We Are All Flawed

One of my family's highlights during quarantine last year was watching the Broadway musical, Hamilton. To this day, on any given night as we prepare dinner, the soundtrack is likely to be playing from the iPad. Like some of you, I imagine, my interest in American history shot through the roof in the aftermath of seeing Hamilton, Burr, Jefferson, and Madison bust rhymes on the big screen. There was just so much I didn't know about the genesis of our nation.

One of the biggest takeaways for me was realizing that our founding fathers, while geniuses whose ideas shaped a whole nation, were far from the moral exemplars I believed them to be. They were exceptional, but not moral beyond reproach. Each of them were flawed individuals. For instance, Washington, Jefferson, and Madison were all slaveholders and yet they knew it was fundamentally wrong and immoral. Even Lincoln held views regarding African Americans that would make most of us uncomfortable. As Pulitzer prize winning reporter, Nikole Hannah-Jones, said in a recent interview, "Our founders were human beings. They were deeply contradictory…It is possible to hold contradictory views. In fact most of us do."[1]

And that is the truth. Human beings are complicated and imperfect. We might think one thing and do the opposite. We also lie, cheat, and take advantage of others even though we know better. Not only were all people in the past flawed in more ways than one, but all of us are too. My mom might disagree, but it's true. None of us are only good or all evil.

You have likely heard me talk about how the majority of the characters in the Torah are flawed. Our sacred text is filled with stories about individuals who make questionable choices at best and horrifying ones at worst. Just last week during Rosh Hashanah as I was introducing the story of the Akeidah, I remarked how the Torah presents troubling characters. The moral failings of our biblical ancestors are abundant:

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[1] Nikole Hannah-Jones on *Deep Background*, ep. 25. July 28, 2021

Abraham and Sarah treat those in their inner circle like objects. They use Hagar's body without her consent and almost kill her along with both of Abraham's sons.

Several of our matriarchs and patriarchs choose favorites among their children.

Abraham pimps Sarah out to Pharaoh just to save his own life.

Lot's idea of showing hospitality to strangers and gaining their favor is to willingly offers his two daughters to be sexually assaulted.

Jacob nearly lets his brother Esau starve to death in order to receive the birthright and then he tricks his own father to receive the choicest blessing while Isaac lay on his deathbed.

Leah sleeps with her sister's husband on their wedding night.

Joseph's brothers discuss killing him and end up selling him into slavery.

King David rapes Bat-sheva and then kills her husband.

Elijah kills more people than Samson, to the tune of 500!

Even Moses gives permission to Israelite men to rape young Midianite women and girls.

These are no role models that I want my children to emulate!

One of my great joys as a rabbi is working with each b'nei mitzvah student on crafting their d'var torah. I learn something new about the Torah each time I dig deep into their portions with them. Liza Jane Price is becoming a bat mitzvah next month and while I don't want to give away her message, I will say that she also grapples with the moral shortcomings of our biblical ancestors. However, she writes that if these characters were all virtuous then we would not be able to relate to them and thus the Torah itself would

be an empty text. In reality, the Torah is a sacred text of imperfection. By shining a light on these people, we can learn a lot about the ways we should act and treat others. I love her perspective on this.

Yom Kippur just so happens to be the Jewish Holy Day that reminds us of our imperfections. It is a much easier task pointing out the flaws of our matriarchs and patriarchs, and even our founding fathers, but when it comes to shining a light on ourselves, we tend to ignore what we see. On this holiest day of the year, we are forced to come face to face with the many ways we have missed the mark in this past year, both individually and as a community. Tonight and tomorrow we pound our chests, deprive ourselves of life-sustaining measures, and delve into the ways that our character is flawed. And from this humble place, we ask forgiveness, first from ourselves and from others and then ultimately from God.

Yom Kippur is also about keeping us honest. We may think that we are blameless or even that some elected officials, celebrities, or historical figures are above reproach, but this is an illusion and Yom Kippur is about shattering illusions. One of the great lessons that we take away from Yom Kippur is that we all make mistakes, but acknowledging them helps us on the path to learn and grow and become better versions of ourselves.

So what do we do with the knowledge that many of the people we look up to, whether historical, biblical, or present-day figures, made some reprehensible choices in their lives? Do we simply look the other way? Do we try to weigh their shortcomings by the gifts they brought to the world? Or do we flat out cancel them altogether? The latter option is all the craze right now. It has become our national hobby, yet it fails to take into account the multi-dimensional people we all are. Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy*, wrote, “Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.”[2] We are too quick to put a label on someone if they missed the mark. How many of us have looked at a single event from someone’s past and used that to define them in the present. I love Stevenson’s quote because I think it speaks to the power of Yom Kippur. We know that, personally speaking,

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[2] Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy : a Story of Justice and Redemption.* New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014.

each of us is greater than even our worst transgressions, so why can't we understand the same when it comes to others? Perhaps one of our flaws that we need to examine is that we have a hard time forgiving imperfection. We also have a hard time accepting other people's attempts at seeking forgiveness. It's never good enough.

One of my favorite midrash comes from *vayikra rabbah* 7:2. It reads:

Rabbi Aba bar Yudan taught: All that God prohibited in an animal sacrifice, God accepts in a human being. What is prohibited in an offering? When a person offers, from the herd or the flock, a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord…it must, to be acceptable, be without blemish; there must be no defect in it. Anything blind, or broken, or maimed, or with a wart, such you shall not offer to the Lord. But all that God prohibits in an animal sacrifice, God accepts in a human being. All these things which render a sacrifice unfit, God sees as fitting in a human being.

We might be ashamed of our imperfections and flaws, but according to our sages, God understands that these do not define us and in fact, they make us who we are. The very brokenness God deems unfit in animals, God is drawn to in people. If God can accept us as broken vessels, then considering we are made in the image of God, we too should be more forgiving of ourselves and others. This doesn't mean we shouldn't hold ourselves and others to higher standards, but if God doesn't discard us when we have missed the mark maybe we should follow this example.

One of the most fundamental aspects of being human is that we are imperfect beings. We make mistakes at various times in our lives. Some of us acknowledge these mistakes and others never realize they transgressed. Regardless, these actions do not make us bad people. We are a mix of contradictions, gaffes, offenses, praises, good deeds, and so much more. This is what it means to be a complex individual. This is who we are.

We gather tonight and tomorrow so that we can express our desire to change and grow. As Stevenson writes, “We all need some measure of unmerited grace.”[3]

In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin talks about this tension between trying to be all good, and knowing that attempting to reach this goal is bound for failure. He writes:

I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time, and to conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my attention was taken up, and employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason.[4]

Perfection is unattainable. By nature humans are fallible, prone to selfishness and capable of hurting others. But, our Jewish tradition reminds us each year that we are in control of our impulses and that we have the power to change and not define others by their shortcomings. We have the ability to forgive, let go, and move forward with a clean slate.

As we begin a new year, may we practice more forgiveness and understanding and less judgment.

May we look inwards and work on improving ourselves and give others the same opportunities without interfering in their own process of teshuva.

May we all strive for goodness and pray for the same in others.

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[3] ibid.

[4] Franklin, Benjamin, 1706-1790. 1928. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

May we give ourselves and others second chances.

If others fall short of our expectations, may we show compassion and grace, and gently help them reach their potential.

And may we appreciate the complexity of the human species and remember that this is how God made us, blemishes, scars, and all, in God's own image.

We continue with our confession of sins, the viddui, on page 269. Please rise.