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**“And For What?”
Remembering our Failures**

Her name is Siegrun Kane, known to me by her initials SDK. The mere utterance of these letters sends a chill down my spine. SDK graduated Cum Laude from Mount Holyoke College and was one of 16 women admitted to the Harvard Law School Class of 1963. The Dean of the Law School hosted those 16 women in his home in the fall of 1960. Over tea, he welcomed them and expressed excitement in having women represented in the class he had helped pick. And then he looked at those women and said, “But I can’t for the life of me figure out what you’ll be doing when you graduate.” These words, a reference to a male-dominated law profession, were seared into SDK’s memory and no doubt served as motivation for what came next.

When I met SDK, she was a partner at Morgan & Finnegan, a leading Intellectual Property law firm located on Park Avenue. She was well-published, a seasoned and well-respected IP expert, and undoubtedly overcame great adversity. She also happened to be my boss. I graduated from NYU in December 2002 and began my rabbinical studies at JTS in September 2003. In the interim, with NYC rent being what it was, I got a job as a paralegal. On January 2, 2003, I began my first job post-college at Morgan & Finnegan, working for SDK. What happened next was something I was not prepared for. I couldn’t accurately transcribe her pages of chicken scratch, I knew nothing about Rolex watches (a major case she was working on), and I had never heard of Schlitz beer (a frequent reference she made in her case). Nothing I did was to her liking. Every time I walked into her office, I shuttered and braced myself for a verbal assault on my intelligence. To say I wasn’t happy is an understatement, but I just needed to weather the storm for eight months in order to pay

the bills. And then the unexpected happened. I was called into the HR office after being on the job for 4 weeks and was told, “Pack your belongings; today is your last day.” I remember calling Jodi in tears. I never imagined being fired. I never imagined such utter failure. I never imagined sharing this story for the first time in 21 years.

I was thinking about this while reading Malcolm Gladwell’s most recent book, *The Bomber Mafia*. The book is about the history of precision bombing leading up to and during World War II, with a specific focus on General Curtis LeMay. Of note was a mission to send 230 B-17 bombers to take out the Schweinfurt ball-bearing factories and, in turn, grind the German war-fighting machine to a halt. To make sure the mission was successful, a diversion was also designed, sending another fleet of B-17s to Regensburg to occupy and distract German defenders. To lead the treacherous mission, the Army Air Force selected the best combat commander they could find: a young colonel named Curtis Emerson LeMay. To make a longer story a bit shorter, LeMay was selected to lead the decoy mission to Regensburg. Taking off from England, the land of mist and fog, LeMay had his crews practice blind takeoffs for weeks. Sure enough, on the morning of August 17, 1943, the fog was terrible. LeMay led his men off into the gloom. Once they entered occupied France, the German fighters started to emerge from behind the clouds, and LeMay’s bomber wing learned what it meant to fly headfirst into the heart of the German air defense (Gladwell, 83, 96-97).

Meanwhile, the other bomber wing being led to Schweinfurt was ill-prepared, stranded on the tarmac until the weather cleared. Rather than take off ten minutes behind LeMay, they took off hours behind, giving the German defenders time to regroup and launch the same ferocious assault on the Schweinfurt raid as they had a few hours earlier on the Regensburg raid. In the end, there were two bloodbaths that day. LeMay recalled, “I had 125 airplanes, and I lost twenty-four...the

[other wing], coming in an hour later...lost about fifty or sixty airplanes.” Those are staggering losses. An air force that launches raids like that on a regular basis would quickly put itself out of business. And what about the actual target, those ball-bearing factories? Well, there were 230 bombers, each carrying 8-9 bombs, so roughly 2000 bombs were dropped. 80 hit the target. This was certainly not the precision bombing that was planned, nor did it make any measurable effect on Germany’s essential war production (Gladwell, 99-105).

Years later, Curtis LeMay would speak about the failed operation. Each of his bombers had a crew of ten, which meant that 240 men did not return. That was 240 letters that had to be written the next day by LeMay and his squadron leaders. Dear Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Your son...Dear Mr. and Mrs. Jones. Your son – 240 times. And for what? (Gladwell, 115).

