The second the punchline was out of my mouth, I wanted the words back. My friends did laugh, but it was uncomfortably. Nervously. Some of the Jews around the Shabbat table were Black, some were White, and just one, my friend Miriam, was Latina. No one could meet my eye.

My "spontaneous, clever quip" about a Congressman we all disliked had made a play on words, bridging his last name to a hateful epithet I would never have used in my own voice, but dared to imagine the politician speaking in his. A slur that reduced my Latina friend Miriam, my immigrant students, and everyone like them to a food-based stereotype. Don't worry, I will not repeat it here--and if you don't know the term I mean, so much the better for you.

As a Spanish bilingual public school teacher in my first career, I had devoted myself to serving immersively in Latinx communities and spent much time as the only white person in the room. I was comfortable with that. Yet no matter how fluent my Spanish nor how expressive my salsa dance moves, this reductive slur was not mine to reclaim or joke about The self-exonerating explanations welled up within me: I don't really think that! It's just my family's style of humor, we say things we obviously don't believe! I didn't mean to insult anyone!

But in that moment, my intention was secondary. All my pun had shown was that this ignorant word *did* lurk in my vocabulary. I had used it and wounded my friend in an unguarded moment among Jewish peers. It was on me to take responsibility for the impact of my action.

How do we recover when we've done something that not only goes against our intention, but against our moral compass and sense of self? What do we do when it just turns out so much worse than anticipated?

These are the questions raised when we look at Reuven in Genesis 37 this week, in Parashat Vayeshev. As the eldest son of his father's first wife, he

has even more reason than his brothers to loathe Joseph and his self-aggrandizing dreams. If, as Joseph had taunted them, one day the whole family would bow down to him, that subversion would be a special blow to Jacob's presumed successor.

Yet at this moment in the Torah story, Reuven feels--and not inaccurately--that his privileged position is in jeopardy. He acts out rashly against the perceived slights inflicted by his father. And each time we may not be surprised that he sinks even lower in Jacob's eyes, but Reuven is. Professor Nechama Price of Yeshiva University writes that "his growing resentment… causes him to act hastily… Reuven never considers the implications of his actions; thus, inevitably, they don't succeed as he would like." Reuven already has the right to inherit Jacob's property and standing, but what he truly craves is Jacob's esteem--and he is desperately uncertain about how to earn it.

The Torah prudently conceals "who started it" when the brothers first decide to attack Joseph. No one brother--and thus, more crucially, no one tribe down the line--can be singled out for blame in suggesting fratricide. All the text says is:

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אָחִיו הִנֵּה בַּעַל הַחֲלֹמוֹת הַלָּזֶה בָּא׃ וְעַתָּה ו לְכוּ וְנַהַרְגֵהוּ...

"They said to one another, "Here comes that dreamer! Come now, let's kill him..." (Gen 37:19-20)

How very human it is, that our memories fail to preserve the origins of our worst impulses. If failure is an orphan, so is wickedness, abandoned to an impersonal "they said." The forbidden idea belongs to all of the brothers together, and thus no one feels himself truly responsible. But Reuven, as the firstborn, assumes a leadership his siblings are not expected to share. He

stands apart in opposition to the plot--the original "if you see something, say something":

וַיִּשְׁמַע רְאוּבֵן וַיַּצִּלֵהוּ מִיָּדָם וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא נַכֶּנּוּ נָפֶשׁ׃

"When Reuben heard it, he tried to save him from them. He said, 'Let us strike no mortal blow.' And Reuben went on, 'Shed no blood! Cast him into that pit out in the wilderness, but do not touch him yourselves. (Gen 37:21-22)

Joseph, for the time being, has been spared.

But. *Lo salka deata*--let us not think--we should hold Reuven up as a noble savior. The Torah hints that Reuven's moral leadership is not excellent. In the same breath as we hear him stand against murder, we also learn that his motivation is not love for his brother, nor fear of God.

וְיָד אַל־תִּשְׁלְחוּ־בוֹ

"Lay no hand upon him"

Good!

לְמַעַן הַצִּיל אֹתוֹ מִיָּדָם לַהֲשִׁיבוֹ אֶל־אָבִיו׃

"–intending to save him from them and restore him to his father." (Gen 37:22)

Not so good.

Reuven sees a way to curry favor in Jacob's eyes, knock rival Joseph down a few pegs and make himself the family hero. What better way could there be to convince Jacob of Reuven's fitness as successor?

Well, lots of ways, Reuven. Here he is not at all focused on actually making himself a role model worthy of following. Instead, he hopes to be commended and rewarded, thinking only of his own status in his father's eyes.

The Torah highlights this lack of self-awareness on Reuven's part.

וַיָּשָׁב רְאוּבֵן אֶל־הַבּוֹר וְהִנֵּה אֵין־יוֹסֵף בַּבּוֹר

"Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not [there]--" (Gen 37:29)

Wait, where did he go?! He walked away during a life-and-death crisis? Reuven intended to save Joseph's life, but the impact of abandoning the scene to the bloodier faction of brothers could very well have gotten him killed. What could possibly have taken priority in that moment?

In Bereshit Rabbah, Rabbi Eliezer connects "*vayashav*" to the idea of "*teshuvah*," repentance, suggesting that Reuven went off to afflict himself with sackcloth and ashes, still performing penance for lying with his stepmother Bilhah. Rabbi Yehoshua claims it was Reuven's turn to tend to their ailing father, a task none of the brothers liked but which Reuven took on to get back in Jacob's good graces. He certainly did have teshuvah work to do between him and his father, but never at the potential cost of his brother's life.

