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 Arlington Street Church
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“Mistakes”

When we were in first grade, Ricky Madison came into class one morning with a HUGE pink eraser, printed with the words, “I never make big mistakes” – spelled m-i-s-t-e-a-k-s. At the time, it was our most sophisticated joke – we had all just learned to read – and after researching this sermon, I’ve concluded it may still be my most sophisticated joke.

I want to speak about making “big mistakes” today, at this mid-point between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, in the midst of these days known as “the ten days of *Teshuvah*.” Here’s a little context about these highest of Jewish holy days:

“The root meaning of the Hebrew word ‘*teshuvah*’ is ‘return.’” Yosef Ben Shlomo Hakohen writes, “It refers to a process of self-evaluation and change [that] leads to a return to our Source. We return ... through rededicating ourselves to the compassionate and life-giving purpose of our creation. In this way, we are also returning to our true selves, the Divine Image that is within each of us.”

“During this process of *teshuvah*, we also acknowledge and confess that we have committed ... acts which were not in harmony with [our purpose].”¹ And so we are invited to make amends and begin again, in love.

Social psychologists Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson came out with a book this year entitled *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me)*, subtitled *Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*.² They open with two priceless quotes; here they are:

¹ Yosef Ben Schlomo Hakohen, israelforum.com/blog_article.php?aid=964967

² Many thanks to Kem Morehead for leading me to this book, via National Public Radio

The first is from George Orwell. He writes, “We are all capable of believing things which we know to be untrue, and then, when we are finally proved wrong, impudently twisting the facts so as to show that we were right. Intellectually, it is possible to carry on this process for an indefinite time: the only check on it is that sooner or later a false belief bumps up against solid reality, usually on a battlefield.

The second is from Lao Tzu. He writes,

A great nation is like a great man:
When he makes a mistake, he realizes it.
Having realized it, he admits it.
Having admitted it, he corrects it.
He considers those who point out his faults
as his most benevolent teachers.

To illustrate the truth of George Orwell’s words, they also tuck in this priceless sentence from Henry Kissinger’s response to charges that he committed war crimes in his role in the United States’ action in Vietnam, Cambodia, and South America in the 1970s. He said, “Mistakes were quite possibly made by the administrations in which I served.” We are to note that, as national security advisor and Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger *was* the administration in which he was serving....³

And this is the point. “As fallible human beings,” write Carol Tavis and Elliot Aronson, “all of us share the impulse to justify ourselves and avoid taking responsibility for any actions that turn out to be harmful, immoral, or stupid. Most of us will never be in a position to make decisions affecting the lives and deaths of millions of people, but whether the consequences of our mistakes are trivial or tragic, ... most of us find it difficult, if not impossible, to say, ‘I was wrong; I made a ... mistake.’ The higher the stakes ... the greater the difficulty.

“...Most people, when directly confronted by evidence that they are wrong, do not change their point of view or course of action, but justify it even more tenaciously.”⁴ “...The [human] brain is [hardwired] for self-justification. When we make mistakes, we [try to] calm the cognitive dissonance that

³ p. 3

⁴ p. 2

[jangles] our feelings of self-worth. And so we create fictions that absolve us of responsibility....”⁵

My mind turns to ... President Bush. We heard from the president that Saddam Hussein was linked with Al Qaeda, and had weapons of mass destruction. He told us that Iraqis would be dancing in the streets to welcome American soldiers. He assured us that the war would end quickly and relatively cheaply, and, six weeks after the invasion, we were told “mission accomplished.” Last year, as Iraq careened into civil war and sixteen American intelligence agencies issued a report that the occupation of Iraq had increased Islamic fundamentalism and the risk of terrorism, the president said, “I’ve never been more convinced that the decisions I made are the right decisions.”⁶

What can we learn about our private selves from this very public example? Carol Tavris and Elliott Aronson are quick to point out that there’s a big difference between lying to others and self-justification. Self-justification is lying to ourselves. It’s the reason, they write, “that everyone can see a hypocrite in action except the hypocrite. It allows us to create a distinction between our moral lapses and someone else’s, and to blur the discrepancy between our actions and our moral convictions.

“...To err is human,” they conclude, “but humans then have a choice between covering up or fessing up.... We are forever being told that we should learn from our mistakes, but how can we learn unless we first admit that we made any?”⁷

I commend to you *Mistakes Were Made*. The book methodically, and, sometimes, hilariously details how self-justification works, and, ultimately, how we can defeat it. I’m going to take us, now, to that conclusion. As always, understanding is the first step.

I want to go there via Oprah Winfrey, one of my great heroes. As Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson tell it, On January 26th, 2006, she devoted her entire television show to apologizing for a mistake. Oprah had endorsed James Frey’s alleged memoir of drug addiction and recovery entitled *A Million Little Pieces*. When it was revealed that Frey had fabricated and

⁵ summary from the dust jacket

⁶ pp. 2-3

⁷ p. 4

embellished beyond any semblance of the truth, Oprah justified her support of him, saying “The underlying message of redemption in [his] memoir still resonates with me, and I know that it resonates with millions of other people.” In other words, “the emotional truth of this book is truer than the true truth.”

I don’t know how Oprah overrode her hardwiring and changed her mind, but she apologized from the top: “I made a mistake,” she said, “and I left the impression that the truth does not matter.... I am deeply sorry about that, because that is not what I believe.... I love the message of this book, and ... every day I was reading email ... from so many people who have been inspired by it.... I allowed that to cloud my judgment. And so to everyone who has challenged me on this issue of truth, you are absolutely right.”

She called Richard Cohen, a *Washington Post* columnist who had called Frey a liar and said that Oprah was “not only wrong, but deluded.” And she said to Cohen, “Sometimes criticism can be very helpful, so thank you very much. You were right, I was wrong.” Richard “Cohen practically had to go lie down to recover. ‘The year is very new,’ he told Oprah Winfrey, ‘but I still name you Mensch of the Year, for standing up and saying you were wrong. [That] takes a lot of courage.... I’ve never done that.’”⁸

My spiritual companions, mistakes were made, mistakes are made, big and small ... by others, and by us. May we devote ourselves to the spiritual discipline of learning from our mistakes, having first admitted them to ourselves and others. Let these words ring in our inner ears, the words of Thomas Edison’s reply to the lament that ten thousand experiments had not yielded the first incandescent light bulb: ‘I have not failed,’ he [said]. ‘I have successfully discovered 10,000 elements that don’t work.’”⁹ And let us commit to memory the immortal words of my friend and teacher, Sylvia Boorstein, her Nine Magic Words that can Change the World: They are,

“I’m sorry. I made a mistake. Please forgive me.”

In this season of *tesuvah*, let us return to our true selves, and so manifest the divine that is within each of us.

⁸ pp. 213-215

⁹ p. 233