

The Courage to Say I Was Wrong

Shabbos Morning Drush | Parshas Lech Lecha

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Based on a teaching of Rabbi Chizkiyahu Yosef Karlinstein

There are three words that can be very difficult to say: **“I was wrong.”**

We can explain. We can defend. We can describe the circumstances. We can point out what the other person did. But to say, simply and honestly, “I was wrong” takes strength.

When we watch public life, particularly during an election campaign, how often do we hear those words? We hear promises, accusations, and explanations of why a candidate’s words have been misunderstood. How often do we hear: “That criticism is justified. I should not have said that. I need to correct it”?

The danger is that we become accustomed to the behaviour. We watch people protect their positions, defend their mistakes, and change the subject when challenged. Eventually, we may begin doing the same thing ourselves.

This week’s parsha teaches us how damaging that can be.

Doing something wrong is serious. Convincing ourselves that the wrong is right can prevent us from ever correcting it.

A question we must not pass over

Avraham Avinu devoted his life to bringing people close to Hashem. He welcomed them into his home, fed them, taught them, and worked with people who were very far from the truth.

Yet Avraham turns to his own nephew, Lot, and says:

הפרד נא מעלי

“Please separate from me.” (Bereishis 13:9)

If Avraham could bring the whole world close to Hashem, why couldn't he bring Lot close?

Surely, he could teach him. Surely, he could work with him. Lot was his own nephew, travelling at his side. Why send him away? Why not continue trying?

Keep that question in mind as we hear the following story.

The prisoner whom everyone feared

Rabbi Moshe Dickstein of Be'er Sheva related:

"Decades ago, I began doing religious work in the prison in Be'er Sheva. I learned Pirkei Avos, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, and the weekly parsha with the prisoners. The practice was that before the lesson, a guard would knock on the doors of all the prisoners' cells and invite them to the lesson.

"After a while, I noticed that the guard skipped one cell. I asked why, and they told me that it housed an exceptionally dangerous prisoner serving a life sentence.

"For twenty-three and a half hours each day, he was buried inside his solitary cell. Nobody went out, and nobody came in. For half an hour each day, he went out to breathe the air in the empty courtyard, after which he returned to his cell.

"When I discovered that he was Jewish, I asked to visit him as part of my work.

"As usual, the prison director was waiting for me when I arrived. He turned to me and said: 'Rabbi Moshe, this is life-threatening. I advise you to abandon the idea.'

"I told him: 'I came to the prison to do religious work among the Jewish prisoners, and this prisoner is included in my work.' I added: 'Let me visit him once, and we will see what happens.'

"The director softened and gave me permission. The guards prepared for the special visit. They stationed themselves outside the dangerous prisoner's cell, informed him that a rabbi wanted to visit him, and opened the door for me. After offering a short prayer, I entered the cell.

“Opposite me sat the prisoner, a large man. He received me suspiciously and fixed me with a frightening stare. I greeted him pleasantly and asked: ‘May I speak with you?’

“He answered, ‘Yes,’ and invited me to sit down.

“I turned over a plastic container, sat opposite him, and began talking. He told me about his wretched life. From a young age, his dark nature had begun to reveal itself. He had grown up in a broken home. From the age of eight, he had been thrown out onto the street, and very quickly he had found his way into the world of crime.

“I began telling him Midrashim of Chazal. I told him about Avraham Avinu and his acts of chesed, about Moshe Rabbeinu, and about Maamad Har Sinai. The prisoner did not take his eyes off me. He drank in every word.

“Two hours passed. I could hear the guards’ increasingly impatient rustling outside. They were becoming restless. I understood that I needed to prepare to end the meeting.

“I asked him: **‘Would you like to make G-d happy?’**

“He answered: ‘Certainly.’

“I told him: ‘Then come, let us put on tefillin.’

“I took out a pair of tefillin and asked: ‘Are you right-handed or left-handed?’ He did not know how to answer.

“**‘Which hand do you write with?’**

“**‘I do not know how to write.’**

“**‘Which hand do you raise when you give someone a good beating?’**

“He raised his right hand.

“I rolled up the sleeve of his left arm. Then I noticed that on his upper arm, where the tefillin would be placed, there was a horrifying, offensive tattoo.

“I hesitated for a moment. What should I do? Was it appropriate to place tefillin over the tattoo?

“I decided to disregard the tattoo and put the tefillin on him. He repeated the words of Shema Yisrael after me, word by word. Afterward, I removed the tefillin.

“I said goodbye to him, told him that, with Hashem’s help, I would return to visit him, and left the cell.

