

“I am a bad mother, but I am learning to be good.”

Jessamine Chan's book *The School for Good Mothers* is one of those haunting books that requires a reader to put it down every few pages in order to take a deep breath, unclench fists and remind yourself “it's just a book” because it can feel so real.

In this slightly parallel universe, children can be taken away from their parents for small infractions - inadequately babyproofing their apartment, letting their child play outside unattended, coddling them (because it's a form of emotional abuse) - in addition to larger transgressions. And in order to get their child back, the parents are sent to government-run schools where they learn to be good parents.

“I am a bad mother, but I am learning to be good” is the mantra the mothers repeat daily as they learn: *a mother can handle anything. A mother is always patient. A mother is always kind. A mother is always giving. A mother never falls apart. A mother is the buffer between her child and the cruel world.*”

After I finished the book, I had to spend the next few days deprogramming myself to remember it wasn't real, and my children weren't going to be taken away for my parenting infractions. I recommended the book to friends, who all told me they felt deeply immersed in the main character, Frida's, struggle. One friend said “I know it was dystopian, but it was only a degree removed from our world. I can imagine it happening, which is why it felt so real and scary.” Another friend confessed that she had spent a session with her therapist discussing the book.

There are a lot of themes to dissect, but the one I want to think about today, which is so real during this season, is what it means to repair a mistake, and what it means to be on the receiving end of someone else's repentance.

During this season, we read and see many different models for *t'shuvah*. We read about the scapegoat - the idea that the priest confesses all of the sins of the people, and the goat runs away, and now we are free of sin. We have the confessional prayer, in which we follow a prescribed set of sins to which we confess while beating our chest. And there are the perfunctory apologies we often see this time of year on social media: "for those I hurt, I'm sorry. Forgive me."

But these all seem to be very superficial, and our tradition is rarely superficial. Rabbi David Wolfe Blank, a 20th century Jewish Renewal Rabbi and a follower of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, offered that *t'shuvah* is ultimately meant to return us to a clear essence of who we are, to shed those qualities we have acquired that distort our essential being. He taught that the point of *t'shuvah* is to examine our behaviors, our roles, and our patterns to determine what we want to let go of, and what we want to strengthen. It means noticing our successes and where we miss the mark. Dr. Louis Newman, a Jewish ethicist, adds that *t'shuvah* is about choosing truth over deception - He shares: "I think repentance really is about coming to terms with who we really are... It's true both in terms of claiming our own mistakes, not running from them, not hiding them, but actually claiming them. Knowing that they're true and owning them. And also owning the fact that deep down, our core essence is ultimately good...Doing *teshuvah* is about returning to the purity and wholeness that's kind of your original nature that you've strayed from. It's about being true to who we really are, ultimately."

In other words, when we do t'shuvah right, we re-balance our lives and live as our truest selves. And so, in this interpretation, we are not doing t'shuvah for the sake of God or even for the sake of others - we are doing it so we can shed the fat around our souls, get down to the ikar, the essence, of our selves, and live our most fulfilling lives.

But it seems to me that in order to do *t'shuvah* right, we need to think about how we truly let go of the things of which we are not proud. What does it mean to truly repair a mistake so that we can shed the things we don't want to take forward with us?

Let's be honest - when we do something wrong, it doesn't feel good. Our natural instinct might be to deny it, to get defensive, to make it small. If we apologize, we might do a version of *either* "I'm really sorry about hurting your feelings. We good?" In this case, we are basically asking the person "can we just move on?" Or we might offer: "I'm really sorry that I was mean, but I wouldn't have to be mean if you didn't annoy me." In either of these cases, we are offering an apology, or a version of an apology, but we are not actually repairing the breakage, nor are we truly shedding the things we have done wrong.

