

# COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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## Overcoming Setbacks

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At first, Moses' mission seemed to be successful. He had feared that the people would not believe in him, but God had given him signs to perform, and his brother Aaron to speak on his behalf. Moses "performed the signs before the people, and they believed. And when they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped." (Ex. 4: 30-31?)

But then things start to go wrong, and continue going wrong. Moses' first appearance before Pharaoh is disastrous. Pharaoh refuses to recognise God. He rejects Moses' request to let the people travel into the wilderness. He makes life worse for the Israelites. They must still make the same quota of bricks, but now they must also gather their own straw. The people turn against Moses and Aaron: "May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us" (Ex. 5: 21).

Moses and Aaron return to Pharaoh to renew their request. They perform a sign – they turn a staff into a snake – but Pharaoh is unimpressed. His own magicians can do likewise. Next they bring the first of the plagues, but again Pharaoh is unmoved. He will not let the Israelites go. And so it goes, nine times. Moses does everything in his power and finds that nothing makes a difference. The Israelites are still slaves.

We sense the pressure Moses is under. After his first setback, at the end of last week's parsha, he turns to God and bitterly complains: "Why, Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and you have not rescued your people at all" (Ex. 5: 22-23).

**"Moses does everything in his power and finds that nothing makes a difference. The Israelites are still slaves. We sense the pressure Moses is under."**

In this week's parsha, even though God has reassured him that he will eventually succeed, he replies, "If the Israelites will not listen to me, why would Pharaoh listen to me, since I speak with faltering lips?" (Ex. 6: 12).

There is an enduring message here. Leadership, even of the very highest order, is often marked by failure. The first Impressionists had to arrange their own exhibition because their work was rejected by the Paris salons. The first performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* caused a riot, with the audience booing throughout. Van Gogh sold only one painting in his lifetime despite the fact that his brother Theo was an art dealer.

So it is with leaders. Lincoln faced countless setbacks during the civil war. He was a deeply divisive figure, hated by many in his lifetime. Gandhi failed in his dream of uniting Muslims and Hindus together in a single nation. Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years in prison, accused of treason and regarded as a violent agitator. Churchill was regarded as a spent force in politics by the 1930s, and even after his heroic leadership during the Second World War was voted out of office at the first General Election after the war was over. Only in retrospect do heroes seem heroic and the many setbacks they faced reveal themselves as stepping stones on the road to victory.

In every field, high, low, sacred or secular, leaders are tested not by their successes but by their failures. It can sometimes be easy to succeed. The conditions may be favourable. The economic, political or personal climate is good. When there is an economic boom, most businesses flourish. In the first months after a general election, the successful leader carries with him or her the charisma of victory. In the first year, most marriages are happy. It takes no special skill to succeed in good times.

**“In every field, high, low, sacred or secular, leaders are tested not by their successes but by their failures.”**

But then the climate changes. Eventually it always does. That is when many businesses, and politicians, and marriages fail. There are times when even the greatest people stumble. At such moments, character is tested. The great human beings are not those who never fail. They are those who survive failure, who keep on going, who refuse to be defeated, who never give up or give in. They keep trying. They learn from every mistake. They treat failure as a learning experience. And from every refusal to be defeated, they become stronger, wiser and more determined. That is the story of Moses' life in last week's parsha and in this.

Jim Collins, one of the great writers on leadership, puts it well:

The signature of the truly great versus the merely successful is not the absence of difficulty, but the ability to come back from setbacks, even cataclysmic catastrophes, stronger than before ... The path out of darkness begins with those exasperatingly persistent individuals who are constitutionally incapable of capitulation. It's one thing to suffer a staggering defeat... and entirely another to give up on the values and aspirations that make the

protracted struggle worthwhile. Failure is not so much a physical state as a state of mind; success is falling down, and getting up one more time, without end.<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner once wrote a powerful letter to a disciple who had become discouraged by his repeated failure to master Talmudic learning:

A failing many of us suffer is that when we focus on the high attainments of great people, we discuss how they are complete in this or that area, while omitting mention of the inner struggles that had previously raged within them. A listener would get the impression that these individuals sprang from the hand of their creator in a state of perfection . . .

The result of this feeling is that when an ambitious young man of spirit and enthusiasm meets obstacles, falls and slumps, he imagines himself as unworthy of being “planted in the house of God” . . .

Know, however, my dear friend, that your soul is rooted not in the tranquillity of the good inclination, but in the battle of the good inclination . . . The English expression, “Lose a battle and win the war,” applies. 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, “A righteous man falls seven times, but rises again” (Proverbs 24:16). Fools believe the intent of the verse is to teach us 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.<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Hutner’s point is that *greatness cannot be achieved without failure*. There are heights you cannot climb without first having fallen.

**“Greatness cannot be achieved without failure. There are heights you cannot climb without first having fallen.”**

For many years, I kept on my desk a quote from Calvin Coolidge, sent by a friend who knew how easy it is to be discouraged.

It said, “Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence.

Talent will not: nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not: the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.” I would only add, “And *seyata diShmaya*, the help of Heaven.” God never loses faith in us even if we sometimes lose faith in ourselves.

The supreme role model is Moses who, despite all the setbacks chronicled in last week’s parsha and this, eventually became the man of whom it was said that he was “a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his energy unabated” (Deut. 34: 7).

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Collins, *How the mighty fall: and why some companies never give in*, New York, Harper Collins, 2009, 123.

<sup>2</sup> R. Yitzhak Hutner, *Iggerot u-Ketavim*, 1998, no. 128, 217-18.

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.

**“The road to success passes through many valleys of failure. There is no other way.”**

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jonathan Sacks". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'J'.

**RABBI  
SACKS**

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