“The director stopped me, looked me over from head to toe, and asked: ‘Tell me: five social workers have gone in to see him, and we had to cut their visits short. After a few minutes, they fled in terror. How did you manage to remain with him for two hours?’

“I told him: ‘I learned Torah with him. Torah is compared to water. Water flows down to a low place. That is how I entered - through the lowest place in my own soul.’

“Several weeks later, the guards arranged another visit. I entered the cell and saw the happiness on the prisoner’s face. He turned to me and asked: ‘How are you, Rabbi?’ Immediately, he added: ‘Now you will be able to put tefillin on me without a problem.’

“He raised his sleeve and exposed the place on his upper arm. I was stunned. There was no trace of the tattoo. In its place was a large, red wound of raw flesh.

“‘What did you do?’ I asked.

“He answered: ‘Honoured Rabbi, I saw that you were unhappy with the tattoo on my arm. After you left, I began scrubbing the tattoo with salt and hot water. After several days, I managed to remove the outer layer of skin. It hurts terribly. But I wanted you to be able to put tefillin on me feeling comfortable about it.’

“I put the tefillin on him carefully and gently. But the moment they touched his raw flesh, he groaned in pain. When he saw me recoil, he told me: ‘Do not be afraid. Tie it firmly.’”

If this prisoner could be reached, why not Lot?

A prisoner serving a life sentence. A man whom others could barely approach. Yet Torah reached him. He listened. He responded. He wanted to put on tefillin. He wanted something in his life to change.

Now the question becomes even stronger.

Rabbi Moshe Dickstein could reach this prisoner. Could Avraham Avinu not reach Lot?

Avraham pleaded on behalf of the people of Sedom. He sought to bring people far from Hashem into a life of emunah. What could have been so different about his own nephew that he had to say, “Separate from me”?

The Kotzker Rebbe expressed the difference between Noach and Avraham with a striking image. Noach wrapped himself in a fur coat and protected himself from the cold. Avraham lit a furnace so that everyone could warm themselves.

Avraham brought the whole world close. Why, then, did he distance his own relative?

The Navi tells us:

ומבשרך לא תתעלם

“Do not turn away from your own flesh.” (Yeshayahu 58:7)

Chazal speak of the merit of drawing one’s relatives close. The Gemara in Yevamos 62b applies to such a person the promise, “Then you will call, and Hashem will answer.” The Gemara in Makkos 24a likewise speaks of the merit of drawing one’s relatives close.

Does that not make our question stronger? Lot was family. Why wasn’t bringing Lot close part of Avraham’s mission?

Rabbi Akiva Eiger and the shoemaker

Rabbi Akiva Eiger once travelled to Warsaw for his grandson’s wedding. When he arrived in Warsaw, he asked: “Where does the shoemaker live?” They showed him, and he went to visit him.

All Warsaw was in an uproar. Warsaw was full of sages and Torah scholars - and whom was Rabbi Akiva Eiger going to visit? The shoemaker!

Surely, he must have discovered some extraordinary hidden tzaddik.

Crowds of Jews flocked to the shoemaker's house. They crowded around the windows to watch the fascinating meeting between the great Torah leader and the shoemaker of Warsaw.

The shoemaker rebuked them: "What are you running about for? Leave me alone!"

After Rabbi Akiva Eiger finished visiting the shoemaker, people asked him curiously: "Is he one of the thirty-six hidden tzaddikim?"

Rabbi Akiva Eiger answered: "How would I know? Do I have ruach hakodesh?"

They were astonished. "If so, why did the Rav go to visit him?"

Rabbi Akiva Eiger answered simply: "***Because he is a relative of mine.***"

So what about Lot? Was he unworthy of being brought close? **Avraham Avinu, bring him into your tent! If you can bring strangers close, why can you not bring your own nephew close?**

The Ponevezher Rav and the public debate

The Ponevezher Rav once came to America to raise money for the yeshiva. As was his practice, he visited the homes of the major donors. But he was informed that the wealthy men were not at home.

What had happened? At that very time, a public debate was taking place between the Orthodox community and a Jewish representative of the Reform movement, in the presence of the heads of the Jewish communities.

The Ponevezher Rav understood that this was not a suitable time to collect money. He decided to go to the Orthodox community, where the debate was taking place.

He entered a large hall and saw the Reform rabbi standing on the platform. The man turned to the Orthodox president and said: "Mister, please stand up."

The president of the Orthodox community rose obediently. The Reform rabbi addressed him in a friendly manner: "Tell me, Mister: are you shomer Shabbos?"

At that time in America, workplaces operated on Shabbos as well. Jews who insisted on keeping Shabbos were not hired and went hungry. It was a severe nisayon.