Instead, for true t'shuvah, what we should be doing in these moments is repair. As Dr. Becky Kennedy, a clinical psychologist and the founder of Good Inside, shares: "*Repair is the act of going back to a moment of disconnection. Taking responsibility for your behavior and acknowledging the impact it had on another.*" She continues: "*And I want to differentiate a repair from an apology, because when an apology often looks to shut a conversation down...a good repair opens one up.*"

In her TED Talk, Dr. Becky, as she is known, offers a few steps for repair -

The first is to repair with yourself, knowing that you cannot offer compassion or groundedness or understanding to someone else before you offer it to yourself. Self-repair means acknowledging that who you are is separate from what you did - it means stopping the cycle of feeling defensive or shame. Only once you are grounded, once you have offered yourself that compassion, can you repair with another person.

Repair has three elements - name what happened, take responsibility, and state what you would do differently the next time. It could come together like this: "I keep thinking about what I said to you last night. I'm sorry I yelled. I'm sure that felt upsetting, because you were trying to do the right thing. I'm working on staying calm, even when I'm frustrated." Repair means that we acknowledge what we have done wrong and name what we might do differently next time. It means connecting with the other person while taking responsibility for your own behavior.

It's also possible that, even when we offer repair instead of an apology, that there will be really big hurt. Even when we take responsibility for our actions, people are allowed to feel hurt, and sometimes we can't fix that (despite the really beautiful song *Fix You* by Coldplay). Ultimately, we are offering repair in an effort to heal, not to fix. Dr. Vivek Murthy, the U.S. Surgeon General, recently shared in an interview: "That word 'healing' is so important...it is different from fixing. Healing is about making whole. And to be a healer, you have to be able to listen, to learn, and to love." And so we can learn - when we offer repair, our intention must be to heal, to listen, to reconnect the relationship. If we offer repair with the intention of fixing, we may find ourselves disappointed.

So we can offer repair, and we can acknowledge the pain we have caused when engaging in *t'shuvah*, but what about accepting someone else's repair and apology? In the book, Frida

makes a mistake. She calls it her “very bad day” - and there is no debate that she made a mistake. And then she tries to fix her mistake. She agrees to be monitored by the state 24 hours day/7 days week. She apologizes, she weeps. She tries to communicate that it will never happen again. She gives up a year of her life to go to the school for good mothers. And she is fighting an uphill battle, one that feels Sysiphean at times, to receive forgiveness.

There are things that might happen - either to us or around us - that are really hard to accept and forgive. And while we are all entitled to our feelings about those things, I also think we have a responsibility to discern the big upsets from the ones we might be able to forgive.

We are taught that when we die, we will be asked 6 questions by God. The fifth question asks in part whether we “understood one matter from another.” One interpretation of this question is whether we understood a small thing from a big thing. In Frida’s world, there is no discernment - she is treated the same as the mother who is in the school for coddling, and they are both in the same program as the mother who locked her children in a cellar without food. And the state is spending the same amount of resources to have these mothers repent.

We spend a lot of time in rages about things that, if we were to take a step back, might dissipate with examination of understanding one matter from another. Or said another way, when I was feeling frustrated about something, Rabbi Ari Lucas used to share - there are three categories of things to get angry about:

There are the things I don’t actually care about.

There are the things I care about, but if they go differently than I want them to go, I can live with it, even if not easily.

And there are the things I care so deeply about, I am willing to lose a relationship, a home, a job.

And hopefully that last category is the smallest, with the fewest amount of topics within it.

And yet often, we get angry - REALLY angry - about things that actually are in category one or category 2. We write people off as “bad people” or “someone I don’t want in my life” because of their actions. In the book, the state spends a lot of resources punishing Frida – and they spend the same amount of resources in asking for her repentance as they do in asking all of the other mothers, who have different degrees of transgression. I wonder how Frida’s story might have changed if the anger matched the crime.