And how do we know Reuven's *teshuvah* was insincere, or at least incomplete? Because, as 12th-century philosopher Maimonides asserts, the truest sign of atonement is to avoid repeating the same offense the next time. Here, Reuven is so anxious to be forgiven for his first failure of judgement, he sins further without realizing. He has an image of the shining son he intends to be--and yet he falls short, again and again, as he trips on his own insecurities.

Eventually, Reuven will truly cede his precedence as firstborn. Yehudah, Judah, will be the brother who speaks on the family's behalf to that stern Egyptian governor with their lives in his hands--who proves to be none other than Joseph. At the end of his life Jacob blesses Judah, not Reuven, with a *bracha* most fitting for a successor. Judah is no saint either, but he has faced his misdeeds productively and is unafraid to risk himself for the benefit of

others. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argues this is why we eventually became known as *yehudim*, Jews, and not Reubenites.

Indeed, we all like to think that we are not Reuven. No one wants to recognize the ways in which we unwittingly prioritize self-interested goals and leave a painful mess in our wake. Yet that is precisely why I find Reuven an appealing and necessary character. He is so very human: he does himself in, and then gets defensive about it. We've all been there, Reuven. It's inevitable that we mess up, but we have choices about how we respond afterward.

When we ignore and suppress our intuition about right and wrong, we are vulnerable to moral injury--the disorienting and shameful feeling that we have violated our inner code and are no longer confident that we are good and capable of good. Reuven is swimming in this moral injury. He has become so afraid he might not be worthy that he avoids one act that could make him so: taking responsibility for the impact of his deeds, whether they turned out as he intended or not.

Imagine, for a moment, how powerful--and how different!--Reuven's story could have been if he had said to Jacob, "*Aba*, I hurt you and I'm sorry. I'm going to work to earn back your trust." That Reuven wouldn't have dreamed of walking away while Joseph's life was in the balance. That Reuven might have been brave and confident enough to say "NO, we cannot do this." Had he taken the risk to own the impact of his actions, Reuven could have been so much better able to judge what he should and should not do.

In the 1950's, Dr. Lawrence Kohlberg posited that our moral reasoning develops through a series of stages. While his research has been rightly criticized for oversimplification and methodological biases, the broad outlines still ring true. As little kids, we judge what's right and what's wrong by the outcome for ourselves--avoiding punishment and getting what we want. In

middle childhood, we desire to be seen as good and may obey the rules simply because they are The Rules. And as we grow into our teen and adult years, most people come to understand the socially constructed nature of law and have an increased capacity to draw upon abstract principles in their moral reasoning.

Dr. Kohlberg, meet Reuven. He's flailing down in the lower levels of moral development, vacillating between naked self-interest and the need for approval. Reuven, in his distress, regresses to a childish self-centeredness. When he discovers Joseph gone, Reuven rends his clothes and wails:

וַאֲנִי אָנָה אֲנִי־בָא׃

And me? What am I to do?" (Gen 37:30)

He has no plan to fix it, no capacity to look beyond his immediate plight. All he can see is himself. All he can feel is the sting of his own failure.

I know that feeling. That's how I was for the rest of that Shabbat, after I slunk home from dinner. Where had that ugly joke come from? Would Miriam, or any of my friends who'd heard, ever want to see me again? I lost sleep turning it over and over in my mind--until I realized *that* was a projection of my own selfish urge to run away, instead of facing up to the mess I had made.

How many times had I said to my students, *el único error es el de que no aprendas nada*--the only real mistake is not learning anything from your mistakes? I'd gotten a peek into the effect of living in a society steeped in harmful messaging about race, and I could be grateful for the reminder that the work of unlearning those biases is always ongoing.

But if I had stopped there, patting myself on the back for my own learning and personal growth, Miriam and I might not still be friends. It was on me to go back and do something about the pain I had caused. In fact, I had Miriam's own

voice in my head saying, as she often did, "When you step on somebody's foot, don't make it all about you. Just get off their foot and apologize. And don't do it again."

As soon as Shabbat went out, I called my friend and apologized for hurting her, and then--most importantly--I bit back the mountain of further self-justification my inner Reuven was hollering to pour out. Instead, I listened. I listened to Miriam relate how shocked she had been. How a pattern of racialized comments like mine and worse had made her feel unwelcome in so many Jewish spaces.

It was intimidating to put my culpability out there, opening myself to deserved criticism, but it was also healing to own what I'd caused instead of avoiding it, like Reuven. The emotional intensity of the memory comes back now and then to stop me from making hurtful comments of many kinds. Miriam, now a decade later, doesn't remember any of this. But I do. It pushes me to notice and use what privileges I have to lift others up, not punch them down. I don't always get it right. I am always reflecting on what is right.

I share this story of the last racist joke I told not as my own version of sackcloth and ashes, but to encourage all of us to reflect similarly. How do we respond in the moment when we've done wrong? And how do we continue to hold ourselves accountable down the road so we don't make the same mistake again, like Reuven?

The beauty of Maimonides' criterion for true repentance--refraining from a repeat of transgression--is that we're never done. There is no point at which we can say, "Okay, teshuvah: check!" and never concern ourselves with it again.

What Reuven can teach us is that while we must always aspire to be *tzaddikim*, upright people who improve the world around them, we must never start from the assumption, brittle and unsustainable, that we already are

unfailingly righteous. We are perpetual tzadikim-in-progress, good people in God's image, even when we err. Because while the path of harm is always there, so is the way back through meaningful teshuvah.

So the next time you wish you could take it back--maybe you misgendered a colleague, or snapped at your child, or failed to show up for a friend--when you see, to your dismay, that your impact turned out far worse than your intention--don't run away from it like Reuven, making things worse by denial and defensiveness. Face it as an opportunity to grow in your awareness and compassion. And fix it, if you can.

"What am I to do?" Reuven asks in his despair. Simple, Reuven. Just get off their foot. Apologize. And make sure you do better next time.