

Shabbat Vaera 5781- Moses, Herzl, mRNA, and Tenacity
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Shabbat Shalom!

Go back in time to Driver's Ed. What was the most important thing you learned from the instructor? For me, it was not: if you're going 60 miles per hour, keep a distance of six imaginary cars. Instead, it was this: if you want to pass the road test, don't go to the Sharonville DMV. You see, my home in Cincinnati is closest to that DMV, but they had a reputation for failing everybody. That can't be true, I told myself. And I'm not going to shlep out all the way to Batavia for this test.

The big day arrived, and I was feeling confident... until the instructor got in the car. This instructor had the intensity of former Bears coach Mike Ditka on gameday. I was so nervous that I became extra cautious, like turning my turn signal on way in advance. "Too early," he said, as he docked me points for that. In the end, I failed the road test.

I went back a few weeks later, and fortunately a different instructor got in my car. I passed on my second try. Later I learned that indeed the Sharonville site has the highest failure rate in all of Ohio, 28% in 2010.

Two years later I was a senior in high school. One day I was working on the school newspaper with another senior, George, and a sophomore, Marty. Marty was looking for some senior wisdom. He was about to take his driving test, and he wanted to know if he should go to Sharonville or somewhere else. I told him, "Go to Sharonville. Don't be afraid of the challenge. Take pride in passing a harder test. And in case you don't pass the first time, you'll pass the second time." Then George chimed in, "or the fourth time!"

We all fail at different times. Even the greatest in their fields suffer defeats before enjoying victories. We all know the adage, "if at first you don't succeed, try, try again." This advice is so easy to share, so difficult to follow. Because often we need more than one attempt.

Just like Moses. There was no greater triumph than Moses leading the Jews from slavery to freedom. But Moses struck out many, many times before he hit that home run.

In last week's Parsha, Shmot, Moses boldly confronts Pharaoh for the first time and demands, "Let my people go!" What happens next? Pharaoh makes things *even*

harsher for the Jewish slaves, forcing them to now gather their own straw to use to produce the same quota of bricks each day. The Jewish foremen are then beaten. When these Jews see Moses, they curse him. Then Moses turns to G-d and says: "Why did You bring evil upon this nation? Why did You send me?... You still have not saved Your people" (Ex. 5:22, 23).

Talk about failure and despair.

The Midrash goes further: Moses spoke in a much harsher way to G-d than ordinary people who are angry. He pointed out to G-d that wicked people in Genesis were destroyed, like the generation of the flood and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Why have innocent Jews been punished with slavery for so long?

G-d then reassures Moses that the process of redemption will start *now*.

Even so, our Parsha, Vaera, narrates plague after plague, the first seven. 10 plagues in all. Nine times Pharaoh says No. Nine times Moses fails to save his people from crushing slavery. But after G-d reassures him, Moses picks himself up and confronts Pharaoh again. And again, and again. As challenging as it is to confront Pharaoh the first time, the hardest must have been the next, after his first failure but before the plagues begin.

But Moses resolves to try again. Maybe it was faith in G-d or solidarity with the Jews, but he marches in and reiterates that same demand of Pharaoh. Moses was never a slave, but he knows the crushing feeling of repeated losses and failures. Good thing he also knew that freedom is a process. Moses' tenacity led to our freedom from Egyptian slavery.

Leading the Jews out of Egypt was second in difficulty to actually leading the Jews in the desert. They kvetch, they build an idol, they rebel, they are stubborn and ungrateful. In the Book of Numbers, chapter 11, the Jews complain about eating manna from heaven and have the chutzpah to say they had it better in Egypt. Moses gives up. He asks G-d why G-d put him through this pain. He basically says to G-d, "Kill me now because I can't go on." Moses has reached his breaking point. He has reached failure. This time, G-d provides him with help. G-d says he should delegate to an assembly of seventy elders. Sometimes when we fail, we just need some outside help. Even Moses, who was able to soldier on with this newfound assistance.

Perhaps the man whose mission was most like Moses was Theodor Herzl. In the Torah, it's Moses who delivers the Jews to the brink of Israel. Though he himself cannot enter, his people cross over and establish a Jewish home in Canaan. Fast forward to the late eighteen hundreds. Herzl devotes nine frenetic years to establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. Though Herzl himself does not live long enough to see its creation, his people make Aliyah and establish a Jewish state in Israel.

Herzl's quest began with an epic failure. In 1895 Herzl met with the man he hoped would bankroll his dream of creating a Jewish state. Baron Maurice de Hirsch was one of the world's wealthiest people, a most generous philanthropist who funded resettling the persecuted Jews of czarist Russia in other lands. It sounded most promising. Author Howard Sachar describes the meeting:

"The self-assurance, too, with which [Herzl] presented his case to de Hirsch was magisterial to the point of arrogance. 'You breed beggars,' Herzl calmly informed his host...But when Herzl began elaborating upon [his] theme, de Hirsch, provoked and incensed, interrupted with vigorous objections. The discussion soon collapsed in a mutual shouting match." As Herzl noted later in his diary, "I only got as far as page six – I had 22 pages!" But Herzl didn't give up.

In an urgent fit of fury, Herzl returned to his hotel and poured his mind and heart into writing a newer, more detailed and convincing argument. These writings formed the core of an 1896 pamphlet he would call, "*Der Judenstaat*-The Jewish State." Translations into Hebrew, English, French, Russian, and Romanian followed. And this single pamphlet would be largely responsible for putting Zionism and Herzl on the map. Herzl's original failure propelled his success. His tenacity led to Zionism entering the mainstream.

In our 2021 mainstream, the expression "Covid vaccine" has established itself. We may even have heard the expression "mRNA," which is the basis of this vaccine. But I bet you have not heard of Katalin Karikó. She is a scientist who "spent decades of her career researching the therapeutic possibilities of mRNA." Many years ago, she became convinced that mRNA could be used for something monumental. But then she encountered failure after failure: grant after grant was rejected. She was demoted from her position at UPenn. Around the same time, she was diagnosed with cancer. It could not have been worse.

She told herself: "Usually, at that point, people just say goodbye and leave because it's so horrible. I thought of going somewhere else, or doing something else. I also thought maybe I'm not good enough, not smart enough." But she didn't give up.

An article on cnn.com says, "Eventually, Karikó and [a colleague] developed a method of utilizing synthetic mRNA to fight disease that involves changing the way the body produces virus-fighting material. That discovery is now the basis of the Covid-19 vaccine. [The founder of Moderna says she], now a senior vice president of ... BioNTech, deserves a Nobel Prize." Her tenacity led to our vaccines' swift development.

Each of us will face challenges in our lives. With family, at school, at work, with injuries and illness, with what is happening in the news. To some of these challenges, we respond like my sister, who passed her driver's test on the very first time, at Sharonville, no less! To other challenges, we are like me, who don't get it right on the first time but regroup to succeed on the second. And yet with certain other challenges we are like my friend George, who needed four tries to pass.

I know from experience the more we fail, the harder it is to try again. It's agonizing, debilitating, crushing. When we are in those moments of failure, we can vent, we can cry, we can even *talk* about giving up. But we must try again. We must still aim for success. Then we will be in the company of Moses, Herzl, Katalin Karikó, and so, so many more.

I conclude by turning to the timeless words of Rabbi Sacks:

"Defeats, delays and disappointments hurt. They hurt even for Moses. So if there are times when we, too, feel discouraged and demoralised, it is important to remember that even the greatest people failed. What made them great is that they kept going. The road to success passes through many valleys of failure. There is no other way."

Shabbat Shalom.