Part of our work is to recognize how important the issue is to us, to find ways to forgive those transgressions that are ultimately in the first two categories, and to see the actions of another as an error in judgment, not the totality of who they are. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov taught that we should always look for the good in others - and that in fact, even in a person who’s virtually completely sinful, we should find the very smallest bit of goodness in them and judge them for their merits. When you do that, he taught — even for the person who’s most sinful — when you see their goodness, you help them repent. I worry that too often, we allow a person’s mistake to define their whole existence forever

In Elena Aguilar’s book *Onward: Cultivating Emotional Resilience in Educators*, Aguilar examines the power of storytelling and perspective. She gives an example of a teacher who says hello to their principal and doesn’t get a response. In one scenario, the person thinks “wow - the principal really hates me.” In another scenario the person thinks “the principal must have a lot on her mind that she didn’t hear me.” Aguilar writes: *“What you think is how you feel. Our interpretations can cause, exacerbate, or intensify emotional distress, or they can boost our optimism, help us connect with others, and enable us to care for ourselves and to engage in the*

*many habits that boost resilience. It's your interpretation that produces an emotion; improve your interpretations and you may feel better."*

This feels so incredibly relevant when we think about the act of t'shuvah and considering what we will take and what we will shed as we head into the new year. What are the narratives you carry that, perhaps, are not exactly as you see them? Where can you offer a generous interpretation to the other person - not even for their sake, but for your own, so you can put down the heavy load you are carrying?

One of the reasons the book is so captivating is the frustration a reader feels as we experience Frida trying to repair, offering acknowledgment of her wrong doing, trying to be better, but the state is holding on to their narrative, seeing her transgression as the worst thing to have ever happened. And the book offers the cautionary tale that, when we don't do *t'shuvah* right, either as the person trying to repair or the person accepting the repair, we offer few options. When it's not done right is when we activate the part of people's brains that see the only options as fight or flight - to abandon meaningful relationships, to remove themselves from families, to rage in unhealthy ways. And while I won't spoil the book's ending, we see in multiple characters and multiple storylines how fight or flight feel like the only possibilities in desperate situations.

And finally, I want to offer that sometimes engaging in repair - as either the person who needs to repair or the person receiving the repair - will not always *feel* satisfying if our goal is to actually impact change.

I had two experiences recently that highlighted this challenge. In the first situation, one of my kids engaged in a behavior they had been repeatedly warned against doing, and it caused them to get really hurt. While the voice in my head loudly screamed "ask how they are! Ask how they

are!” the voice that came out of my mouth said “how many times have I told you not to do that?!” As you might expect, the result was crying and a closing off from the relationship. I will bet that I did not shift the future behavior of this child, and I am guessing that in that moment, my response elicited shame and self-blame from my child.

In the second situation, a parent in the school behaved badly. They yelled, they said unkind things, they made many people feel really bad. And what I *wanted* to do was to tell them “you can’t behave that way! Shape up or ship out!” But I recently heard, and am trying to live by, the phrase: “It’s more important to be effective than to be right.” So instead I called the parent and asked “I heard it was a hard conversation. Tell me about what happened.” The parent shared feelings of shame and guilt and feeling unseen. And while it didn’t excuse the behavior, I could understand where it came from, and we could address the causes. And once the parent was calm, and the problem was solved, I was able to return to them and say “I know this felt really bad for you. I want to share how it felt for me as well.” And at that point, the parent could hear the feedback, could offer an apology that repaired their relationships with others, and - I believe - will impact their future choices.

Because ultimately repair and *t’shuvah* are about putting relationships at the center. It’s about our relationship with ourselves, it’s offering compassion and kindness to others, and it’s seeing repair as a way to create a healthier dynamic for ourselves and others. We aren’t trying to escape consequence – of course there are consequences when we do something wrong – but we are saying that our relationships and connection with other people are more important than our behaviors.

In the School for Good Mothers, the behavior is ultimately the thing that the state cares about - not the person, not the intentions, not the repair. And I think the reason the book continues to

haunt me, 5 months after reading the last page, is the idea that Frida could never make right the thing she did wrong. Her mistake was irreparable and dominated her life story. Perhaps the lesson here is that the line between our fraught world and an actual dystopian one is the ability to make things right when one errs. We don't need to live in bondage to even our most grievous mistakes. The two worlds were so hauntingly similar, and yet we do have the ability to repair, and to accept others' repair, so that we can shed what we want to leave behind, we can strengthen that which we want to take with us, and we can move forward in a way that allows us to live as an ever evolving, hopefully better, version of ourselves. May it be so for all of us in the year to come.