

What if two kids were having a fight at school, and after knocking his opponent down, the stronger one continued to pummel his opponent while he was lying on the ground? Wouldn't we say it was wrong to hit him when he was down?

Rabbi Abraham Twerski, a prominent American Orthodox rabbi born in 1930, says that this is what we often do to ourselves and we think this is right behavior. When we make a mistake, we don't just correct it and make amends, but we continue to beat ourselves up, suffering over what is past, wallowing in guilt and self-pity. It is this pummeling after the fall that, in his opinion, does us even more damage than our initial wrongdoing.

Rabbi Twerski derives this insight from God's words to Cain in the Torah portion that Lucas shared with us this morning.

The natural thing after making a mistake is unfortunately to make another. That's what happened to Adam and Eve, who compounded the sin of eating the fruit from the tree they had been told not to eat, by failing to take responsibility and to repent, and instead trying to pass the buck. Looking to somewhat more recent events, that was the issue in Nixon's White House as well. What ultimately did him in, wasn't the break-in at the Watergate Hotel, but the subsequent cover up.

But God reminds Cain, it doesn't have to be that way. He had been careless with his offering, which God did not favor, he was filled with jealousy towards his brother, but he could move forward in a better way.

God says to him:

Why are you distressed and why is your face fallen?

Surely if you do right there will be uplift,

but if you do not do right, at the tent flap sin crouches, and for you is its longing, YET YOU CAN BE ITS MASTER.

God wants Cain to believe that his story can have a different ending but Cain doesn't listen at first. He instigates a fight with his brother out in the field, with tragic consequences. But the Torah also gives us a look at a repentant Cain, a man who finds his way in later life.

Perhaps God buys the argument that Cain had no way to know that he would kill his brother, never having seen death. In any event the death penalty is not imposed as would be the case in a capital crime. Cain is punished more along the lines of a person found guilty of manslaughter, who in later Biblical times, has his life disrupted as he was forced to relocate.

Cain must leave his home, becoming a wanderer. We are told in the Bible that he marries and learns to live with others, establishing the first city. His descendants bring music into the world, making me think of the solace that music offers.

Adam and Eve are also presented in the Torah, as finding new life after tragedy. One son is dead and the other is his murderer. Yet they find solace in each other. They have another child, Sheyt, which means gift, and we are told that he begins to call upon God's name, that is to find a spiritual life.

Maybe you had the experience of missing a note at a piano recital, or flubbing a catch at an important game. If we continue to beat ourselves up about it, most likely we will make other mistakes. But we can take a deep breath and do well, even though we made a mistake. This can be true in larger things as well. One failed test, one course in which we did not do as well as we hoped, even one year at school that does not go well, does not have to ruin our lives unless we believe that it will. Even as adults, one lost job, one damaged relationship- we can review our steps and repair. And sometimes what we learn from these hard experiences makes us more than we were before.

One of the most famous oft-told stories in Jewish tradition is about a king who had a very valuable diamond. It was his most precious possession and he got great satisfaction in gazing at it in all its perfection. Unfortunately one day he drops the diamond on a hard stone floor and it gets an ugly jagged scratch on it. The king is desolate, he no longer enjoys looking at his diamond, now that it is damaged. The king's advisors put out a call to all the jewelers in the world to find someone who will remove that scratch- but it could not be done. Finally a poor beggar appears and offers to work on the diamond. The advisors are skeptical but the king says, what else can we do. From that damaging scratch the beggar creates a beautiful rose and the diamond is that much more beautiful.

This is the first Shabbat of the new year. We started once again with a clean slate, the record of our life a new page with no cross outs or mistakes. Yet we know it will not stay that way. The challenge in our year is not to be perfect, the challenge is to respond to our imperfections. Will our first mistake lead us down a path to worse wrongdoing, or can we find our balance, like those children's toys that you can attempt to knock over, but which always return to their center.

Lucas, when we name babies in the synagogue, we bless them wishing them well in every way. And yet we are also realistic.

“Though none can escape sorrow and pain, we humbly ask the courage to face evil, the faith to transcend it, and the strength to subdue it.”

So may it be for you as you go forward into your adult life.