

Rick Perry and Joe Paterno: A Tale of Two Mistakes  
(Parshat Vayera: November 12, 2011)

Last Thursday morning's headlines featured the unlikely juxtaposition of two men: Rick Perry and Joe Paterno.

In the eyes of some observers, each man had landed on Page One for the same reason. Both Perry and Paterno had made serious mistakes that embarrassed them in the public eye. Moreover, each man's mistake may have permanently destroyed his career and his reputation. And supporters of both men offered the same basic defense.

Rick Perry's mistake occurred in the middle of the Republican Presidential Candidates debate. In an answer to one of the moderator's questions, Perry stated that he would eliminate three cabinet-level departments from the government if he were elected. Perry named the first two--commerce and education--but could not remember the third department. After a series of verbal stumbles, Perry simply grimaced and said "sorry, oops."

As soon as the debate was over, pundits on the right and left began suggesting that Perry's mistake has effectively eliminated him as a serious Presidential candidate. Perry's standing in the polls has fallen precipitously. In response, Perry's defenders, including Perry himself, are trying to laugh off the incident as just another example of how everyone makes mistakes.

Joe Paterno's mistake took place a long time ago, but became public just last week. Paterno, received a report of child sexual abuse by a former assistant coaches in Penn State locker room in 2002. While Paterno did pass on the report to the school's athletic director, he did not call the police and did not follow up. The former assistant coach continued to have access to Penn State's facilities and Paterno staff participated in fundraisers for the coach's charity.

Finally, last week, the assistant coach was indicted on multiple counts of child sexual abuse. The indictment resulted in Paterno's dismissal as Penn State Football coach. But, that night, hundreds of students rioted at Penn State in support of Paterno. In the words of one of the student protestors: "We got rowdy, and we got maced," "But make no mistake, the board started this riot by firing our coach. They tarnished a legend." To this young man, and many other Penn State students, Joe Paterno was punished unjustly. He may have made a mistake. But punishing Paterno with loss of his beloved head coaching position was the real crime.

As we await the final outcome of both incidents, we can't help but wonder: "are the defenders of Perry and Paterno right? Are both men's errors essentially the same? And if so, both men lose their positions and be forced to leave the playing field as a result?"

A close look at our Torah portion today suggests that, in fact, there are crucial differences between the mistakes made by Rick Perry and those made by Joe Paterno. These crucial differences clearly mandate a different fate for each man.

Let's begin with an incident involving Abraham, Sarah and God. The incident parallels, in many ways, to what happened to Rick Perry on Wednesday night. At the beginning of our Torah portion, three angels, messengers from God, pay a visit to Abraham. At the dinner table, one of the angels tells Abraham, "I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!" The Torah tells us that, as it happened,

"Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him. And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?" Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?' <sup>14</sup> Is anything too wondrous for the Lord? I will return to you at the time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." Sarah lied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was frightened. But He replied, "You did laugh."

It would be hard to imagine a bigger gaffe than laughing when an angel brings news about God fulfilling a promise. Sarah is clearly embarrassed by her gaffe. Yet, she makes the gaffe even worse by denying it. God then calls her on her denial, and Sarah ends up flustered and humiliated. Nine months later, though, Sarah does indeed give birth to the son who was promised to her.

Why, we might ask ourselves, doesn't God punish Sarah for her mistake? It seems, after all, like Sarah's laughter is tantamount to a denial of God. The medieval commentator Tzror HaMor helps us put Sarah's laughter into perspective. He explains that while Sarah did in fact let out an audible laugh when she heard she would have a child, it was momentary, involuntary reaction, not a denial of faith. To be sure, Sarah committed a faux pas by laughing out loud at the wrong time. But she was not guilty of a sin. And that's why Sarah answered God that she did not laugh--she may have guffawed in the moment, but she never really doubted the power of God. While God seems unsatisfied by this answer at first, it is clear that eventually, God too, understands the difference between inopportune laughter and blasphemy.

The story of Lot's wife may seem, at first glance, very similar to the story of Sarah's laughter. But upon closer examination, the stories are very different; in exactly the same way that, upon closer examination, the story of Joe Paterno is really very different than the story of Rick Perry.

At the beginning of chapter 19, God sends angels to inform Lot and his family that God will soon destroy the wicked city of Sodom. When the people of the city find out that Lot has taken strangers into his home, they gather outside Lot's house demanding that Lot send the visitors outside so they can abuse them. In response, the angels create a diversion and instruct Lot and his family to flee the city at once. The angels warn Lot's family not look back on their

way out of the city. But as they are leaving, we read that " Lot's wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt."

