

At six years old, Larry had his most beloved toy:

It was a bright red Ferrari with a yellow racing stripe down the middle.

He loved that car. LOVED it.

So when it suddenly disappeared, Larry tore his room apart looking for it. Under the bed. In the closet. Between toy boxes. Everywhere.

And then, late that afternoon, the doorbell rang.

Standing on the porch was his best friend Mark, holding the Ferrari in his hand.

"I borrowed it," Mark admitted. "I wanted to show it to my brother. I'm sorry."

Larry snatched the car back.

"You stole it!"

Mark apologized again. He had not meant to keep it. He was not making excuses. He was genuinely sorry.

But Larry was not interested.

"I don't forgive you," he shouted. "And I'm never playing with you again."

Then he slammed the door.

That night, Larry sat in his room with his beloved Ferrari safely back where it belonged.

He had his car. But he could not enjoy it. He was miserable.

At bedtime, his mother asked what was wrong.

Larry answered, "I got my car back. But now my best friend is a thief."

His mother gently asked, "Don't you think you could give Mark another chance?"

Larry's answer was immediate.

"Never."

And that night, Larry had a dream.

He found himself in a place called The Land of No Second Chances.

In that land, if you missed your highway exit, there was no turning around.

If you failed a test, there were no retakes.

And when Larry asked for an eraser to fix his mistakes, his teacher and all the other students just laughed.

“An eraser?” she said. “This is the Land of No Second Chances. You’re not supposed to make mistakes.”

Suddenly, Larry realized just how terrifying that world really was. A world with no forgiveness. No do-overs. No way back.

Of course, none of us would want to live in the Land of No Second Chances, a story written by my childhood rabbi, Sam Karff. And yet, how many of us can see Larry in ourselves, more than we would like to admit?

We do not want to live in the Land of No Second Chances.
We do not want God to govern the universe that way.

And yet, if we are honest, many of us carry a little piece of that land around inside us.

We need second and third and fourth chances all the time. When something slips out the wrong way. When our anger gets the best of us. When we’re tired or distracted.

Every Kol Nidrei is built upon an astonishing assumption: human beings make mistakes.

All of us. Not just the person sitting next to us, or down the row. Each and every one of us.

We fail.
We break promises.
We hurt people.

If Judaism believed in no second chances, there would be no Yom Kippur.

There would be no *teshuvah*, no repentance.
No forgiveness.
No return.
No tomorrow.

If Yom Kippur teaches us anything, it is that Judaism does not believe our mistakes should determine the rest of our lives. Thank goodness our childhood mistakes do not define us forever. Thank goodness no single moment has to become the whole story.

I was kind of a snarky child. I was popular and surrounded by friends, but often I got those relationships by acting out, making fun, being too direct, and choosing being right over being kind.

I look back at my bat mitzvah sermon experience and cringe. I cried in the rabbi's office because I could not think of a single example of selfless kindness to include. That moment became a turning point for me. It helped me begin to ask who I wanted to become.

And as I think through my life, I can look back on so many moments that required chances upon chances. Friendships where I got angry too quickly. Classes that would have been easier if I had not disrespected the teacher. Arguments with siblings during a holiday meal that once resulted in me backing my car out of the garage without first opening the garage door.

Abraham Joshua Heschel says it best: "When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people." Or as the writer George Saunders puts it, "What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness."

I think of these words of wisdom often. My regrets as I age are not about cleverness, they are about failures of kindness.

While I was caring for my mother, I lost my temper. My mother was stubborn. I knew that her fierce will to be independent kept her from giving in to her illness—it extended her life. But as a caregiver, it was hard.

At one point, she had been instructed to use a walker. Her medications had weakened her, and she could no longer move safely on her own. And I was right there to help her get anything she needed. Except for the moment when I was not.

I got her all set up, went out for a quick walk, and when I came back, she was on the floor. Her walker was across the room. And there I was, dialing 911 for lift assist. I yelled—I was snarky. I lost my patience.

From the caregivers group here, I know there is hardly a family caregiver who has not lost their temper. There is no easy way to stay calm in every stressful moment. And yet the guilt afterward can feel worse than anything.

This is the human condition. We are full of mistakes, and therefore we are in constant need of second, third and fourth chances.

And when we look at Torah, we discover that our most sacred stories are filled with them.

Again and again, relationships break, people fail, dreams collapse, and even creation itself seems to go off course. But the story does not end. Somehow, there is another beginning.

At Sinai, the Israelites experience the greatest spiritual moment in Jewish history. They hear God's voice. They enter into the covenant. And then, almost immediately, they fail.

Moses comes down the mountain and finds the people dancing around the Golden Calf.

If there were ever a moment for the story to end, this was it.

But it does not.

Moses argues with God.
The people repent.
The covenant survives.