The Orthodox president blushed with embarrassment and began to stammer: "You have to understand. I have a wife and five children at home..."

But the Reform rabbi persisted: "I am repeating the question, Mister President. Are you shomer Shabbos?"

The president tried again to explain the constraints under which he lived. But the questioner would not let him continue.

"You are not answering my question. I asked whether you keep Shabbos. Please answer me yes or no."

The president was cornered. He had no choice, and he answered in embarrassment: "No."

The Reform rabbi struck the platform and said: "Well, then! If the Orthodox president does not keep Shabbos, that is a sign that Shabbos is not so important. Okay, I am finished." He stepped down from the platform.

There was tremendous tension in the room. It was clear that the Reform side had won the confrontation.

Suddenly, the Ponevezher Rav stood up and announced: "I would like permission to speak."

Permission was granted. He went up onto the platform, turned to the Reform rabbi, and addressed him in fluent English: "Mister, please stand up."

The man rose. The Ponevezher Rav asked him: "Tell me, Mister: are you shomer Shabbos?"

The Reform president burst out laughing. "Certainly not! Even the Orthodox president, who claims to be committed to halachah, has admitted in front of us that he does not keep Shabbos. What do you want from me?"

“Thank you very much,” the Rav said with a smile. “You are invited to my home for Shabbos.”

Then the Ponevezher Rav stood and addressed those present:

“Anyone who thinks that the Orthodox president and the Reform president gave the same answer understands nothing about Judaism! We all noticed how each of them gave his answer.

“The Reform president declared brazenly and proudly that he did not keep Shabbos. But the Orthodox president admitted that he did not keep Shabbos. He lowered his head in shame and apologized.”

The Rav continued: “Certainly, I cannot justify someone who does not keep Shabbos. But I will tell you one thing: the Orthodox president apologizes for not keeping Shabbos. If so, with the cantor’s permission, he may pass before the congregation as shaliach tzibbur and lead us on Yom Kippur.

“In contrast, the Reform president, who takes pride in the sin of not keeping Shabbos, cannot lead us.”

After relating the story, we can now say: ***“Now I understand the pshat in the pasuk.”***

אם יהיו חטאיכם כשנים כשלג ילבינו

“If your sins are like scarlet, they will become white as snow.” (Yeshayahu 1:18)

Why does the Navi call sin red? If forgiveness makes the sins white, isn’t the opposite of white black? Why, then, does the pasuk describe our sins as scarlet red?

Here is the explanation: **if a person’s face reddens with shame over his sins, there is hope that those sins will become white. He can return in complete teshuvah.**

When a person can blush over what he has done, he still recognizes a truth greater than his own conduct.

The answer about Lot

That was the critical point concerning Lot.

Had Lot told Avraham, “You are right. It is forbidden to steal. It pains me that I am stealing, but what can I do? I have a yetzer hara, and I cannot overcome it,” Avraham would have continued bringing him close, until one day he would overcome his yetzer hara and return from his sin.

But Lot was a scholar. He could marshal an entire pilpul to justify the theft.

The wrongdoing itself was being defended. With such a person, what could Avraham do? The only possibility was: “Please separate from me.”

Avraham could help a person struggling against his yetzer hara. But how could he help someone who insisted that the theft itself was justified?

Rabbi Chaim Walkin and the taxi driver

The mashgiach of Yeshivas Ateres Yisrael, Rabbi Chaim Walkin, once related in a conversation that he had been visiting America.

He was travelling in a taxi, and the driver was listening to the radio. Suddenly, the driver burst into loud laughter.

Rabbi Chaim looked at him and asked: “Why are you laughing?”

The driver explained: “They just announced on the news that they caught the Secretary of the Treasury embezzling tens of millions, and they are bringing him to trial.”

He turned to the mashgiach and said:

“Have you ever seen a bakery worker come home with clean clothes? When he leaves the bakery, there is always some flour stuck to his clothing.

“How does that happen? Did he get himself dirty deliberately? Did he want to steal a little flour? Heaven forbid! It simply sticks by itself.

“There is nothing to be done. Someone who works with flour has flour stick to his clothes.

“‘I, too,’ the Secretary of the Treasury could say to the judge, ‘was dealing with billions. So a few million stuck to me. What can I do?’”

Millions have been embezzled, but the explanation makes it sound as innocent as flour settling on a baker's apron. It simply "stuck."

That is what a justification can accomplish. There is no decision to examine, no responsibility to accept.

How often do we use our own version of that argument? "I did not really have a choice." "That is how things work." "Anyone in my position would have done the same thing."

