

Nothing Works the First Time
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“Nothing in the Bible works the first time.” These words from Israeli author and scholar Micah Goodman startled me. He elaborated: God creates the world, then destroys it with a flood. God gives the Torah, then needs to start all over after the Israelites build the Golden Calf. God establishes a monarchy, anointing Saul, then regrets that first choice, leading to a battle to the death between Saul and God’s second first choice, David.ⁱ

Hearing those words at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem this summer, my mind immediately wandered from the Bible to the human condition. How often do we fail to “get it right” the first time we try something? When our kids struggle with their first attempt on the bicycle, we tell them not to worry, they’ll catch on. Keep trying. A teacher may give a student an opportunity to earn back points on a test by correcting errors, emphasizing learning over strict evaluation, at least at an early stage. Most of us acquired life lessons, not lifetime partners, from our first loves. At the same time, we all know the famous line, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” The reality is that some people are more forgiving, but experts in congregational life tell us to assure easy access and a warm welcome the first time a person enters our synagogue doors. And the second time and the third. We can all recount examples when we mishandled a first significant encounter with a classmate, colleague, or neighbor, and were never given the opportunity to reset.

At first glance, tonight’s Torah reading suggests that even God isn’t all that forgiving the first time that Adam and Eve go wrong. Put another way, God’s initial plan for humanity goes awry. God imagines that those two humans will thrive in an idyllic world, without reproduction or death – on a vegan diet, no less. Even that restrictive regime is further limited when God forbids them to eat the fruit from one particular tree. And they go right ahead and eat. Their punishment? Expulsion from the garden. They will need to reproduce for the species to survive, since they’re now destined to die. They and their descendants will have to work for their food, no longer seeing all their needs met by an abundant garden.ⁱⁱ

I wonder, though, if the penalty is all that harsh. One commentator from medieval France, Chizkuni, compares the consequences to those faced by an Israelite who is guilty of unintentional manslaughter, as opposed to murder, elaborating: “The reason why this penalty was appropriate was that at the moment when Eve and Adam had eaten from the tree of knowledge they had not yet possessed the knowledge of good and evil which would have made them deliberate sinners.”ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, the mistake would seem to have been God’s, failing to provide the first humans with the resources to avoid wrongdoing. Even God doesn’t get it right the first time! As a result, the commentator named Sforno insists that they got a soft landing: “The place to which Adam [and Eve were] transferred was compatible with the requirements of [their] constitution, more so than any other part of the Earth.”^{iv}

If God doesn’t get it right the first time, then why should we expect ourselves to do so? We may need to be gentler with ourselves when we get something wrong. If God judges the first human miscreants with mercy, we may be called to do the same when other people in our lives err in their initial attempts with us. If God can give humans a break, then we need to be eager to let ourselves and others off the hook, too.

Let us also note that from God makes a second attempt – after the first try with humans goes wrong, after the initial transmission of Torah is thwarted, and after the inaugural choice of a King proves ill-advised. When we err, we have an obligation to keep trying to get it right, just like that kid who first fails at bike riding.

I planned to give a sermon tonight, on the Shabbat when we read the beginning of Genesis, before I realized that I had missed the mark in delivering the sermon I gave on Rosh Hashanah Eve. I will not get a second chance with the congregation that gathered that particular evening. Still, not having gotten that sermon right at my first – and in this case, only – real opportunity, I did get a second chance in an alternative forum.

On Wednesday, I was privileged to be the keynote speaker at LifeQuest’s annual Founder’s Day Luncheon. Moreover, I was asked to address a topic similar

to the one of my Rosh Hashanah Eve sermon, specifically the challenges of American diversity in 2018.

At LifeQuest, I did not shy away from expressing concern that millions of Americans, acting out of fear, seek to return America to a fantasy version of 1950s, in the process discriminating against people of color, immigrants, Muslims, gay men, lesbians, and transgender Americans, among others.

My mistake on Rosh Hashanah Eve was not in naming injustice. Instead, the problem was that I failed to acknowledge wrongdoing on more than one side, suggest remedies, or to offer any comfort. Here's how I tried to get that right at LifeQuest:

Sadly, millions of Americans see only bigotry when they look across the political aisle. The notion that nearly half of our fellow voters constitute "a basket of deplorables" is not only an unhelpful, losing strategy; it is a repudiation of the very diversity that God intends.

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, coined a slogan, "audacious hospitality," to describe how a congregation must behave if it truly seeks to be inclusive, if it is eager for a viable future. Audacious hospitality doesn't only mean that we need to embrace people of color, women, Muslims, immigrants, gays, lesbians, and transgender people, and treat each one as equal, which we must. At the same time, if we truly uphold the principle that every human being is created in God's image, if we really believe that all are created equal, and if we actually affirm that God intends diversity, well, then, we who prefer MSNBC must find a way to embrace our fellow Americans who watch Fox News. And vice versa.

LifeQuest is a place where people of different beliefs and political philosophies walk in the door every week, whether to applaud John Brummett's every word or to argue with him, or even to skip session and show up for something else. We need more, not fewer, places like LifeQuest and more, not fewer, Americans like the people who go there, eager to mix with a diverse group, affirming the worth of each and every one, welcoming one another with audacious hospitality.

I have every confidence that, like LifeQuest, Congregation B'nai Israel is such a place. Diversity of every kind is welcome here. We may not always get that

right, whether in a sermon or in a reaction to it, the first time. Given that Micah Goodman is correct, that the Bible – that is to say, God – doesn't get much right the first time, let us always give ourselves and one another a second chance.

Amen.

ⁱ Micah Goodman, Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, July 5, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Genesis 3. Also Sforno to Genesis 3:17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chizkuni to Genesis 3:23.

^{iv} Sforno to Genesis 3:23.