

ADMITTING MISTAKES

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The Shabbat Table Discussions are designed to provide parents with a way to engage their families in discussion of *midot* and ethics. Visit www.yutorah.org/shabbattable to subscribe to future issues and view previous issues.

On June 2, 2010, Armando Galarraga, 28 pitched what seemed to be a perfect game, a feat only achieved twenty times in Major League Baseball's 130 year history. However, on the very last play of the game, umpire Jim Joyce, 65, mistakenly called the runner safe at first base, ruining the perfect game. After the game, understanding the mistake he had made and the implications to Galarraga, with tears in his eyes, Joyce went over to Galarraga and apologized, admitting his mistake. Galarraga graciously accepted his apology saying "Nobody's perfect. Everybody's human." They are currently writing a book together titled "Nobody's Perfect."

R. Yosef D. Solovetichik was known for his intellectual integrity when delivering a shiur (lecture). On one particular occasion, he spent the bulk of a two and half hour shiur developing a particular idea. Many questions were asked by the students during that shiur and after the shiur, R. Soloveitchik summoned one of the students and told him "you were right and I was wrong. Tomorrow we will restudy the topic based on the question you raised."

Memories of a Giant pg. 325

Admitting a mistake is not easy, and requires a certain degree of self-sacrifice that can be humiliating. Sometimes we have to admit that we are wrong even when it is questionable whether or not there was an actual error. Admitting to such an error may be the simplest solution to a problem, but may create negative consequences.

Let's look at the following scenarios

CASE ONE

Michael worked very hard to prepare for the presentation in his history class. One of his friends asked a question during the presentation, though, that caused Michael to think that his entire theory may be incorrect. While Michael has a satisfactory answer to the question that will spare him the embarrassment of acknowledging that he was wrong, deep down, he feels that in all honesty, his theory is wrong. What should Michael answer?

CASE TWO

Miriam and Esther have been ignoring each other ever since they had an argument a few weeks ago. Miriam knows that she can repair their friendship by admitting she was wrong and apologizing, but she doesn't really believe that she was wrong. Should she apologize anyway?

CASE THREE

Steven and Chaim are partners in a used car dealership. A customer bought a car from them, and now claims that he was misled about the quality of the car. Steven thinks that the customer may be correct and would like to admit to the customer that they were wrong, but Chaim disagrees. If Steven does admit that they were wrong, both Steven and Chaim will lose out. What should he do?

Examining the sources

The Greatness of Admitting a Mistake

There are a number of stories in Tanach where someone is praised for admitting a mistake. For example, after the death of Aharon's children, Moshe Rabbeinu criticizes Aharon and his remaining sons for burning the remainders of a *chatat* (sin) offering and not eating it (they felt that because they were mourners, they should not eat the offering). Aharon maintained his belief that he acted correctly and following a short debate (The details are recorded in Zevachim 101a-101b) Moshe Rabbeinu concedes to Aharon:

Aharon said to Moshe: Today, [my children] offered their sin and burnt offerings before God and [died], would it be good in God's eyes had I eaten that sin offering today? Moshe heard and was satisfied [by the answer].

Vayikra 10:19-20

וַיְדַבֵּר אַהֲרֹן אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, הֲנֵן הַיּוֹם הִקְרִיבוּ
אֶת-חַטָּאתָם וְאֶת-עֹלֹתָם לִפְנֵי ה', וַתִּקְרָאנָה
אֹתִי, כְּאֵלֶּה; וְאֶכְלְתִּי חַטָּאת הַיּוֹם, הַיֵּיטֵב
בְּעֵינַי ה'. וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה, וַיֵּיטֵב בְּעֵינָיו.
וַיִּקְרָא י:ט-כ

Moshe Rabbeinu received the Torah at Sinai and was the authority on all matters of Jewish law. How is it possible for Aharon to disagree? Wasn't this law discussed at Sinai?

'He was satisfied by the answer' Moshe was not ashamed. [He could have excused himself] saying 'I never heard the law (at Sinai that a mourner does not eat that offering),' rather he said "I heard it and I forgot (about it)."