It is easy to imagine why Lot's wife would have looked back, in spite of God's instructions. She may have looked back out of natural human curiosity; the same natural curiosity that causes us to slow down as we pass a traffic accident on the side of the road. Or, perhaps Lot's wife looked back out of concern for her two married daughters who were still in the city. Certainly, no matter what the reason, Lot's wife made a mistake. But why was she so severely punished for making a mistake that any one of us might have made under the circumstances? The punishment does not seem to even remotely fit the crime.

In Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, the rabbis are also troubled by this question. They suggest that Lot's wife was punished for a much more serious sin; one that was only compounded by looking back at the destruction of the city.

R. Isaac said: "She sinned through salt. On the night that the angels visited Lot, Lot said to his wife, 'Give these guests a bit of salt.' But she replied, '[Besides entertaining guests], is it your wish to introduce into Sodom another vile custom [that of seasoning their food]?' What did she do? She went around among all her neighbors, saying to each one, 'Give me salt. We have guests,' intending thereby to have the townspeople become aware of the presence of guests in her home [and penalize Lot for it]. Hence, she herself became a pillar of salt."

Lot's wife, then, was not punished for making a simple human mistake. Looking back was just an expression of her identification with the people, and the sins, of Sodom. Lot may have been a righteous man. But Lot's wife enabled the criminal behavior of the people of Sodom. Although she herself did not take part in the criminal activity, her actions made the heinous behavior of the people possible. Moreover, Lot's wife represented her actions as an effort to help her guests, when in fact she put them in grave danger. Lot's wife, then, does not just make a natural human mistake. She commits a sin--by allowing and even encouraging others to engage in criminal behavior. And it is for this sin that God punishes Lot's wife.

In the end, the difference between Lot's wife and Sarah is a simple one: Lot's wife commits a sin, Sarah makes a mistake. God recognizes this difference; punishing the sin severely and ultimately forgiving the mistake.

We can, and should, make the same distinction between the actions of Joe Paterno and Rick Perry. Joe Paterno committed a grave sin by allowing his former assistant to engage in criminal behavior with the apparent endorsement of Penn State football and by enabling the abuse of innocent children by not aggressively following up when the problem was brought to his attention. The consequences of this sin were devastating to the victims--as devastating as the conduct of the people of Sodom and Gemorrah. Even though Paterno did not commit the

crimes himself, he is clearly guilty of not doing enough to protect vulnerable young boys and indirectly providing aid and cover for the perpetrator of these crimes.

Rick Perry on the other hand, simply made a mistake. He had a brain freeze in while speaking in public. This kind of brain freeze happens all the time to public speakers. I have certainly lost my place or my train of thought during a sermon or a lesson on more than one occasion. Perry's gaffe was natural human reaction to stress, just as Sarah's laugh was. The only dramatic conclusion we can draw from this incident is that Rick Perry is a human being, who can, like most of us, become flustered under stress. In the end, each of us will decide to whether or not to support Rick Perry. We should make this decision on the basis of his policy positions, his record and his character-- not on the basis of his performance in a debate.

The distinction between Joe Paterno's sin and Rick Perry's mistake should be very clear. Yet, judging from the reaction to each incident, there is still confusion among those on the scene. In a presidential campaign, the reporters and pundits occupy the front row seats. These representatives of the mainstream media inflated the story of Perry's gaffe from what was a genuinely funny--albeit embarrassing-- moment into an earthshaking campaign crisis. The hyperbolic coverage of the Perry story makes me ask, "does the media think we are really that shallow, that superficial, that we will judge a person solely on the basis of their ability to remember every plank of their campaign platform?"

On the other hand, looking at the reaction of the Penn State students to Joe Paterno's dismissal, I have to wonder, "Do these students really not understand the difference between a mistake and a sin? And if not, is there any hope for the next generation?" We can only hope that time, and the continued public outcry, will give these students some needed perspective.

For each of us, the events of past week serve as a poignant reminder that one of the most important life skills we can possess is knowing the difference between a mistake and a sin. May God grant us the wisdom and the courage to make this distinction in our own lives; may we always recognize when it is time to raise our voices in condemnation; and when it is time to extend our hands in forgiveness.