

“I Was Wrong About...”

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In late July the editors of the New York Times Opinion section asked eight of their columnists to choose a piece they had previously published and would like to revisit, beginning with the words, “I was wrong about...” The opening piece from the editors was written with copy-editor markings throughout. The online version has the cursor go over typos and correct as you scroll down the screen. In that opening explanation the editors write: “It’s not necessarily easy for Times Opinion columnists to engage in public self-reproach, but we hope that in doing so, they can be models of how valuable it can be to admit when you get things wrong.”¹

The typo-corrections that the editors used to exemplify self-correction was a clever way of demonstrating the deeper process of what they called “public self-reproach.” I used to do copy-editing as a part of a job years ago, and I learned then a truth that applies to us in life: it is much easier to notice mistakes in someone else’s writing than in your own. My eyes zero in on errors in text. They shout out at me so much that I sometimes make corrections in books I am reading, correcting for whom, who can say? But I always miss typos in my own writing. This is of course true in a broader sense: it is always easier to find fault in others than in ourselves. But the process of doing so is the act of tshuvah, repentance, the project that we are recommissioned for every year between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rather than critique others, which is all too easy, we are taught to look deep at ourselves, to acknowledge what we have done wrong,

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/07/21/opinion/nyt-columnists-i-was-wrong.html?smid=url-share>

and then to publicly ask forgiveness and change our ways. That is genuine repentance, for which fasting on Yom Kippur acts as a mere signpost to the changes we have made in our lives.

Did the New York Times Opinion columnists do tshuvah? While not taking a position here on the various political issues they address, I will summarize what they said, and why I was disappointed in each case.

In “I Was Wrong About Inflation,” Paul Krugman regrets being too “relaxed” in his words, about the inflation that might result from the American Rescue Plan of early 2021. But he argues in what reads as a quite defensive piece, that he and many economists were wrong only in forecasting the magnitude of inflation, but not in their basic theoretical analyses. “I know it sounds lame to say,” he actually writes about the other side who warned of significant impending inflation, “that [they were] right for the wrong reasons, but it’s also arguably true.” He then goes on to say that inflation may have already peaked or will peak soon, and so “things may seem less puzzling a few months from now.” Is this regret? “The whole experience has been a lesson in humility” he writes, acknowledging that he was obviously wrong in his projections. However, he does not suggest how he might have analyzed things differently and how he has changed the way he looks at the economy. Regret? Perhaps. Tshuvah? Not really. Again, I am not taking a position here on economic theory. My take-away from Paul Krugman’s “I Was Wrong About” though was a defense of why his approach was not wrong even though he got it wrong in the end. It’s like saying, “I apologize for what I said, although yes, if the same situation happened again I would probably say the same thing.”

In “I Was Wrong About Al Franken,” Michelle Goldberg regrets calling for Al Franken’s resignation from the Senate in 2017 when he was accused of sexually harassing a woman during

his time working as a comedian. But she doesn't actually say she was wrong about Al Franken, even though that's what the title implies. She says the opposite, arguing that eight different women had come forward and claimed that Franken had inappropriately trying to forcibly kiss or grope them, and that it seems "overwhelmingly clear that he acted in a way that left women who'd admired him confused and humiliated." What she regrets was that she called on him to resign without the due process of a Senate investigation. It reads to me a bit too much like "buyer's remorse" from the liberal side in being too quick to punish their own when "the other side" is more protective, to put it delicately. Ok, but the reason Al Franken resigned was to spare his colleagues and his party the embarrassment of a process that was already having a foregone conclusion. She does not address that argument and seems more intent on assuaging her regret over a "rush-to-judgment" against someone from "her side." It is as if she is saying: I wasn't really wrong about Al Franken, I was just wrong about not giving him the benefit of the doubt of an investigation that I believe would have proven that I was right. Again, I am not in any way defending the behavior that caused Al Franken to give up his seat in the Senate. My point is simply in reaction to a column that says, I was wrong, even though I was really right.

