

NITZAVIM/VAYELECH
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No person in the Bible had more failures than our great leader Moses. As a young man he does not make it in Pharaoh's palace as he slays an Egyptian taskmaster and is forced to flee to Midian. When he returns to Egypt many years later, after meeting G-d at the burning bush, he is a total failure when he asks Pharaoh to "Let my people go." Throughout the experience in Egypt the elders of his own Israelite nation do not believe him or trust him, Pharaoh's magicians mock him, and only after G-d shows His awesome power by killing the firstborn of the Egyptians, does Moses succeed in redeeming the Israelites from their bondage.

Throughout the desert experience Moses is besieged by his people, frightened as he approaches the Sea of Reeds, angered by a rebellious nation who builds a golden calf, and concerned about his nation's military prowess against the Amalekites and the giants Sihon and Og. Many times he is unable to control the people for whom he is the great liberator and lawgiver. As we come near to the end of the Book of Devarim, to the last days of Moses' life, we see him coping with the final, and perhaps most crushing, disappointment of his life. He has been told he will be unable to fulfill his fondest wish, to enter the Promised Land. Instead, he will only be able to look at it from afar, but never tread on its soil.

The Dean of an MBA program at a major university was once quoted as saying, "We teach people how to fail." He meant by this that business executives can learn a lot by studying the success stories of major companies, but they would learn more by studying their failures. The response to those failures, the reactions to dashed dreams and the business plans that failed, are all good learning opportunities for young people as they proceed through their studies and prepare to make their lives in the business world.

Looking at non-profits, Sarika Bansal, a freelance journalist who specializes in social innovation and global health, has written: "As in any field, people who work in non-profits, social enterprises, development agencies, and foundations, experience failure on a regular basis. People make hiring and budgeting mistakes. Shipments arrive late, or not at all. Organizations allow their missions to drift. Technologies are proven inappropriate so that the communities do not benefit from them."

She also tells us that this idea is ingrained in the cultures of even some for-profit industries. In Silicon Valley, she writes: "Failure is a rite of passage. If you're not failing, you're not considered to be innovating enough." In fact, most of the great innovators of any age have many more failures than they had successes. The story is told that in Thomas Edison's laboratory there were 50,000 experimental failures in working on the storage battery. One of his new assistants asked him why he would persevere in his research under these conditions. Edison is reported to have told him: "Why, young man, I have gotten a lot of results, I now know 50,000 combinations that won't work." The story goes that the next day he discovered the correct formula for the storage battery.

Failure is a normal part of life. Just think of the sports arena. It is well-known that only great hitters even come close to having a .400 batting average. Those who have achieved it are considered the true batting stars of baseball history. Ted Williams was the last one to finish the season at that level. Yet, think of it. That means that only four out of ten times the batter was successful in getting a hit. And that means six out of ten times he was not. More than half the times he was a failure. Today anyone who hits over .300 is considered a star player.

In our society we tend to think of success as the only possible goal, whether it be in business, athletics, arts and culture, or any specific endeavor in which we participate. However, many times failure is the greatest teacher. Oprah Winfrey, in her commencement address this year at Harvard University, told the students: “There is no such thing as failure. Failure is just life trying to lead us in a different direction. Now, when you’re down there in the hole, it looks like failure... Give yourself time to mourn what you think you may have lost, but then here’s the key: Learn from every mistake because every experience, encounter and particularly your mistakes are there to teach you and force you into being more than who you are. And then figure out what is the next right move.”

Failure allows us to recognize that we are not perfect, that we make mistakes, that we can be better. At this time of year, as we prepare for the High Holy Days, as we commence the Selichot season this evening, we are asked to recognize our failures, face them, and learn from them. This entire period emphasizes the importance of repentance, of doing better next time. Judaism recognizes that no one is perfect, everyone makes mistakes. Yet, we are granted second chances, opportunities to improve ourselves, our conduct, and make a difference in our lives and the lives of others.

A Christian pastor, Elwin Ahu, has written: “We all know that Moses was a great man of G-d whose actions and decisions had a great impact on life – even ours as we know it today – but it is not because he got through life flawlessly. No. In fact, Moses had some major failures but it is not because of his failures that we know who he is. It is because of his willingness and ability to overcome his failures that he had such a great impact upon the world.”

Moses, with all of these failings in life, could have given up his role in leadership, could have suspended his responsibilities to the Israelite people. Instead, he recognizes that though he will not live to see his fondest wish come true, he wants to make sure that the children of Israel are well-cared for. Told that he will die in the wilderness before his people enter the Land of Canaan, he is concerned that G-d will replace him with a worthy successor. While I am sure it was difficult for him to accept his fate, he reminds the Israelites of their special mission as they prepare to enter the land and urges them to follow the covenant and the teachings that were brought to them after his encounter with G-d. He learns to recognize that he is not indispensable, that his teachings will remain with the people long after he is gone. One hopes that he realizes that he was no failure at all, but extremely successful. Moses was ultimately successful because we continue to learn from the example of his life and from the lessons of his legacy. This is what true success is all about.

Hal Urban in his book *Life’s Greatest Lessons – Twenty Things That Matter* writes, “Failure is a natural outcome of trying. Success rarely comes on the first attempt... Success only

comes as a result of time, determination, and prolonged effort.” He encourages us to understand that failure is one of life’s greatest teachers. Here are some of its greatest lessons: failure teaches us humility. It teaches us to correct our course of action. It teaches us that we can’t always have what we want. Failure teaches us about the strength of our character and about perseverance. It teaches us that we can survive defeat, for there is no shame in falling, only being afraid to get up and try again.” He quotes H. Stanley Judd who wrote: “Don’t be afraid to fail. Don’t waste energy trying to cover up failure. Learn from these failures and go on to the next challenge. It is OK to fail. If you’re not failing, you’re not growing.”

Failure is simply part of life, it is just part of the process of living. It was Winston Churchill who said, “Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.” Everyone fails. At the same time, it is important to put it into perspective. Can we learn from the experience? Can we grow as human beings? Can we teach others? Can we become stronger in the process? Can we learn lessons that give us a greater opportunity for true success?

As we approach the season of the High Holy Days, let us remember that everyone fails, even the greatest teacher of our tradition, Moses. The challenge is to learn from failure, to grow in the process, and to recognize that while failure is part of living, true success is told in undying devotion to a good cause and the legacy of trying to achieve it.

Moses is known as Moses our teacher for he continues to impact our lives until this very day. We continue to learn from his example, recognizing our frailties, our mistakes, our misdeeds, and our transgressions and learning from them as we work towards a more promising future for all. We may not make it to the Promised Land but we should never stop trying to get there.