capacity to admit mistakes is anything but widespread. **Our instinct is to rationalise. We justify. We deny. We blame others. We have an almost infinite capacity for interpreting the facts to vindicate ourselves.**

As the Sages said in the context of the laws of purity, "No one can see their own blemishes, their own impurities." We are our own best advocates in the court of self-esteem. Rare is the individual with the courage to say, as the Kohen Gadol did, or as King David did after the prophet Natan confronted him with his guilt in relation

to Uriah and Batsheva, *chatati*, "I have sinned."

Judaism helps us admit our mistakes in three ways. First is the knowledge that God forgives. He does not ask us never to sin. He knew in advance that His gift of freedom of choice would sometimes be misused. **All He asks of us is that we acknowledge our mistakes, learn from them, confess, and resolve not to do them again.**

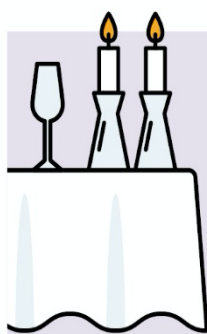
Second is Judaism's clear separation between the sinner and the sin. **We can condemn an act without losing faith in the agent.**

Third is the aura Yom Kippur spreads over the rest of the year. It helps create a culture of honesty in which we are not ashamed to acknowledge the wrongs we have done. And despite the fact that, technically, Yom Kippur focuses on sins between us and God, a simple reading of the confessions in *Ashamnu* and *Al Chet* shows us that, actually, most of the sins we confess are about our dealings with other people.

The first Jew to admit he made a mistake was Yehuda, who had wrongly Tamar his daughter-in-law Tamar, and then, realising his mistake, said, "She is more righteous than I" (Bereishit 38:26).

It is surely more than a coincidence that the name Yehuda comes from the same root as *vidui*, "confession." In other words, the very fact that we are called Jews – *Yehudim* – means that we are the people who have the courage to admit our wrongs.

Honest self-criticism is one of the unmistakable marks of spiritual greatness.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. Why is it so hard to admit mistakes?
2. How does Yom Kippur create a culture where this becomes easier?
3. Why is it important to have the courage to admit mistakes?



Lessons

by Syma Weinberg

When Rabbi Sacks first invited me to become the Director of the Chief Rabbi's Office, I was surprised to be asked. After all, I had never held a position like it before. I shared my worries with him. One thought that deeply concerned me was: what if I made mistakes? How would they impact him? His role was so important, could we afford to take risks and make errors? Rabbi Sacks responded by telling me the following story, which I have since shared many times.

A young man was appointed as the CEO of an important organisation. Everything seemed to be going well until one day he made a grievous error. He was summoned to meet with the president of the company. The young man was certain of what was going to happen next. There was no way this was going to end well! As soon as he walked into the president's office, he apologised for his terrible mistake and added: "I know that you will want me to leave because of this, so I have already cleared my desk."

"Not so," responded the president. "You have admitted that you were wrong, and you now know what to do differently next time. Please stay, and please use this experience, this 'mistake', as a stepping-stone to your continued development. Our mistakes are how we learn. How we grow."

In this week's essay Rabbi Sacks writes that most people avoid admitting their mistakes, instead developing any number of strategies to justify their actions. But what Rabbi Sacks taught me – and what this story he shared can continue to teach all of us – is that we are only human, and humans make mistakes. If we want to grow and develop ourselves and our character, then we need to see mistakes as something to own and learn from, not something to hide behind, and ignore. Mistakes are painful, but as time goes by, they become a collection of experiences called "lessons".

● Syma Weinberg worked closely with Rabbi Sacks on several initiatives, prior to serving as his Director of the Office of the Chief Rabbi for 12 years.



A CLOSER LOOK

● Syma Weinberg reflects on some of the deeper lessons she learnt from Rabbi Sacks.

What did you find powerful in this week's essay by Rabbi Sacks?

My favourite quote this week is: "Judaism helps us admit our mistakes in three ways. First is the knowledge that God forgives. He does not ask us never to sin. He knew in advance that His gift of freedom would sometimes be misused. All He asks of us is that we acknowledge our mistakes, learn from them, confess, and resolve not to do them again."

Why is this idea so important?

This is the very essence of *teshuvah*. The idea that you can make mistakes, admit them, learn from them, and grow. And this is something we can do at any time, not just during the period from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. It's always a good time to do some self-reflection.

Can you share something you learnt from Rabbi Sacks himself?

In the conclusion of this week's essay, Rabbi Sacks wrote that "Honest self-criticism is one of the unmistakable marks of spiritual greatness."

There were many reasons why it was a true privilege to work with Rabbi Sacks. One of those reasons was because when he made mistakes, he never failed to personally acknowledge them, and always sought to learn from the experiences. His humility and courage was inspiring to witness, and it continues to inspire me today.



TORAH TRIVIA

Q: A child says to the teacher: "I studied Acharei Mot – Kedoshim and learned two laws. First, the law that one must glorify the beard on their face, and second, that we may not cut in line in front of an elderly person.

The teacher responds: "Go back and study the concept of heteronyms and vowels."

The child returns and says, "Ah, I made a mistake." **What is going on here?**

▲ The Hebrew words for *zaken* "an elderly person" and *zakan* "use all the same letters – z-k-n. They are heteronyms. Since the Torah is written without vowels, it is easy to confuse these two words, because only the vowels show us the different pronunciations. There are two *halachot* in parshat Kedoshim, separated by 5 *pesukim*. One deals with the beard, the other with how we treat the elderly. The *halachot* that originally confused the child are: *lo tashchit peat zekanecha* – do not destroy the corners of your beard (Vayikra 19:27) which was misread as *do not cut corners in front of an elderly person* and *vehadarta pnei zaken* (glorify) (glorify) (Vayikra 19:32) which was misread as, "you should glorify the beard on your face."

● Adapted from Torah IQ by David Woolf, a collection of 1500 Torah riddles, available worldwide on Amazon.