In "I Was Wrong About Capitalism," David Brooks admits how the world keeps changing and he has had to adjust his understanding, from being a "democratic socialist" in his student days, to a supporter of free market enterprise and the privatization of industry in former Communist states. He admits to being too critical of President Obama's stimulus plans and the auto industry buy-out. He advises that we need to learn to "reorganize our minds and see [the world] with new eyes." Yes, that is true, and it is refreshing that he admits that some of his approach was too much of a rejection of the idealism of his youth. But he is hardly saying that

he was wrong about capitalism in the sense of preferring a different kind of economic system. The process of tshuvah is not just regret but also the determination to set a new direction. David Brooks says he should have been less critical of Barack Obama, but he does not say he supports Bernie Sanders.

Not that I am saying he should. Just that our understanding of tshuvah, of repentance, involves an about-face-change-of-direction. That is not what David Brooks is suggesting here.

In "I Was Wrong About Why Protests Work," Zeynep Tufekci explains how in 2003 after attending a mass demonstration in New York City against the US invasion of Iraq she became disillusioned on the effectiveness of mass protests. She wrote a book analyzing the changing dynamics of mass protests in the internet age, looking at the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, the Women's March, and others and correlated them to governmental response. Why were they not more effective at change, she asks. Her conclusion is that they still make a difference, but governments will use various tools of analysis to determine the representative weight of the protest against general public opinion. When protest movements lack a longer-term direction, their effects are mitigated. While offering a careful interpretation of why huge protests don't immediately change the worlds they seek to, Tufekci says that "this doesn't mean I've come to think that protests are pointless or that big marches don't accomplish anything....It's just that they have different trajectories and dynamics now." If the project of tshuvah is change, it is fascinating to re-examine how we effect change, of all things, in society. But Tufekci's argument is clever. She digs in, that mass protests are not wrong, they just have to be better to be effective. And of course, her example of protesting in 2003 against the US invasion of Iraq is the ultimate "I told you so!" Not a very humbling example of regret.

In “I Was Wrong About Trump Voters,” Bret Stephens expresses regret for denouncing potential Trump voters in the election of 2016. “If by now you don’t find Donald Trump appalling,” he wrote in the summer of 2015, “you’re appalling.” He quickly clarifies that he stands by everything he has written about the man who would become our 45th president. What he regrets is having insulted the voters. Without referencing her, he is clearly thinking about Hillary Clinton’s unhelpful remark about “the basket of deplorables.” Stephens goes on to explain the legitimate grievances of so much of the electorate, the ones who felt forgotten and voted accordingly. Yes, of course that is the only way to explain the election of 2016. But then Stephens writes: “A final question for myself: Would I be wrong to lambaste Trump’s *current* supporters, the ones who want him back in the White House despite January 6th” Stephens answers his question to himself that now it is different and he would not be wrong, but he has to be nicer about it. More persuasive. More diplomatic. So where is the change? Without engaging the point of whether he is right or wrong, my take-away from his piece is that he simply regrets he had not been more effective as a columnist. Certainly every Opinion writer would feel that way at some point or another. Regret at being wrong, or regret at not being better at being right?

In “I Was Wrong About Chinese Censorship,” Thomas L. Friedman admits to being at least overly optimistic that China would continue to “open” and relax its censorship over the press. While China is certainly more open than it was 32 years ago when Friedman first started visiting China, it is more restrictive of its press than ten years ago, a retrenching that Friedman traces through the Xi regime. Friedman is forced to take account that recent developments in China went the opposite way of his predictions. Interestingly, he offers three possibilities: 1) he was prematurely optimistic, 2) he was naïve imagining something that is unlikely, or 3) that he was

completely wrong, as a full lifting of censorship is impossible in China. While the differences between the second and third options are subtle, Friedman of course opts for the first option, devoting most of the piece to explaining why he should have been right (explaining how China cannot sustain a modern economy in a controlled unfree society), and that he will be found right in the end. In his closing words: “While I plead guilty to premature optimism when it comes to China developing a more open information ecosystem, I’m going to ask the court for a suspended sentence. Let’s all wait and see how this plays out over the next decade.” So he doesn’t really regret anything. In the short term he looks wrong, but he believes that he will be proved correct later on. His regret is just that he was not as accurate as he could have been in his analysis. We have often taken that kind of stubborn approach to things: it may *look* as if I was wrong, but give it time and you’ll see. However we may feel about the People’s Republic of China’s claim that a Communist-regulated capitalist market society can succeed, Friedman has not changed his mind that it cannot.

