

Ofer Zimri is an Israeli security specialist. At one time, he was in charge of security at Ben Gurion airport. In addition to making sure that terrorists will be unable to get explosives or weapons aboard planes, he also realized that another aspect of the threat is to phone in a bomb threat, causing planes to be evacuated and totally disrupting the regular functioning of the airport.

To deal with that, Zimri developed a protocol, which remains to this day a secret, to distinguish an actual bomb threat from a phony one.

Then came the day when Zimri's own daughter was on board a plane, taxiing to take-off, and a bomb threat was received. A colleague said, "For God's sake, it's your own daughter -- call the plane back and take her off!"

Zimri replied that if he were to call back the plane he would remove all the passengers, not only his daughter. But the central question was: did he trust the protocol that told him that the bomb threat was not real?

He did trust his protocol. He let the plane take off, and it arrived safely. But his wife wouldn't speak to him for a number of weeks.

I'm thinking about this story against the backdrop of the Akeidah story, the story of the binding of Isaac. I wonder: Does Abraham really trust his understanding of the nature of the God who spoke to him, who promised him a future as founder of a people through the very Isaac whose life is threatened by God's command? Does he trust that God will keep God's word? It's one thing to bet your own life on your faith; it's another thing to bet the life of your child. But Abraham does, and God keep God's promise and it turns out well. Following the story, Abraham and Isaac go their separate ways and Isaac goes on to a loving marriage with progeny who will follow his father's covenant.

If the Akeidah is, as I suggest, a kind of parenting test of whether you are willing to let go of your children and trust that they will find their way, we can find an mis-application of this in the story of "Operation Varsity Blues," the college admissions scandal, the parents who paid a consultant to fraudulently get their children into prestigious schools. If you trust that your children have the ability to find their way in the world, the enterprise of parenting becomes a slow process of letting go. When you send them away to college, they are on their own. You trust that they can manage the challenges; and that if they cannot, that they will learn something in the process that will make them better able to overcome the next challenge. It's hard to place your child on the altar of the roulette table of life and let the croupier spin the wheel, knowing that you can no longer protect them from a bad outcome.

When parents decide to game the system, they do so not because they have their child's best interests at heart, but because they are more worried about their image as the parents of successful children than their actual children's success. In the end, Abraham didn't harm his son. Parents who deceive the system to get their children into schools they would not otherwise qualify for may very well be doing harm to their children, getting them in over their heads, setting them up for failure. Not every kid is cut out for Yale or USC.

In this story, we have a terrific High Holiday lesson in teshuvah and punishment. One of the parents caught in the scandal, Felicity Huffman, has clearly studied Maimonides laws of repentance. From the beginning, she told the judge: "I am pleading guilty to the charge brought against me by the United States Attorney's Office. I am in full acceptance of my guilt, and with deep regret and shame over what I have done. I accept full responsibility for my actions and will

accept the consequences that stem from those actions. I am ashamed of the pain I have caused my daughter, my family, my friends, my colleagues and the educational community.

“I want to apologize to them and, especially, I want to apologize to the students who work hard every day to get into college, and to their parents who make tremendous sacrifices to support their children and do so honestly. My daughter knew absolutely nothing about my actions, and in my misguided and profoundly wrong way, I have betrayed her. This transgression toward her and the public I will carry for the rest of my life. My desire to help my daughter is no excuse to break the law or engage in dishonesty.”

Felicity, *yashar koach*. No stammering or hemming and hawing. No passing the buck, no excuses, qualifications or justifications. No conditioned apologies. And no attempt to say, I didn't know or think I was breaking the law. And nice that Felicity acknowledges that her bad behavior victimized honest low and middle class families who study hard and work hard to get into college and pay for that education.

