

Shabbat Shalom.

This week, I would estimate that there were maybe 25 things I *forgot* to do. There were probably 125 things I should have done, but didn't. And at least a dozen things I *did* do incorrectly.

Nevermind the many more things I hopefully did right, or remembered to accomplish. It may even be that there weren't actually that many things that went wrong, but my mind inevitably focuses on the mistakes. Perhaps you can relate to this feeling. That even if we do 99 things right out of a hundred, our minds can't help but dwell on that one place where we missed the mark. I think it's normal. Especially when we are culturally predisposed to insist on achievement, and when the rat race of life in New York city demands being the best.

Pulling the curtain back a little bit, I'll tell you that the multifaceted job description of clergy sets us up for many opportunities to make mistakes. We are simultaneously teachers, and guides, and party planners, custodians, comedians, and accountants...jacks of all trades and masters of, hopefully, Torah. But you know, it's tricky business. And, let's not forget, we're also human beings. Brains in bodies with frailties and faults, just like everybody else. And as we read this week, Jewish clergy have struggled to hold it all together since the beginning of our history.

Parashat Shmini describes the installation of the very *first* Jewish clergy – and the first sacrifices of the priesthood. On the eighth day, shmini, Moses called Aaron and his sons, and the elders of Israel. Vayomer el Aharon, And he said to Aaron, “kach l'cha egel ben bakar l'chatat.” Take a calf of the herd for a sin offering.

They bring the things that Moses had commanded, and the whole community stands there in front of the tent of meeting. And Moses turns directly to Aaron, his brother and newly minted high priest, and says: krav el ha-mizbeach. Come close to the altar. And sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering, atoning for yourself and for the people.

Aaron steps gingerly forth, drawing closer to the altar, and Moses prods him forward, telling him that the animal he must sacrifice is an *egel*...a calf. Now think back for a moment to a few weeks ago when Aaron played a very different role in the life of the people. When Moses was up on Mount Sinai, and the restive Israelites convinced him to fashion an idol in the shape of an *egel*, a calf made of gold. The connection between these two episodes is not lost on our rabbis, who point out that the sin offering could have been anything – earlier the instructions list a sheep or a goat, or perhaps turtledoves or even simply flour. But for Aaron, it had to be a calf – a physical symbol of his prior mistake.

The Etz Hayim Torah commentary explains that “Aaron had to be urged to bring his purification offering...because he was embarrassed [by the memory of] of his role in fashioning the Golden Calf.”<sup>1</sup> The Midrash adds that at this moment, Aaron was filled with dread. As he started to make his offering, nothing supernatural or divine occurred, and he became convinced it was his fault because he had sinned so grievously with the golden calf.

Another midrash teaches that Aaron was so distressed that he began to hallucinate. As Ramban explains, Aaron imagined that the altar itself had become a bull, which frightened him. According to Ramban, Aaron was so hard on himself that his famous mistake remained top of mind for him all the time. For this reason, Moses had to say to him “krav el ha-mizbeach,” get close to the altar. As if to say, “don’t be so worried. Stop punishing yourself. You have a job to do.”

In the ensuing verses, Aaron does indeed complete his task. According to tradition, Aaron’s ability to sacrifice this *egel* allowed him to move through his trauma of having sinned with an *egel* previously. And he was able to move forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Etz Hayim, 631

It's a happy epilogue to the emotional drama of Aaron and the golden calf. Aaron...and the people...are forgiven. But I think it's notable that our tradition offers so many stories about Aaron's mental wellbeing as he considered both his role and his human imperfections. We don't have to be spiritual leaders to relate to having standards for ourselves, which we sometimes fail to meet. Many of us encounter scenarios where we have to face our shortcomings. And it's never comfortable. Perhaps, like Aaron, when we think about the ways in which we didn't behave as the best versions of ourselves, we too might hallucinate. We might invent stories in our heads about how others perceive us, convinced that others look down on us or are still thinking about that thing we did or didn't do.

It's only natural. As Etz Hayim also teaches, "the ability to feel shame is one of the defining characteristics of a moral human being. It arises from an awareness of the gap between who we are and who we might be."

But if even Aaron is able to confront his mistakes and move through them...perhaps we, too, should treat ourselves with a little more grace and compassion. Perhaps we should forgive ourselves the way our tradition urges us to forgive others, when they mess up. It seems, by the end of the chapter, that Aaron is able to do exactly this.

But that isn't the end of the parsha. In the next chapter, a tragedy unfolds. Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu take their firepans and offer an aish zara, an alien fire, which God did not command. Immediately, a different fire comes forth from God to consume Nadav and Avihu and they die then and there.

One can only imagine how devastated Aaron must have been, and how guilty he might've felt as a parent and role model. In the Torah text itself, Moses doesn't come across as especially compassionate. He essentially says to Aaron: "this is what *not* to do." And Aaron responds in silence. Modern readers would be right to question Moses in this moment – after the intensity of what his brother had just endured...he doesn't seem to respond with brotherly love. But he says one thing that stands out, given

the reading of Aaron's mental state earlier. He says to Aaron and his remaining sons: u-mipetach ohel moed, lo te'tz'u. Do not leave the tent of meeting. The reason he gives is that leaving would constitute yet another infraction against God, which might incur God's wrath upon them as well.

But Rabbi Aviva Richman offers a different take, which moved me to offer this teaching this week. She writes that "when Moses tells Aaron and his sons to stay inside the mishkan, it conveys that these deaths are not a sign of rejection and punishment. [Rather], God wants to hold Aaron close even in these tragic circumstances."<sup>2</sup> Lest he think it was all his fault, Moses insists that Aaron must keep moving ahead...trying to get close to God.

Perhaps, then, Moses' response to his brother actually *was* compassionate and loving. Perhaps he realized that Aaron would blame himself yet again and want out, so Moses encouraged him yet again...to stay in.

Leadership is filled with opportunities to make mistakes. So is parenthood. And relationships. And work, and pretty much everything that we spend our time doing. And it is hard to stay committed to these things when we know we have made mistakes. It is natural to want an out, when we aren't quite performing our level best. And it is all too human to ruminate on prior mistakes and invent stories about others' perception that make us feel even worse, as if the best alternative is to give up, or flee. Especially when something truly terrible happens.

But, still, like Aaron, frequently the right decision really *is* to stay inside. To push ourselves to try again and confront the ways in which we've made mistakes in the past, and simply try our best. When we see a vision of ourselves and how we want to be, sometimes we have to stay inside the tent, *even* when our shame and trauma urge us not to. Even when we feel very far away from that vision of who we want to be, chances are...we can get close.

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<sup>2</sup> Richman, "Whiplash and Endurance," 2022

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