The first tablets are shattered. But the miracle is what comes next.

God does not say, "Well, that was your last chance."

God says, in effect, "Carve new tablets." This is your second chance.

The rabbis teach that both the broken tablets and the whole tablets were carried together in the Ark of the Covenant.

What a powerful image for Yom Kippur.

The goal of life is not to become a person who has never broken anything.

The goal is to become a person who learns how to carry the broken pieces with dignity, humility, and wisdom.

Each of us comes to this sanctuary carrying our own broken tablets.

Some of us are haunted by mistakes we made.
Some of us are wounded by mistakes others made.
Some of us have relationships still stuck in the moment they were broken.

But Torah whispers a different possibility.

Not every story is over.
Not every failure is final.
Not every broken thing must remain broken forever.

Of course, believing that God forgives is one thing.

Forgiving the people who have hurt us is another.

And forgiving ourselves may be the hardest of all.

We start to believe that our mistakes make us unworthy—but we all make mistakes. We are not meant to be judged based solely on our failures. As the lawyer and justice advocate Bryan Stevenson says, “Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.” Making mistakes, forgiving ourselves and others—this is part of the process of living and growing in relationship with others.

We must teach the next generation that one failure does not erase their worth. Resilience is not perfection. And if we are endlessly critical of ourselves and others, we are not really practicing forgiveness.

We are trapped in the Land of No Second Chances.

Torah is honest about how difficult forgiveness can be.

Think of Jacob and Esau. Their story begins with deception and betrayal. Jacob takes what belongs to his brother and runs for his life. For years, the brothers live apart in silence, distance, and unresolved pain.

When Jacob finally returns home, he is terrified. He expects vengeance.

But Esau runs to meet him. Not to strike him. Not to humiliate him. Not to settle old scores.

He embraces him, kisses him, and they weep.

We never learn exactly what happened in Esau’s heart during those years. We only know that somewhere along the way, he decided the hurt was no longer worth carrying.

And because he did, both brothers were set free. This works in our families too. Some siblings hold on to past hurts for decades, coming together for brief moments when parents pass and wondering what took them so long. It’s never too late to reach out. I never hear of regret after someone forgives, only sorrow over holding on to hurt.

Joseph’s story teaches another essential truth.

Joseph’s brothers throw him into a pit, sell him into slavery, and let their father believe he is dead. If anyone has earned the right to hold a grudge forever, it is Joseph.

Years later, Joseph has power over them. He could destroy them with a single command. Instead, he asks whether they have changed.

That detail matters.

Joseph does not offer cheap forgiveness.

He waits to see whether repentance is real.

Only then does reconciliation become possible.

These stories remind us that people's worst moments are not always their final chapters. They ask us to consider a challenging question:

What if the person standing before us today is not the same person who hurt us years ago?

What if people are more than the worst thing they have ever done?

And perhaps the most uncomfortable question of all:

What if we are more than the worst things we have done?

Because every one of us comes into this sanctuary hoping that others will recognize that we are more than our failures. We hope our spouses, children, friends, and God will not define us only by our worst decisions, our worst words, our worst moments of anger.

I am not the same person I was at 12 or 24 or 32. I am more than the mistakes that I've made. I can forgive myself for failures of kindness. I am still a work in progress—far from perfect. I am continuously learning to be more patient, sympathetic and kind. My mind is quick, and my filter needs to be just as quick.

We hope to be judged not only by who we were, but by who we are trying to become.

At the end of Rabbi Karff's story, Larry wakes from his nightmare in the Land of No Second Chances. Shaken by what he experienced, he runs next door to Mark's house carrying the little red Ferrari.

"I want you to borrow it," he tells his friend. "I'm sorry I got so mad. Can we still be friends?"

Mark forgives him immediately and asks why he is so upset.

Larry answers, "I just don't ever want to go back to the Land of No Second Chances."

And that is the moment when the story reveals its deepest truth.

The Land of No Second Chances was not a punishment for Mark. Mark had already apologized. Mark had already returned the car. He has moved on.

The person who was suffering was Larry.

His anger, resentment, and refusal to forgive were not imprisoning his friend.

They were imprisoning *him*.

That is what many of us spend years learning. When we refuse to offer grace, the first person we trap is ourselves.

Tonight, we stand before a God who creates and begins again.

A God who gives another tablet.

Another covenant.

Another tomorrow.

Another year.

Another Yom Kippur.

We are here tonight because God does not look at us and see only our worst mistakes.

God sees who we might yet become.

And if that is how God sees us, perhaps that is how we can begin to see one another and ourselves.

So as this holy night begins, ask what might this year become if I left the Land of No Second Chances behind? What burden might I finally put down if I can at last offer forgiveness? What freedom might I discover?

Amen.