

MISTAKES WERE MADE



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT VAYIKRA
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

In their book *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*, Drs. Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson explain the psychology behind why many of us have difficulty admitting mistakes. They describe the various tricks our brains use to defend our egos from noticing our shortcomings, including cognitive dissonance, confirmation bias, naïve-realism, and memory distortions. The basic gist behind all of these tricks is that our mind “yearns for consonance and rejects information that questions our beliefs, decisions, or preferences.” Yet, the thrust of Tavris and Aronson’s argument is that we could go a long way to compensate for these cognitive errors by just being aware that they exist and are in danger of deluding reality.

The Torah describes four different inadvertent sins that require different sacrificial atonements, depending on who sinned: the High Priest, the court, the leader, or a regular individual. While for the High Priest, the court, and the individual, the Torah frames the sacrifices based on the condition of “if” they sin (“*im*”), when it comes to the leader, the *pasuk* uses the word “*asher*” – “when the leader sins.” Commentators are bothered by the assumption. Why do we assume the inevitability of the leader’s sin?

Ibn Ezra circumvents the problem by arguing that the word “*asher*” is synonymous with the word “*im*” and also means “if,” not “when.” Others take the change in wording more seriously and suggest that there is a fundamental difference between a leader and the other three groups. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks quotes three different explanations including that a leader is more prone to arrogance (Sforno), is more involved in secular pursuits (Rabbi Eliyahu Munk) and can be easily strayed by popular opinion (Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk). Rabbi Sacks suggests a fourth answer which stresses the inherent difficulty and uncertainty in making political decisions.

Rashi, quoting the *midrash*, takes the discussion in another direction by focusing on a different function of the word “*asher*,” as it also doubles as an allusion to the word “*ashrei*,” meaning happy, praiseworthy, or fortunate. “Fortunate is the generation,” he writes, “whose leader sets his heart to bring an atonement sacrifice even for an inadvertent sin; how much more certain is it that he will repent for his willful sins.” It isn’t easy for any of us to admit our mistakes. We have so many cognitive distortions that conceal our mistakes from our awareness. It is even more common for leaders to not see their mistakes because the stakes are higher. It is indeed worthy of pausing and celebrating such leaders who are willing to admit their mistakes and are able to model proper behavior for others.

How do we overcome all the obstacles that prevent us from seeing our mistakes? I believe the answer lies within a careful reading of Rashi’s commentary. If we pay close attention, we will notice that Rashi formulates the idea slightly differently than the sources he is quoting from. The *Tosefta*, the *Talmud Bavli*, the *Sifra*, and the *Yalkut Shimoni* all write “fortunate is the generation whose leader offers a sacrifice for his unintentional sins.” Rashi adds the words “*notein leiv*” – “sets his heart.” “Fortunate is the generation whose leader is “*notein leiv*” to offer a sacrifice for his unintentional sins. The path to be able to admit mistakes is to pay attention – to be “*notein leiv*.” As Drs. Tavris and Aronson argued, the way to overcome our biases is to be aware that we have them in the first place. If we become aware of the tricks our minds play on us to protect our egos and become mindful and pay attention, we have a chance at being able to recognize and admit when we make mistakes.

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