Zevachim 101b (adapted from Soncino Translation)

וַיֵּיטֵב בְּעֵינָיו לֹא בּוֹשׁ מִשֶּׁה
לֹמַר לֹא שְׁמַעְתִּי, אֲלֵא
שְׁמַעְתִּי וּשְׁכַחְתִּי.
זבחים קא:

Questions for the Table

- Why does the Talmud praise Moshe Rabbeinu for admitting his mistake? Isn't this something we would expect of anyone?
- Moshe Rabbeinu is praised for choosing "I heard and I forgot" over "I never heard it." Does "I never heard it" imply 'because I never heard it, it must not be true' or does it imply 'Aharon is correct and the reason I questioned him is because it was something I didn't know about'?
- Did Moshe Rabbeinu admit his mistake despite the potential for embarrassment or was he simply not concerned about embarrassment when admitting the mistake? Should we be embarrassed when admitting mistakes?

Why was
Moshe
praised?

It is the nature of a person to justify themselves even if they are wrong because the idea of "admitting without being ashamed" (a term used by Rashi, Vayikra 10:20) is very difficult and intimidating.

R. Chaim Zeitchik, P'ri Chaim page 43

Moshe could have protected his honor by saying 'I never heard it at all' than to say "I heard and I forgot" because saying I never heard is a positive attribute of a Torah scholar (see Avot 5:6) [and a response that does not damage the scholar's reputation.]

R. David HaLevi Segal, Divrei David Vayikra 10:20

היינו שבטבע האדם ללמד זכות על עצמו,
אפילו שטעה כי קשה ואיום הוא הענין של
הודאה של "הודה ולא בוש."
פרי חיים עמ' מג

שיותר כבוד היה לו למשה לומר לא
שמעתי כלל ממה שיאמר שמעתי ושכחתי
שמאמר לא שמעתי הוא מעלה בת"ח.
דברי דוד ויקרא י:כ

R. Zeitchik highlights that when we are confronted about mistakes we might have made, our natural inclination is to justify our actions. Moshe Rabbeinu could have stood by his position and won the debate, but instead opted to admit his mistake. While this may not have been a great challenge for Moshe Rabbeinu (see R. Yehuda L. Chasman, *Ohr Yahal to Parashat Shemini*), it is a challenge that many of us struggle with on a regular basis.

R. Segal notes that Moshe Rabbeinu could have simply responded that he never discussed this particular question with God when he received the Torah, and protected his dignity. Such a response would not have affected the final outcome and Aharon would have been informed that his argument was correct. Moshe Rabbeinu, however, opted to tell the truth despite the potential for embarrassment (see [Shabbat Table Discussion on Lying](#)).

Application to Case #1

How would you apply this discussion to case #1? Does it make a difference if Michael admitting his mistake will negatively impact his grade? Is it reasonable for Michael to ask for more time to think about the question before drawing any conclusions?

Legal Rights and Moral Obligations (Cases #2 and #3)

Before discussing cases # 2 and #3, let's distinguish between what halacha *obligates* one to do and what one *should* do. In case #2, if Miriam is truly free of any blame for the dispute, she has no legal obligation to apologize, even though apologizing may bring an end to the dispute. Yet, Miriam certainly has the option to apologize and making peace and it is certainly recommended for her to do so. The Talmud states:

Those who are forgiving of others will be forgiven for their own wrongdoings.

Rosh HaShanah 17a

כל המעביר על מדותיו מעבירין לו על כל פשעיו.
ראש השנה יז.

While this source only addresses the importance of getting along with others in general terms, *Avot D'Rabbi Natan*, an addendum to *Pirkei Avot*, relates how Aharon would make peace between two disputing parties:

[If there were] two people who had a dispute, Aharon would sit with one of them and tell him, "My son, see what your friend is saying. He is beating his heart, tearing his clothes and saying 'Woe unto me, how can I even look at my friend, I am embarrassed from him because I am the one who wronged him!'" Aharon would sit with him until the jealousy is removed from his heart. He would then go and sit with the other and say "My son, see what your friend is saying etc. And when the two would meet, they would hug and kiss one another.