There can be real pressures and difficult circumstances. The Ponevezher Rav's story recognizes that. But pressure does not require us to declare that a wrong has become right. We can acknowledge the difficulty and still acknowledge the failure.

When Lot stopped being a student

Look at the Torah's language. At the beginning, the Torah says:

וילך אתו לוט

"And Lot went with him." (Bereishis 12:4)

The Malbim, citing the Vilna Gaon, explains that this wording presents Lot as accompanying Avraham in a subordinate role. As long as Lot understood that he was subordinate to Avraham, Avraham could influence him.

But later the Torah says:

ולוט עמו הנגבה

"And Lot with him, toward the south." (Bereishis 13:1)

Now Lot sees himself as standing alongside Avraham: "I am important too. I am no less than you."

If Lot considers himself Avraham's equal, Avraham can no longer influence him. And so: "Please separate from me."

המצדיק את החטא אין לו תקנה

One who justifies the sin leaves himself without a remedy. The remedy becomes possible when he stops defending the wrong and allows himself to recognize it.

What we learn from the people we watch

Now consider what we see in public life. A politician is challenged about something he has said or done. Does he address it? Does he reconsider? Or does he explain why the question should never have been asked?

In the Michigan Senate campaign, Abdul El-Sayed was asked on CBS about Hasan Piker; he redirected the discussion toward affordability rather than directly addressing concerns about Piker's rhetoric. [1]

Affordability matters. But the importance of grocery prices does not answer a question about something else. A concern has been raised. It deserves to be addressed on its own terms.

We recognize the same pattern in ordinary conversation. "Why did you speak to me that way?" "Do you know how much pressure I am under?" The pressure may be real. But the question remains.

"Why did you repeat that accusation?" "Why are you not asking what the other person did?" Perhaps the other person also needs to answer. But that does not remove my responsibility.

There is a clear example from Donald Trump's 2024 campaign. He repeated the false allegation that Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio, were eating people's pets. Local officials rejected the story. When a voter challenged him at an October 16 town hall, he maintained the claim, saying he was repeating what had been reported. [2]

There was an opportunity to say: "I repeated something that was not substantiated. I should not have done that."

We face that opportunity ourselves. We pass along a story, repeat an accusation, or speak confidently after hearing only one side. Then we discover that the facts were different. Do we correct what we said? Or do we defend ourselves: "Well, somebody told me"?

The danger is that we become so accustomed to watching people avoid responsibility that we begin to regard it as normal. We admire the clever answer and enjoy the sharp reply. But did the answer actually address the issue, or merely protect the speaker?

Bringing the lesson home

A husband speaks harshly to his wife. She tells him that he hurt her. He explains that he was exhausted. He may have been exhausted. But can he also say, “I should not have spoken to you that way”?

A parent loses patience with a child. The child may have behaved badly. But can the parent say, “Your behaviour needs to change. And the way I responded was wrong”?

Both can be true. A person can have a legitimate complaint and express it unfairly. A person can be correct about the problem and still owe an apology for the way he handled it.

Yet we sometimes defend everything because we are afraid that admitting one mistake will mean losing the entire argument. So we defend the tone, the exaggeration, and the insult. We spend our energy proving that there is nothing to repair. And the relationship suffers.

Think of the difference a few honest words can make: *“You are right about that.” “I should have listened.” “That was unfair.” “I owe you an apology.”* Those words give the relationship somewhere to go.

The question is not only, “Have I done something wrong?” It is also, “When I am wrong, can I be corrected?”

Can my spouse tell me something difficult? Can a friend challenge my account of an argument? Can I hear a criticism without immediately preparing my defence? Can I recognize that someone I disagree with may nevertheless have made a valid point?

Avraham’s life was devoted to helping people change. The obstacle with Lot was his ability to defend what needed changing. That is a warning for anyone with intelligence, education, experience, or a quick tongue. Those gifts can help us discover the truth. They can also help us protect ourselves from it.

Three words that allow us to begin

We cannot control whether a politician admits a mistake on television. We can control whether we admit one at home.

We can correct a story that we should not have repeated. We can return to someone we hurt. We can stop using another person's failure as an excuse for our own.

This week, think of one conversation that remains unfinished. One apology that we keep explaining away. One thing we know we ought to correct, but have been too proud to face.

Then say the words: ***"I was wrong."***

Those words do not erase the past. They allow us to begin repairing it.

Good Shabbos.

References for the contemporary examples

[1] CBS News, interview transcript, Face the Nation, September 13, 2026.

[2] Reuters, "Trump, at Latino event, stands by false claims of immigrants eating pets," October 17, 2024, reporting on the October 16 town hall.