Felicity Huffman was sentenced to 14 days in prison, 250 hours of community service, and a \$30,000 fine. A second parent sentenced just last week after pleading guilty received four months in prison, 500 hours of community service and a fine of \$95,000. At the sentencing, he also expressed remorse. He said:

“There are no words to justify my behavior, nor will I offer any excuses or justification. The crime I committed is unacceptable. In my heart and my soul, I want what's best for my son. I realize now my actions were the antithesis of that.”

However, earlier, when the scheme first began to unravel, he said, “They have no business or legal right ... to be calling and challenging [my son's] application.” Prosecutors said that he failed to take full responsibility, instead blaming the consultant who masterminded the fraud scandal. And a fourth parent, who said that he accepts total and full responsibility but also said he was drawn in and manipulated by the consultant, was sentenced Thursday to four months in prison, a \$100,000 fine and 500 hours of community service.

We see a pattern here. The harsher sentence seems to be tied to the poorer quality of his admission of guilt. On the other side of the spectrum, Lori Loughlin is playing her cards differently. She and her husband have pleaded ‘not guilty.’ According to ‘a source close to her’ “it's just taking some time for it to sink in that what she was allegedly doing could be considered illegal. To her, it wasn't egregious behavior. Was it entitled and ... selfish? Perhaps. But she didn't see it as being a legal violation.”

We don't know what Lori Loughlin's sentence will be, if she is found guilty. We might expect that she'll be punished more severely because she doesn't accept responsibility for her actions. We'll see.

In another case, a group of Atlanta teachers and a testing coordinator who facilitated cheating on aptitude tests given to poor students from an underperforming district were sentenced to between one and seven years in jail, fines of between \$1000 and \$25,000, and 1,000 to 2,000 hours of community service. Only one teacher admitted that she did wrong, and she was given no jail time. So there, too, the lighter sentence seems to correspond with the degree of remorse.

Justice is a liturgical theme of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We speak of God as *melekh Hamishpat*, Sovereign of justice. We ask that the punishment fit the crime. The punishment may or may not be a deterrent, but it should feel adequate, but not excessive, for the crime.

So consider another case of cheating to get a better education, the case of Kelley Williams-Bolar, an African-American, poor, single, mom convicted of two felonies for falsely registering her children at her father's address in order to get them into a better school district. Consistent with laws set down by the Ohio Legislature, she was sentenced to two concurrent terms of five years in jail for tampering with government documents. A parole board reviewed the case and recommended a rejection of clemency. Governor John Kasich, however, disagreed and reduced the conviction to misdemeanors and a nine day sentence, saying that it seemed that the penalty was excessive for the crime and that she deserved a second chance.

We focus on justice in our High Holiday liturgy. Cheating is wrong. Repentance involves a complete acknowledgement of guilt. Determining appropriate consequences, in the words of a mishnah dealing with civil cases of damages, depends on the status of the offender and the status of the one who suffered damage. In other words, the mishnah does not pronounce hard and fast rules, because there needs to be room for considering all circumstances, even economic circumstances. And although teshuvah doesn't mitigate all punishment, it's nice to see that authentic remorse does, in the words of our liturgy, *ma'avir at ro'a ha'gezerah*, avert the severity of the decree.

Ofer Zimri trusted the protocol designed to keep airports functioning smoothly, efficiently, and safely. Abraham trusted the Commanding Voice. Our justice system is neither quick nor has the advantage of an all-seeing eye above. So it can be slow, expensive, and is not always entirely fair or consistent. Thank God we live in a country built on a set of fair principles, but at the same time, we know that sometimes the wrong people are targeted, sometimes the wrong people are punished, and sometimes the punishment seems unduly harsh or unreasonably light.

From the Akeidah, we learn lessons about trusting the protocols of a life based on Torah and lessons about letting those we love find their own true path in the world. And from those who fail the Akeidah test of letting go, we learn lessons of what constitutes real teshuvah and how that affects the application of justice. May your year be one in which Torah provides you a sense of comfort and in which your life's path is secure. May your year be one in which you give room to others and have the space around you to learn and grow and engage in holy and restorative relationships. And may we all see a world of fair justice for all.