Avot D'Rabbi Natan 12:2

שני בני אדם שעשו מריבה זה עם זה. הלך אהרן וישב לו אצל אחד מהם ואמר לו בני ראה חברך מהו אומר מטרף את לבו וקורע את בגדיו אומר אוי לי היאך אשא את עיני ואראה את חברי בושתי הימנו שאני הוא שסרחתי עליו. הוא יושב אצלו עד שמסיר קנאה מלבו והולך אהרן ויושב לו אצל האחר וא"ל בני ראה חברך מהו אומר וכו' וכשנפגשו זה בזה גפפו ונשקו זה לזה.
אבות דרבי נתן יב:ב

Questions for the Table

- Why wasn't Aharon concerned that his plan would backfire when the two parties finally spoke to each other?
- Why wasn't Aharon concerned that one of the parties was actually correct and that he would weaken their claim?

What was Aharon trying to accomplish?

Aharon knew that the root cause of a contentious dispute is often "the jealousy of the heart." An honest dispute may arise over money, or friends or some other matter, but the way to find peace, especially when the dispute is emotional is to first have the parties make peace and only then can they work out the original issue. Aharon wasn't interested in working out any monetary dispute or other legal claim. He was interested in finding a way for the two parties to come to the table as friends.

Application to Case #2

In every dispute, there are two sides to the story. Is it possible that Miriam is absolutely free of blame? How would she honestly determine that? Even if she does verify that she is not at fault, what can we learn from Aharon about whether one should admit a mistake that may not have happened in order to promote peace?

Case # 3 also requires us to examine the tension between legal and moral obligations. Shulchan Aruch discusses a case of two partners where one partner admits to a claim of a plaintiff while the other denies it:

Reuven claims that he lent money to two people, one of them denies it and the other admits that they took the loan in partnership, [the one who admits] is not believed regarding the partner and the one who admits must pay the whole sum.

R. Yosef Karo, Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 37:4

ראובן תבע לשנים שהלוה להם וכפר א'
והודה השני שהוא וחבירו (חייבים) אם
אותו ממון לקחו בשותפות אינו נאמן
על חבירו והוא לבדו יתחייב בכל.
שלחן ערוך חושן משפט לז:ד

Let's assume we are not dealing with outright fraud. If it were fraud, Steven would have no choice but to refund the money and Chaim would have to agree. The disagreement between Steven and Chaim is more likely about a situation that is not so clear. For example, the customer found a flaw and Steven is unsure if the flaw arose after the purchase. Steven feels that since it is possible that the flaw existed beforehand, the proper thing to do is offer the customer some compensation and Chaim disagrees.

Application to Case #3

- If Steven feels that legally, the customer has no claim but morally, he should be given compensation, should Steven try to convince Chaim to agree?
- If Chaim claims that there was no wrongdoing and there isn't even a moral obligation to pay, should Steven offer to pay Chaim's share or should he just give partial compensation?

Vidui commonly translated as a confessional, is found through the High Holiday liturgy. R. Meir L. Weiser, however, has a different definition of *vidui*:

The term "vidui" is the opposite of denial or refutation, rather a public acknowledgement of something that people naturally hide. This can be either admitting the praises of someone else, or one's own shortcomings.

Malbim, Vayikra no. 319

גדר הוידוי הוא הפך הכפירה וההכחשה
והוא שמפרסם בפיו דבר שטבע בני אדם
להעלימהו, והוא שמודה שבח חברו או
שמודה גנות עצמו.
מלבי"ם ויקרא ס' שיט

One of the main components of *teshuva* (repentance) is to admit when we are wrong. This not only includes admitting to actions that harmed others, it also includes acknowledging our own shortcomings so that we can work on improving ourselves.

Rosh HaShanah celebrates the birth of man and the greatness of man. The ten days of repentance, culminating with Yom Kippur also focus on improving oneself and becoming a better person. The Torah highlights Moshe Rabbeinu's admission of error to teach us that admissions of error don't lower

us, rather they elevate us. Whether we are confronted by situations similar to Jim Joyce, Michael in case #1 or any other situation, we should realize that admitting and acknowledging our mistakes can make us better people.

