

The Failure Resume
Emor 5776
Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky
Congregation Shaare Tefilla
Dallas, TX

Johannes Haushofer graduated with honors from Oxford and holds two PhDs, one in Economics from the University of Zurich, and another in neurobiology from Harvard. He is an assistant professor of psychology and public affairs at a small, liberal arts college in New Jersey called Princeton. His academic CV runs seven pages long. In other words, he is a typical academic underachiever...It's not his CV that has garnered interest of late, however. Recently, he published a "CV of Failures¹." It is a long list of degree programs that rejected him, academic fellowships and positions that he did not secure and papers turned down from academic journals. In a world in which we heavily curate our public image to present the appearance of success- indeed, in which "curate" is a verb and not just the job description of a museum curator- Haushofer has made waves for doing the exact opposite. Since failure resumes seem to be all the rage, what can we learn from this counterintuitive idea?

This week's Torah reading relates one of the only stories in the entire book of Vayikra. It is the story of the *mekalel*, the blasphemer, about whom the Torah tells us precious little. All the Torah says is that he "went out," that he invoked the name of God and that his mother was Shlomit bat Divri from the tribe of Dan. It doesn't tell us where he came from, what happened to cause him to blaspheme and even what he said that was blasphemous, which is especially puzzling when

¹ https://www.princeton.edu/~joha/Johannes_Haushofer_CV_of_Failures.pdf

you consider that the offense committed is so heinous that Chazal refused to call it by its name, referring to it instead euphemistically as “blessing the name of God.” What happened here? All these blanks are filled in by Chazal, but even their account is inconclusive. One account, in the Tanchuma Yashan, relates that he wished to set up residence among the encampment of the tribe of Dan; after all, his mother was a Danite woman and he felt these were his people. However, he was rejected by the Danites because Jewish status is maternal, but tribal affiliation is paternal. This man was of questionable lineage; according to the Tanchuma, he was the product of a sexual encounter between Shlomit Bat Divri and the Egyptian man who struck her Jewish husband, an incident that led to Egyptian man’s death at the hands of Moshe. In the Medrash Rabba, the blasphemer is identified as an actual *mamzer*. Regardless, his rejection on account of his lineage was, in the reading of the Tanchuma Yashan, was the reason he went out and blasphemed. There is another account, though, in the Medrash Rabbah, that is more puzzling. The Medrash says that the *mekalel* cursed as a result of the *lechem hapanim*, the showbread described in the section in the Torah before this one. The show bread was set out each Shabbos and replaced the following week, and miraculously, it never went bad. During our time in Woodmere, there was a local bakery that shall remain nameless whose Challah was often described as having similar properties...The blasphemer was bothered by his feeling that a mortal king would never eat stale, week old bread, yet God is offered bread that is eaten more than a week after it was baked. It was his outrage at the apparent disrespect of God that led him to blaspheme the name of God. The question is obvious; I can understand why someone upset with a ruling on his lineage might curse the God who made those rules. But how can the person who

was God's most vociferous defender become, in just a short while, His most violent opponent- and with such little provocation, at that?

Oftentimes, differing explanations in Midrashic and Talmudic passages about the cause of biblical events are not necessarily arguing about facts. Instead, they should be viewed as a constellation of explanations that, when taken together, provide insight into situation being described and the mindset of its protagonists. The *mekalel* was an exemplar of the kind of person we see often and likely all know, the person who is hard wired to find external problems because he has unresolved internal baggage. Perhaps he can't deal with criticism, rejection, or other character deficiencies so he externalized them, making them someone else's problem instead of his own. This was manifest in his reaction to the ruling of the tribe of Dan; he was unable to reconcile with the circumstances that confirmed his own self image of inadequacy, so he externalized it by cursing God instead. It was especially true with the show bread. The *mekalel* looked to a religious framework to solve all his social problems, to answer all his questions in life and to provide him with a sense of mission and purpose that he was unable to find for himself. There is no question that religion can and should do this, but there are many people who involve themselves in the sacred to fulfill deficiencies elsewhere in life. Schools, shuls and communal organizations are often areas where people seek the respect and appreciation they may not otherwise garner in their personal and professional lives, and the kind of automatic social framework they might not otherwise easily create. When they don't get enough respect, when their ideas aren't implemented or aren't implemented the way they want, when they don't experience immediate social belonging- indeed, when something happens in which they feel

anything less than loved, they will often lash out in irrational ways. This was exactly the behavior of the *mekalel*. Instead of owning up to his own deficiencies and acknowledging the source of his anger, he preferred to let it fester and wear the flimsy garb of righteous indignation. For him, caring about religious symbols and the *mishkan* was a way to fill a void, and when it failed to do that, the pendulum swung from defender of the faith to blasphemer.

This is an important lesson for us as well. The Torah does not demand perfection of us. Our sages tell us that “The Torah was not given to the ministering angels.” If it were, there would be no laws about restitution of stolen items, no financial penalties for acts of physical violence and no laws about the spreading of malicious truths also known as *lashon hara*, because it would be inconceivable that people would actually do such things. There would be no punishments for the violation of Shabbos and no rules of which animals *not* to eat, because no one would ever violate the Shabbos or eat non kosher food under any circumstances. But if the Torah does not demand our absolute perfection, it does demand our unflinching honesty, certainly with others but especially with ourselves. All of us have circumstances in our lives that we wish were different, something (or someone) in our lives of which we are less than proud and character traits that may be less than desirable. We can use these as pretexts for inaction, apathy or anger, externalizing our challenges so we don’t have to take ownership over them and deal with them internally, or we can follow the more productive opposite path. In the third chapter of Eichah, Yirmiyahu utters a strange question.

מה יתאוונן אדם חי גבר על חטאו

Why does a living being, a man, have to complain over his sins? That's the way it's usually translated. Listen, though, to Rav Huna's explanation of this verse, in Eichah Rabbah:

איכה רבה (וילנא) פרשה ג

א"ר הונא יעמד כגבור ויודה על חטאיו ואל יתאוון

Let a person “man up,” admit to his sins and not complain or place blame elsewhere. As Cassius said to Brutus, in [Shakespeare's](#) play *Julius Caesar*.

² “*The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves, that we are underlings.*” Although many interpretations are placed on this verse, both in and out of context, the simple meaning is that it is our weakness of character that causes us to act against our will and interest, and nothing else. The lesson of the *mekalel* is a challenging one, but uplifting as well. For while we cannot place blame elsewhere for our failings and challenges, we are also given leeway so long as we own up to them and place them prominently on our failure resume. It's no surprise that Johannes Haushofer's resume has gone viral; it speaks to a deep and liberating truth we all wish we could say aloud and more often: It is better to learn from our weaknesses than feign our strengths. In fact, the final failure Haushofer lists on his resume is that far more interest has been generated in his failures than any of his successes! Let us learn the lesson of the *mekalel's* cautionary tale. It is though owning our weaknesses and failings that we will meet with the greatest spiritual and personal success.

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² Act I, Scene III, L. 140-141