

Thank God for the blessing of the second chance. Without it, I would not be here today. My first year of rabbinic school, I took my Talmud final exam. It was a hard exam. Really hard. But I assumed that I passed -- not by a lot, but by enough. Why not? I was not an advanced student of the Talmud, but I certainly was no slouch. At least I thought I wasn't a slouch. However my dear friends, I was quickly disabused of this confident self evaluation of my scholarship when I got to my little mailbox at school the next day and read the memo inside of it. Mr. Stern, it read, you have failed your Talmud final. And then those 2 terrifying words that chill the blood of every student who's ever lived: "See me".

Flunking Talmud is not the same as flunking 4th grade penmanship, the only other course I'd ever flunked. I was panicked -- what was I going to do? I felt certain that the Talmud professor, notoriously difficult and contentious, would show no mercy. I mean, we'd make jokes about his gruff manner, his tendency to bully weak students. Well, guess who the weak student was?

I pondered what I could say to persuade the professor to let me retake the test. Upon subtle desperate investigation, every one of my peers had passed. They studied, and they took the test, and they passed. And I didn't. Why did I deserve to take it again? I had no good answer. I just couldn't bear failing like this, letting

people down. I would be forced to retake the course, not continue with my class, and, in general, experience public humiliation on a grand scale.

I felt so bad, and so lost. I held back my tears and decided to leave school early and go home. After all, what difference did it make? I had failed Talmud. I rounded the corner of the hall toward the main entrance to make my getaway. And there stood my Talmud professor schmoozing with my modern Hebrew Lit teacher. At least I was good in Hebrew lit class; but hey, maybe I had flunked that final, too.

I wanted to run the other way, but I did not. Truthfully I didn't know where to run. "Mr. Stern," he said, giving me the come hither signal with his index finger. "In the second Mishnah of masechet Rosh Hashanah, what are the four new years in the correct sequence?" I answered that "On the first day of Nisan is the new year of kings. On the first day of Elul is the new year of animals. On the first day of Tishrei is the new year of the world. And on the first day of Shevat, according to Shammai is the new year of the trees, but according to Hillel it's the fifteenth of Shevat." "So why didn't you write all that on the exam?" "Frankly, Professor, I don't remember what I wrote." "Oy, a cholerya!", he said, grabbing his skull as if he'd just been stricken with a massive migraine. "Go home Stern!" I stood there,

not exactly sure what to do. “Go home! You passed... Gevalt...” At which point he pivoted and walked away, while my lit professor, walking off with him, shouted, “Go home before he changes his mind.”

Thank God for the blessing of the second chance. Because we’re human, we desperately need second chances. Because we’re flawed, because we have a dark side and we have done or not done things, said things or left things unsaid, acted out in crazy, self-defeating, self-destructive ways, or remained silent and passive when action was called for. We’ve hurt people, let them down. We’ve blown it. And not just once. We’ve been lost, down on our luck. We’ve stared into the darkness, unable to sleep, wondering what might happen next. And if we were really lucky, someone gave us a second chance. Thank God for the blessing of the second chance, because we all need second chances.

Submitted for your approval, the case of Michael Vick. If you know football, you know about Michael Vick. And chances are, if you love dogs, you know about Michael Vick. So for the 15 of you who fit neither category, let me clue you in.

Imagine an African American child borne 29 years ago to a 16-year-old unwed mom, raised in a God forsaken hellhole nicknamed the Bad News projects in

Newport News, VA. The place is filthy, dangerous, drug ridden, as horrible a home in which any child could be stuck. But Michael Vick has something special: he is blessed with extraordinary athletic abilities, superb gifts that would and could free him from the Bad Newz projects and make him a superstar. He was borne to be the quarterback. In high school he once ran for six touchdowns and threw for three touchdowns in a single game.

From 2001 to 2006, Michael Vick was the man. As a quarterback for the Atlantic Falcons, he showed extraordinary skill, dexterity, and smarts on the field. He broke record after record. Michael Vick arguably became the best quarterback to ever play football.

His contract, the highest ever in football, paid him \$130 million for 7 years.

Additionally, Vick picked up very lucrative endorsements from Coca Cola and Nike and EA Sports, and Air Tran... well, the list goes on and on. At the absolute apex of his fame, Vick earned \$25 million dollars a year, more money than any other sports star, second only to Dale Earnhardt, Jr, the reigning NASCAR king.

As Michael Vick's talents shined ever more brightly on the field, off the field he showed stupendously bad judgment with investments and so-called advisors. He had a leeching, lawless posse of so-called friends and family, and a remarkable

inability to handle all the money he made. Vick became the subject par excellence of the classic cautionary tale about the ghetto kid who strikes it rich but deep down remains the desperately poor child with no sense of the world as anything other than a hostile place to hustle. Michael Vick was strong, photogenic, unbelievably talented, and simultaneously, an inept, arrogant gangsta.

Vick's house of cards came crashing down when it was discovered that he had been bankrolling a dogfighting ring on his 15-acre property in rural Virginia. He admitted providing money for bets on the fights but said he never shared in any winnings.

Gruesome details about the dogfighting enterprise went public. When it came out that he personally helped kill 6 dogs that he and three other partners in crime deemed to be losers, that he actively bet on the dogs, that he crossed state lines with dogs for dogfighting, the other shoe dropped: Michael Vick was arrested. He went from being one of the great American athletes to one of the most despicable, hated men in the USA.

