

That's Your Best Excuse???

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

Excuses, excuses. None of us lacks reasons or justifications. As Rabbi Joseph Telushkin puts it, rationalizations are more important than food. After all, we have all gone a day without eating.

Rationalizations are as old as human beings. In the Torah, Laban cheats Jacob, marrying off the older sister Leah before the younger Rachel, and then rationalizes his deception by pleading local custom. (The Rabbis imagine Leah justifies herself by reminding Jacob that he too cheated — taking the birthright from his older brother.) Even in the midst of confession it is hard to avoid qualifications: "I'm really sorry, but you have to understand why I did it," is the motto of the rationalizer; in other words, the motto of the human being.

What does Judaism have to teach us about rationalizations? "Moses turned and went down from the mountain bearing the two stone tablets inscribed on either side." (Ex. 32:15) Our Sages teach that the tablets of the law were inscribed such that one could read them on either side of the stone. Once a man came to a Rabbi explaining away his misdeed. The Rabbi responded: "Remember, the tablets read the same on either side. No matter how you turn it, it is still wrong." (Click [here](#) to read Rabbi Wolpe's take on Lance Armstrong and ego in America)