In this special issue of the New York Times Opinion section last July in which eight columnists were asked what they regretted they wrote, only two of them seem to reach the standard of what we would call *tshuvah*. In “I Was Wrong About Mitt Romney (And His Dog),” Gail Collins regrets making fun of Romney in the campaign leading up to the election of 2012 for once driving with his dog on roof of his car. In 2012 she was making the point that a President Romney would leave some folks outside the comfortable cabin as we drive into the future. It was an image she used through what she remembers as a very boring campaign. Now, in appreciation of Romney’s various votes against his caucus’s party-line in the Senate, Collins writes that “some things are way worse than boring.” I don’t know if she is suggesting that had Romney defeated

Obama in 2012, the Republican party would have gone in a different direction than the one it took in 2016 and since, a direction which Collins would have preferred. I think what is clear is that she regrets having dug her heels in the sand in a partisan divide that, in retrospect, seems far less polarizing than the political landscape today. Perhaps she is suggesting that we should not be so quick to disagree with each other all the time. Although she leaves much of that unsaid.

Only one of the eight columnists from that July issue of the Opinion section stated a clear and unambiguous regret and rethinking. In “I Was Wrong About Facebook,” Farhad Manjoo explains that in January of 2009 he advised everyone to join Facebook if they had not already, and he says now that he has regretted that ever since. Writing in 2009 that Facebook “is now so widely trafficked that it’s fast becoming a routine aid to social interaction, like email and antiperspirant,” Manjoo regrets getting carried away by the excitement over new tech, his trust, along with the Obama administration, that the tech leadership “knew what to do,” and his failure to foresee the consequences in loss of privacy and increased partisanship and selective information that social media generates. If he could go back in time he would warn us of the dangers, he writes. That is the only clear case of tshuvah among the eight columnists who wrote about being wrong about something. Only one of them clearly says that he was wrong and he would have done it differently if he could do it again.

But am I being too harsh on these eight columnists who responded to the challenge to consider what they were wrong about? The classic Jewish approach to tshuvah, repentance, is to name the wrong, acknowledge it publicly, seek forgiveness of the wronged party, and sincerely work to change our ways. Is there perhaps a grey area, some value to admitting regret without a full change of direction that classic tshuvah implies? At the end of the first section of the Torah,

in parashat Bereishit, when God decides to bring the Flood, we find what is probably the scariest verse in the Bible: *vayinahem Adonai ki asah et ha'adam ba'aretz*. God regretted creating humanity on the earth. *Vayitatzev et libo*, God's was heart was saddened (Gen. 6:6). The anthropomorphism of God's heart—of course God does not have an actual beating heart—is just as much of a metaphor as God's expression of human emotions such a regret and sadness. As I had intended to communicate in my sermons on both days of Rosh Hashanah, the way we imagine God is a reflection of how we understand ourselves. God lets out a literal temper tantrum of divine frustration through the waters of the Flood, but in the end humanity and the rest of life on Earth survive, as God ends up creating and maintaining the world all over again, allowing Noah and friends to get by on the Ark. God's tshuvah, then, is incomplete, but thank God for that! We can handle God's regret and disappointment, as long as God leaves it there. Sometimes we need to perform full tshuvah, a turning around of our ways. But at other times it is enough to simply state a regret, and make a space to express our emotions, be they sadness or anger. Maybe fewer temper tantrums, but it's okay to be sad now and then, to acknowledge that not everything always goes the way we had hoped.

We need to be able to express regret in order to truly be able to appreciate the blessings we enjoy. The fast that we have begun tonight is such an exercise. By missing the absence of food, we teach ourselves to appreciate the blessing of not going hungry. And so by regretting being wrong, or at least not completely correct from time to time, we can more humbly appreciate those times we get things right.

Have an easy fast.