

Breishit 5787

A Little Better is a Lot

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Shabbat Shalom.

When I was a teenager taking Driver's Ed., my instructor generally stuck to the textbook. But on the last day of class, he digressed. He said: "If you want to pass the road test, don't go to the DMV in Sharonville." You see, *that* DMV was closest to my home, but it had a reputation for failing everybody. That can't be true, I told myself.

The big day arrived, and I was feeling confident... until I met the instructor. A drill sergeant on the first day of basic training got into my car. I suddenly got so nervous that I became extra cautious, like turning on my turn signal way in advance. "Too early," he growled, as he docked me points. In the end, I failed my first road test.

Two years later I was a senior in high school. One day after school I was working on the school newspaper with a sophomore, Marty, and another senior, George.

Marty asked me: "Can you please share some senior wisdom?"

"Have a seat, my friend."

"I'm about to take my drivers test. I know about Sharonville. Should I go there anyway or somewhere else?"

"Go to Sharonville. Don't be afraid of the challenge. And if you don't pass the first time, you'll be part of the club. You'll pass your second time."

Then George spoke up: "Or your fourth time!"

We all fail at different things at different times. Sometimes we haven't yet mastered a skill like driving. Other times the failure is more serious, a test of character.

People are inevitably imperfect, but our failures don't have to define us. So teaches the perfect book, the Torah.

The Torah opens today with Parashat Bereshit, Genesis 1. And it begins with all the boundless optimism and promise of Opening Day. The first chapter highlights that G-d creates people in G-d's own image. Wow! G-d then looks at all of creation after the first week and concludes it is "*Tov Meod*/very good" (Gn. 1:31). Amazing! What could be better?

But then Adam and Eve take a bite, and everything falls apart. They defy G-d's single command by eating from the forbidden fruit. Worse still, they evade moral responsibility by blaming others: Adam blames Eve and even G-d, while Eve faults the serpent. (Gn. 3:12-14).

The next generation fares worse, as Cain murders his brother Abel. Worse still, he too runs away from moral responsibility. He tells G-d "I do not know [where my brother is]. Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gn. 4:9). Remember that question.

Future generations fare even worse. By the time today's portion concludes, here is where we have landed: "The L-rd saw how great was man's wickedness on Earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the L-rd regretted that he had made man on Earth, and His heart was saddened. The L-rd said 'I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created ... for I regret that I made them.' But Noah found favor with the L-rd" (Gn. 6:5-8).

Humanity has become so morally corrupt that G-d decides to wash it all away in a flood. G-d began Genesis declaring creation to be *Tov Meod*/very good. Now G-d is prepared to destroy every family but one. Genesis 1 is followed by a cascade of moral failures.

And yet the Torah continues. Humanity continues with Noah because G-d holds out hope that humanity can improve. Not certainly but possibly, and that's enough for G-d.

Let's return to the verse: "G-d was saddened in His heart." On the one hand, it's touching: G-d is moved emotionally only because G-d cares so much about humanity. On the other hand, the verse raises a serious theological challenge: if G-d is all-knowing, G-d should not be surprised or saddened by human actions.

An ancient Midrash response to this exact challenge. A heretic once asked Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Korha: "Do you people not believe that G-d can foresee the future?"

The rabbi answered: "Of course we do."

The challenger responded: "Yet the verse states that 'G-d was saddened in His heart.' How do you explain that?"

The rabbi answered with his own question. "Tell me, has your wife ever given birth to a child?"

"Yes."

"And how did you react to the birth of your son?"

"I celebrated and invited others to celebrate with me."

“But surely you knew at the time that eventually your son will die.” [That’s not how I would have said it! I might have said: “How can you rejoice knowing that sad things will happen to him in the future?”]

“I delight in the happy times, and I mourn in the sad times.”

The rabbi concluded: “So it is with G-d. Even though G-d knew that eventually humanity would sin and be destroyed, that did not prevent G-d from creating humankind for the sake of the righteous who would arise among them.” [In other words, G-d creates humanity knowing humanity will fail. And G-d still says: Let’s begin. Because G-d is sure that one day humanity will rise up to its potential to be morally responsible for each other.]

Failure is part of the human condition from the start. I’m not talking about a shortcoming of skills like a driver’s test, but moral failure. About falling short in our responsibilities to each other. In our relationships with others. In our ethical lives. In our character traits. In the things that we just did Teshuvah for on Yom Kippur. But we try again just like G-d tried again: For better is always possible.

The Torah says more about this: Moral improvement is incremental, not transformational. Incremental, not transformational. We learn this too from Noah and then his successor Abraham. The very beginning of the next portion, Parashat Noach, says: “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his age. Noah walked *with* G-d” (Gn. 6:9).

Noah did well, as he was the only one on earth not to fall prey to moral corruption. He redeemed humanity! But 10 generations later, Abraham surpassed even him.

The Torah tells us that when Abraham was 99 years old, G-d told him: “Walk *before* Me and be blameless” (Gn. 17:1). Noah walked *with* G-d, while Abraham walked *before* G-d. The rabbis learn from this that Noah was good while Abraham was great. Parents know from experience that any child can walk next to them, but only a trustworthy child can walk ahead of them.

Interestingly, Noah and Abraham face the exact same moral test: Both are told by G-d that a world will be destroyed. Yet they respond very differently.

Let’s look at Noah first. He is nothing if not obedient, building the ark exactly as instructed. But Noah is utterly silent. Noah does not protest G-d’s decree of destruction. Does not ask G-d for mercy. Does not even implore his neighbors to improve their ways to earn forgiveness. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The Torah leaves us with an uncomfortable question: Did Noah believe the answer was No?

Not so with Abraham. In Genesis 18, G-d reveals His plan to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, for they are filled with wicked people. But Abraham will have none of it. He comes out swinging at G-d: "Far be it from You to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty. Shall not the Judge of all the Earth deal justly?" (18:25). Now that's Chutzpah!

G-d then concedes and says if there are 50 righteous people there, G-d will spare the cities. But Abraham isn't satisfied with that either. He pushes back and convinces G-d to save the cities even if there are only 10 righteous people.

In the face of humanity's destruction - in this case, two cities - Abraham protests vigorously. Abraham demands justice and pushes not only for his nephew Lot to be spared, but all of the openly wicked people too! He asks G-d for justice because he assumes that even in a corrupt city, there are still people worth saving. Not everybody, but somebody, and that's enough. Abraham here affirms: "I'm responsible for myself. And I am also my brother's keeper."

Noah reaches step one, as he obeys G-d. But Abraham supersedes him by arguing with G-d on behalf of other people. By accepting responsibility for others.

This should provide us all with some reassurance after the High Holidays. It's been a few weeks since Yom Kippur asked us to take an honest look at ourselves. How are we doing on our character commitments for the year ahead? Character growth is always challenging. If we're doing it right, we should be a *little* bit better now than a few weeks ago. The world loves extreme makeovers and radical transformations. Those make for wonderful TV. But our souls move at a different speed.

The Torah doesn't ask us to become perfect people. It asks us to become people who try to become better. Adam and Eve fail. Cain fails. Noah takes one step. Abraham takes another. And so do we. Maybe this year we won't become completely different people. But perhaps we can become a little more patient. A little more honest. A little more generous. A little more willing to say, "I was wrong." A little more willing to ask, "What do I owe my brother?"

A little better may not sound like much. But if we always aim for a little, it adds up to a lot.

Shabbat Shalom.