Compiled by Rabbi Josh Flug, Director of Torah Research, CJF

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

R. YEHUDA LEIB CHASMAN (1869-1936) was one of the leaders of the Mussar Movement. He was born in Vilna and held a number of positions in Europe before moving to Israel in 1926 to serve the spiritual guide (*menahel ruchani*) of the Chevron Yeshiva.

R. YOSEF KARO (1488-1575) is most well known for his Shulchan Aruch, The Code of Jewish Law. Born in Toledo Spain, his family was forced to leave Spain in 1492 when they settled in Portugal and then Bulgaria. He eventually settled in the Land of Israel about 1535. Aside from Shulchan Aruch, he authored numerous works including Kesef Mishneh and Beit Yosef.

R. DAVID HALEVI SEGAL (Taz c.1586-1667) was a Polish scholar. He is most well known for his Turei Zahav, a commentary on Shulchan Aruch. His commentary includes discussions about rulings of his father-in-law, R. Yoel Sirkes.

R. YOSEF D. SOLOVEITCHIK (1903-1993) was born in Pruzhan, Poland, the son of Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik, and grandson of Rabbi Chaim HaLevi. In 1932, he moved to America and settled in Boston. He founded Yeshivat Rambam—the Maimonides School—and delivered weekly shiurim there for many years. In 1941, he succeeded his father, upon the latter's passing, as rosh yeshiva at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (Yeshiva University), commuting from Boston to New York each week for over four decades. His shiurim in halachah and aggadah, which reached to the ends of the Jewish world, made a profound impact on Torah learning in our times. He was known by many as "The Rav" to connote that he was his generation's quintessential teacher of Torah, ordaining more rabbis than any other in his generation.

R. MEIR LEIBUSH WEISER (Malbim 1809-1879) is known for his commentary on Tanach which places a specific emphasis on the language of the text and apparent synonyms. He held numerous rabbinic posts in his lifetime throughout Europe.**R.**

CHAIM ZEITCHIK (d. 1989) began his career teaching in the Novardok Yeshiva in Poland and ended his career teaching in Jerusalem. He authored more than a dozen volumes on Jewish values.

אִכְבַּר הָעֶרְנוּ בְּזֶה בְּמִקְ"א לְהִתְבּוֹנֵן מֵהַ שְׁבַח- שִׁיחֻקָּךְ בַּתּוֹרָה לְנִצְחָה – שֶׁהוּדָה עַל הָאִמְתּוּ, וְלֹא שִׁיחֻקָּר ח"ו מִפְּנֵי הַבּוֹשָׁה לֹא שֶׁמֵּעֵתִי? וְהֵרִי אִפְ"י עַל אָדָם פְּשׁוּטָה, לֹא הִיָּה בִּידֵינוּ לְהַבִּין הַהִתְפַּעְלוּת מֵהַ שְׁלֵא עִבַר עַל "לֹא תִשְׁקַר אִישׁ בְּעֵמִיתוֹ" ... יוֹצֵא לָנוּ מִזֶּה כָּלֵל גְּדוּלָּה! שְׂכֵשֵׁם שְׁשׁוּקֵלִין לְאָדָם קְלוֹת כַּחמּוֹרוֹת... כִּמוֹ כֵּן גַּם לְהִיפֵךְ בְּצַד הַטּוֹב! לֹא נֹאבֵד מִכָּל אָדָם לְשֵׁלֵם לוֹ שְׂכָרוֹ – אִף לְהַגְדוּל שְׁבַגְדוּלִים.

We have discussed this matter elsewhere in addressing why is it praiseworthy- to the extent that it is engraved in the Torah eternally- that he admitted the truth and didn't lie, God forbid, because of embarrassment, by saying "I never heard it"? Even if we were dealing with a simple person, we shouldn't necessarily be amazed by the fact that someone chose not to violate the commandment "don't lie to one's friend." ... We see from this an important principle! Just as a person's "serious" and "light" transgressions are given consideration ... so too, regarding fulfillment of commandments. A person receives the proper reward [no matter how easy], even the greatest of people.