Until this week, I had never thought to compare Moses to the man who became the fifth chief of staff of the US Air Force. We began this morning the book of Exodus. Joseph and his brothers have died, and their small family has grown into a large nation. This nation is now under the whips of Egyptian taskmasters and the whims of a tyrannical Pharaoh. The Israelites are oppressed, and their children are being tossed into the Nile. Their spirit and vigor have been snuffed out in the bitterness of slavery. One day, after many years, “their cry for help...rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered the covenant...God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them” (Ex 2:23-25).

Enter the man for the job, the former prince of Egypt turned shepherd, the one that God had chosen, Moses. We know that Moses had no interest in the job whatsoever. He didn’t even apply for the job. He gave every excuse he could think of, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh? What will the Israelites say? What if they don’t believe me? I have never been a man of words. Please, God, choose someone else!” (Ex 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13). Moses finally accepts and, like General LeMay,

insists on his own terms and the liberty of choosing his own approach. And what happens? Moses meets with Pharaoh, demands that Pharaoh “Let My People Go,” and is rebuffed. Moses tries again. “Let us go...a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God” (Ex. 5:3). Moses loses the negotiation with Pharaoh and, to rub salt into the wound, Pharaoh doubles down on the slaves’ labor. The taskmasters are instructed to withhold straw for making bricks and to intentionally make the slaves’ work even harder. Not surprisingly, the Israelites lose faith in Moses: “May the Lord look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh and his courtiers – putting a sword in their hands to slay us” (Ex. 5:21). In this moment, all Moses could see was his utter failure. He turns to God and pleads, “O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh, he has dealt worse with this people, and still You have not delivered [them]” (Ex. 5:23). Echoing LeMay’s reflection, “And for what?”

Fortunately for Moses, and fortunately for us, we know how this story ends. Moses, with the help of God, pummels Egypt with plague after plague until Pharaoh practically begs Moses to take his people and leave. Pharaoh’s change of heart and eventual demise is just the icing on the cake for a leader who can ultimately claim victory. Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt, he leads them across the Red Sea, and he brings them to encounter God at Mount Sinai. Finally, at the end of Moses’ illustrious career, he sends them across the Jordan into the Promised Land while he rides into the sunset with God’s ultimate embrace.

What Moses always knew, and what we always forget, is that Moses’ journey to free his people began with utter failure. And yet, this failure was the most crucial moment of his journey. Failure for Moses, failure for LeMay, and frankly failure for all of us, is often the stepping stone towards success. Seldom does one succeed with failing first. Without God’s nudging, Moses would

likely have given in to his fear of failure. When we fear failure, we not only keep ourselves from success but also miss significant opportunities for ourselves and the people around us. Moses very well could have given up after giving it the ol' college try, going back to a life of shepherding his little sheep. Instead, he picked himself up, dusted himself off, took responsibility for his decisions, and went on back to Pharaoh. Moses did not give up until Pharaoh finally let God's people go. It wasn't easy, but Moses emerged from failure to deliver a proud and free nation.

During General LeMay's final years, he lived in a beautiful home in Southern California. A friend once remarked, "You walk into his foyer, and it was all marble. There on the wall to the left was a huge mural of Regensburg...On the opposite wall was a mural...a picture of Schweinfurt." Curtis LeMay would have one of the most storied careers any Air Force officer would ever have. He planned and commanded countless missions more consequential than the Regensburg-Schweinfurt Raid. In 1948-1949, he would run the Berlin Airlift, one of the pivotal events at the start of the Cold War. He would eventually control America's nuclear arsenal as head of the Strategic Air Command. During his time in the service, he met every world leader imaginable and posed for pictures with the kinds of people the rest of us only read about in history books. He could have hung mementos of any of those things in his foyer. But he didn't. In the entryway to his house, he hung a reminder from that foggy August day, a reminder of failure and loss (Gladwell, 115-116).

During the course of our lives, there will always be moments when we fall. The true test is not whether we fall but whether we get up. The righteous, according to Proverbs (24:16), are not those who are perfect but rather those who work through failures and eventually find success. It has been a while since I thought about my brief time at Morgan and Finnegan. The letters SDK still make me shudder. And while I won't be handing her the "Best Boss of the Year Award," she

taught me something very important. She taught me how to fail. And following my failure, I picked myself up, dusted myself off, and began my career as a rabbi. After a successful five years at Park Avenue Synagogue, I am full of joy and gratitude for the community we have created together here at Agudas Achim. It's been nearly ten years since I walked through these doors, and I know the best is yet to come.