Vick did not end up in a country club prison. He did 2 years in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary; that's hard time. He went bankrupt and lost everything: money, homes, cars, everything. He still owes various businesses and lawyers and

banks millions of dollars. And most significantly, he lost his job and his reputation. Michael Vick was an utterly discredited failure and disgrace.

When Michael Vick got out of prison, he spoke up in public, expressing deep remorse for his behavior. He acknowledged the heinous nature of his crimes. He wrote, "Sitting in a prison cell didn't make me feel remorse. It was meeting so many animal lovers, speaking with them and looking them in their eyes. Staring at them. Looking so deep into their eyes that I began to feel their pain. Allowing that pain to enter into my body is when I started to understand how bad it really was... My whole life I was disconnected from the suffering of animals. And you might say, "Come on Mike, how could you do those things to those dogs?" And you're right...I ask myself those questions every day. What kind of person does this? How does a human-being treat dogs or any animal with such pain and cruelty? And the hard part for me is the answer to these questions. Because the answer is ME. And I am trying so hard right now to become a better person, because who I was, I am ashamed of."

The talk of the sports world after Vick was released from prison revolved around one very simple question. Does Michael Vick deserve a second chance?

We get -- or don't get -- second chances from so many different sources. From those closest to us: our spouses and our children, our siblings and our parents. From associates and colleagues and peers and bankers and police officers and meter readers and judges and coaches and ticket takers and flight attendants.

No one can deny it. At different points in our lives, some critical, some quotidian, someone gave us another shot; someone changed the order and flow of things to let us try it again.

Michael Vick certainly paid his dues, going to prison, setting up a trust fund for the remaining dogs he owned, expressing remorse, speaking publicly about the evils of dogfighting. But does Vick deserve a second chance? What would his teammates say? How would they feel to have a convicted felon on the team? How would the home town of any football team react to Vick wearing the colors of their beloved team?

Who determines whether someone deserves a second chance? In Vick's case, it was Andy Reid, the head coach of the Philadelphia Eagles. Why did Reid urge the owner and the general manager of the Eagles to take a chance on Vick? Because Reid had rachmones; he had a heart full of empathy. Andy Reid understands what

a second chance can mean. Both of his sons have been in trouble with the law for a number of incidents involving illegal firearms and drug related offenses. Both of his sons have done prison time. Reid said, "With the situation my boys went through, they were right around the same time [as Vick's legal crisis]."

With great frankness Reid said he wasn't sure if he could have given Vick a second chance if his own sons hadn't messed up with drugs. But once you've walked in Reid's shoes, the world is longer the same. Everything looks different. Everything IS different.

As I write this, Michael Vick is scheduled to play this Sunday. How did the fans receive him? The current quarterback of the Eagles, Donovan McNabb said Vick deserves a second chance. What about the rest of the team? Were they kind or cruel? Were they willing to give him a second chance?

Who deserves a second chance? What are the criteria? There's no rule book that indicates when someone is desperate enough to deserve a second chance, rich enough or poor enough, remorseful enough, pathetic enough, vulnerable enough.

Of course, there really aren't any criteria at all. As you think about the past year and your good deeds and your sins, the way you've treated family and friends and

the strangers in your midst, do you deserve a second chance? Can you, with a clear conscience, say without hesitation that you deserve a second chance?

The truth is that whether or not you believe that you are deserving of a second chance is irrelevant. It's all in the hands and the hearts of those around us to grant us a second chance. It's all about God's grace and the openheartedness of the people in our lives.

Andy Reid, the coach of the Philadelphia Eagles did give Michael Vick a second chance. Reid, a father who has watched his own flesh and blood make stupid mistakes, break the law, go to prison, become drug addicts. He has watched his sons fall so far and so hard. Reid has experienced enormous pain and continues to carry it on his shoulders. He and his wife have been ridiculed as terrible parents, blamed for their sons' behavior. Not a day goes by when Andy Reid doesn't say to himself, what could I have done differently.

Such pain and sorrow and guilt could have made Reid brittle and angry, distrustful and pitiless and no one would blame him for that. But Reid remembers so well what it meant when someone--anyone -- looked at his boys as anything other than losers. So he has taken a chance, and given Michael Vick a second chance. Rather

than turn his back, he has opened his heart. Because he's willing to put his faith to the test, to believe in this fallen football player, because he knows that a second chance is a blessing.

Reid thinks Vick is ready. He said last week, "It's up to Michael to prove that change has taken place. I think he's there. That's what he wants to do. He knows everybody won't have that trust in him or belief in him. I think he'll prove that to people." From his mouth to God's ears.

Giving someone a second chance can be risky business. We've all been burned, taken advantage of by people who were weak or unscrupulous, people who let us down, betrayed our trust. It's likely that most if not all of us have given someone or someones several second chances. And sometimes we regret our openheartedness.

Here we are, on Kol Nidre, considering how we've done over this past year. We have made bad mistakes, errors in judgment, selfish, ignorant, self indulgent choices. We have messed up our relationships with the most important people in our lives. We have done stupid things. The truth is that there have been times when we did not feel deserving of a second chance. But someone gave us the gift

of a second chance. How can we not open our hearts and pay that blessing forward? Isn't that why we're here?

I do not know why my Talmud professor gave me the gift of a second chance. I don't know what I did or did not do to gain his rachmones, his mercy. And in a way it doesn't really matter. The story isn't about me: it's about him and his decision to open his heart. I have never forgotten his gift and I am grateful for that second chance. I am grateful for every second chance I have ever received.

Dear God, on this Day of Atonement, we all need second chances. Provide us the strength and the wisdom and the open heart to give the blessing of the second chance. As we are healed, so may we heal.