

Failure Makes Us Worthy

Yom Kippur / Yizkor 5779

I.

ONE OF MY FAVORITE thought experiments is found in the *gemara* in *Pesachim* (119b), which invites us to imagine a fascinating scene: God is hosting a magnificent banquet for the righteous. And following the banquet, they need someone to lead the *zimun*, the call-and-response that begins *Birkat ha-Mazon*, Grace After Meals.

The first person they ask is Avraham Avinu – you couldn't pick a more righteous person that God's chosen one. But, surprisingly, he declines because he considers himself unworthy given Yishmael was one of his sons. So they then turn to Yitzchak, the next best choice after Avraham, but he also declines because Esav was one of his sons. He, too, is unworthy. Yaakov also declines, because he was married to two sisters, Rachel and Leah, which, at the time, was not forbidden but would later be prohibited by the Torah.

So they then decide to switch tack. If the patriarchs don't see themselves as worthy enough, perhaps the leaders of the Jewish people will. Who better than Moshe *Rabbenu* – he who went up to God to bring the Torah down to earth! But, surprisingly, he declines because he never entered the Land of Israel. Yehoshua, his successor, the one who leads the conquest of the Land of Israel following Moshe's death also declines. He's doesn't see himself as worthy either because he never had sons.

Desperation is starting to set in. It's a meal of the righteous and, so far, those most respected are declining to lead the *zimun*. But there's still plenty more righteous figures. And so, finally, after Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, and Yehoshua all decline, David *Ha-Melekh*, King David, the greatest king of the Jewish people steps up to lead the *zimun*. And it is here that the scene ends.

II.

It seems a nice story, but there's a huge problem with it. The things that make the major figures of the Jewish people unworthy – these are nothing compared to their merits. Even if you wanted to blame Avraham and Yitzchak for raising bad kids, they were Avraham and Yitzchak! Yes, Moshe was punished by being forbidden entry into the Land of Israel but that is dwarfed by his greatness. And some of these things aren't even things! How is Yaakov to blame for breaking a law that didn't exist in his time! Why is Yehoshua's sonlessness invalidating? None of these are problematic enough to warrant concern, yet they do!

And, in contrast, if you could point to one Biblical character who does do something that's really not good, it's David *Ha-Melekh*. He impregnates a married woman and gets her husband killed so he can marry her and cover up the affair. If there was one Biblical figure we'd expect to turn around to the rest of the righteous and decline to lead the *zimun* it would be David! Yet it's the opposite! How can this be?

III.

In 1962, a letter was sent to Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner, the Rosh Yeshiva of New York's Yeshiva Chaim Berlin and one of the most prominent, respected, and thoughtful rabbis in America. The author of the letter complained about his struggle with sin, how he always found himself succumbing and failing. This, he felt, invalidated his identification as a religious Jew. By failing, by sinning, it tainted him to the point at which he couldn't see himself as religious, despite his desire to live as an observant Jew.

Part of R. Hutner's lengthy response revolves around a verse in Mishlei, Proverbs:

כִּי שֶׁבַע | יִפֹּל צַדִּיק וְקָם וְרָשָׁעִים יִכְשָׁלוּ בְרָעָה:

Seven times the righteous man falls and gets up, While the wicked are tripped by one misfortune (24:16).

As R. Hutner writes:

Certainly you have stumbled and will stumble again, and in many battles you will fall lame. I promise you, though, that after those losing campaigns you will emerge from the war with laurels of victory on your head ...

The wisest of men said כִּי שֶׁבַע | יִפֹּל צַדִּיק וְקָם “Seven times the righteous man falls and gets up.” Fools believe the intent of this verse is to teach us something remarkable – that the righteous man falls seven times and, despite this, he rises. But the knowledgeable are aware that the essence of the righteous man's rising again is because of his seven falls.

What makes a person great, according to R. Hutner, is *their failure*. By having made mistakes, by having regrets, a person is able to look at themselves and seek improvement, to become better. Someone cannot become perfect without addressing a flaw.

IV.

This is why, in the minds of *Chazal*, David *Ha-Melekh*, alone, sees himself as worthy enough to lead the *zimun*. *Because he failed*. Because he realized his mistakes, as he declares to the prophet Natan נָטָן (II Samuel 12:13), “I have sinned” – he is able to have regret. He is able to become a better person due to his failures. The other righteous ones barely sinned and so they never had regret! They never had failures to turn to that they could try and improve. Only David. And therefore, counterintuitively, he is the worthiest among the greats of Jewish history.

For all of us in the room, we are more David *Ha-Melekh* than Moshe. We have failed. We've spent all of this day so far, and will continue to do so, in confession. Focusing on our failures. They should hurt, they should fill us with regret, but they must fuel our future. One can only be righteous

having fallen seven times. As we recount all our falls of the past year, we must realize that they need not be our spiritual downfall but our catalyst for growth.

V.

And, as I think about what we are about to do, recite *Yizkor*, I think that the mentality that David *Ha-Melekh* has is appropriate for how we consider our loved ones who are no longer with us. There's a temptation to ignore their flaws, to paint them as perfect beings – but I think that that is not the Jewish way. Our loved ones were imperfect people striving to be better – and there is nothing greater in God's eyes than that.

Our loved ones, like our greatest king, David, should be our guides in how to approach our repentance and confession. Our sins do not shackle us. Our failures don't stop us from achieving greatness. They fuel us.

On Yom Kippur we reflect on the fact that we have fallen seven times and will fall seven times more still, yet that will not stop us: it will only direct us on the path of righteousness.