

**Parshat Ki Tissa:
On Making Mistakes
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The giving of the second *luchot* represents the opportunity for a second chance; an opportunity to atone. In Hilchot Teshuva, Rambam systematically outlines the stages and laws related to *teshuvah* (repentance) in his monumental work, the Mishneh Torah. *Teshuvah* begins with **awareness**. In order to change, we have to recognize we have sinned. This step is referred to as *hakarat ha'chet* (awareness of the sin). Next we have to **verbally confess** the sin, through the act of *vidui* (confession). Admitting our personal shortcomings and wrongdoings, enables us to face the truth about ourselves, no matter how painful that may be. The experience and expression of **regret** (*charatah*) is another essential step of *teshuvah*. Regret enables us to learn the deepest lessons from our mistakes. The next step of *teshuvah*, according to Maimonides, involves the **resolution not to repeat the sin** in the future. (Hilchot Teshuva 2:2). This moment is turning point when a person decides to rewrite the script that guides their lives. Awareness. Confession. Regret. And Resolve to change and do better.

Although the gravest mistake committed by the Jewish people is the sin of the golden calf, it is also the mistake that provides the model, the blueprint, for forgiveness.

First: Awareness: Moses came down and smashed the *luchot* (stone commandments), ground up the golden calf, and made the people drink it (32:20). This is a metaphor for internalizing this mistake, thereby making *B'nei Yisrael* tangibly aware of their sin.

Then they had to confess: Moses asks the people directly who wants to do *teshuva* in Shemot 32:26:

מִי לַיהוָה Whoever is for God, join me

They had to publicly admit their wrongdoing before they could join Moshe. Interestingly, most of the people were not able to do so and were severely punished

Next, they had to experience regret: Slowly, the Jewish people began to realize the gravity and far-reaching ramifications of their mistake and the Torah says in 33:4 the “people became grief stricken (וַיִּתְאַבְּלוּ).”

But regret is not enough. The final and crucial stage is resolve to change: This is manifested in the second set of tablets. The second *luchot* looked the same as first set. As the Torah says, Moshe “carved out two stone tablets, like the first one” (34:4). But in fact, the two tablets are entirely different. The second *luchot* were carved by Moshe, not God. The laws are the same, but the first vessel that contained the laws was shattered, to make room for a new one—one, which ultimately would become sustained, used and kept by the Jewish people. It is the second *luchot* that is given on Yom Kippur, as symbol of the possibility of change. The second *luchot*, symbolizes the possibility for a second chance.

Immediately following the creation of the second tablets, God reveals his thirteen attributes of *rachamim* (mercy), and God resolves to remain amongst the Jewish people.

Awareness. Confession. Regret. And Resolve to change, and to do better.

Rambam's stages of Teshuva are not so simple to achieve. Bringing each mistake to the conscience level evokes a feeling of shame and pain; it is easier to push awareness of mistakes further into the abyss of our unconscious. Becoming aware of our pitfalls means admitting that we have weaknesses, making us vulnerable. Then even if we are aware of a mistake, confessing a mistake out loud, admitting that you have wronged God, yourself, or a friend, is impossible. This is why on Yom Kippur, the liturgy is set for us, the language is put in our mouths, as a recognition of the limitations we have with being able to confess, out loud, our own mistakes. Then, one is supposed to feel regret. Shame. A feeling that we grow up trying to avoid. Regret evokes feelings of helplessness—if only I had been more present, wealthier, younger, older. Perhaps, then I could have avoided my mistake. And then finally, we are supposed to change. Rambam suggests that we are supposed to change into a new person, changing the very essence of who we are, in order to become better people.

And yet, if one cannot recognize a mistake, confess it, show regret and change, we cannot grow. And that is the key. From mistakes, we can grow. In one of his works, *Tzidkat Ha'Tzaddik*, (47) a Chassidic teacher, Reb Tzaddok teaches: "Through the very quality in which one is lacking or wounded, by that very quality one finds one's unique gift or strength." In other words, our most unique gifts and strengths often derive from our very weaknesses and vulnerabilities. To base his idea in traditional sources, he quotes a well-known midrash about Adam and Eve: "And they [Adam and Eve] sewed [garments] from the leaves of the fig tree. Through that which was their downfall they were rectified" (*badavar she'kilkelu bonitaknu*) (Bereishit 3:7). In other words, Adam and Eve clothed themselves with the leaves of the very tree which led to their temptation, sin, and subsequent exile from paradise. Sometimes our mistakes and personal limitations lead us to our most redeeming features.

We all make mistakes. It's human nature. But it's how we respond to the opportunity for a second chance, that really matters.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.