

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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Surviving Failure

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Bereishit ends on a sublime note of reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers. His brothers were afraid that he had not really forgiven them for selling him into slavery. They suspected that he was merely delaying his revenge until their father died. So after Jacob's death they express their fear. Joseph however insisted:

“Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Gen. 50: 19-21)

This is the second time he had said something like this to them. Earlier he had spoken similarly when he first disclosed that he – the man they thought was an Egyptian viceroy called Zophenat Paneakh – was in fact their brother Joseph:

“I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no ploughing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.” (Gen. 45: 3-8)

This is a crucial moment in the history of faith. It marks the birth of forgiveness, the first recorded moment at which one person forgives another for a wrong they have done. But it also establishes another important principle: the idea of divine providence. History is not what Joseph Heller called it, “a trashbag of random coincidences blown open in the wind.” It has a purpose, a point, a plot. God is at

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work behind the scenes. “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,” says Hamlet, “rough-hew them how we will.”

Joseph’s greatness was that he sensed this. Nothing in his life, he now knew, had happened by accident. The plot to kill him, his sale as a slave, the false accusations of Potiphar’s wife, his time in prison, and his disappointed hope that the chief butler would remember him and secure his release – all these events that might have cast him into ever deeper depths of despair, turned out in retrospect to be necessary steps in the journey that eventuated in his becoming second-in-command in Egypt and the one person capable of saving the whole country – as well as his own family – from starving in the years of famine.

Joseph had in double measure one of the necessary gifts of a leader: the ability to keep going despite opposition, envy, false accusation and repeated setbacks.

Every leader who stands for anything will face opposition. This may be a genuine conflict of interests. A leader elected to make society more equitable will almost certainly win the support of the poor and the antagonism of the rich. One elected to reduce the tax burden will do the opposite. It cannot be avoided. Politics without conflict is a contradiction in terms.

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Any leader elected to anything, or more loved or gifted than others, will face envy. Rivals will say, “Why wasn’t it me?” That is what Korach thought about Moses and Aaron. It is what the brothers thought about Joseph when they saw that their father loved him more than them. It is what Antonio Salieri thought about the more gifted Mozart according to Peter Shaffer’s play *Amadeus*.

As for false accusations, they have occurred often enough in history. Joan of Arc was accused of heresy and burned at the stake. A quarter century later she was posthumously declared innocent by an official court of inquiry. More than twenty people were put to death as a result of the Salem witch trials in 1692-3. Years later, as their innocence began to be perceived, a priest present at the trials, John Hale, admitted, “Such was the darkness of that day ... that we walked in the clouds, and could not see our way.”¹ The most famous false accusation of modern times was the trial of Alfred Dreyfus, a French officer of Jewish descent accused of being a German spy. The affair rocked France during the years 1894 and 1906 before Dreyfus was finally acquitted.

Setbacks too are part of the life-story of the most successful. J. K. Rowling’s initial Harry Potter novel was rejected by the first twelve publishers she sent it to. Another writer of a book about children suffered twenty-one rejections. The book was called “Lord of the Flies,” and its author, William Golding, was eventually awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

¹ Quoted in Robert A. Divine, T. H. Breen, George M. Fredrickson, R. Hal Williams, *America Past and Present*, Volume I, Pearson, 2001, 94.

In his famous commencement address at Stanford University the late Steve Jobs told the story of the three blows of fate that shaped his life: dropping out of university, being fired from Apple, the company he founded, and being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Rather than being defeated by them, he turned them all to creative use.

For twenty-two years I lived close to Abbey Road, North London, where a famous pop group recorded all their hits. At their first audition, they performed for a record company who told them that guitar bands were “on their way out.” The verdict on their performance (in January 1962) was: “The Beatles have no future in show business.”

All this explains Winston Churchill’s great remark that “success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.”

It may be that what sustains people through repeated setbacks is belief in themselves, or sheer tenacity, or lack of alternatives. What sustained Joseph, though, was his insight into Divine providence. A plan was unfolding whose end he could only dimly discern, but at some stage he seems to have realised that he was one of the characters in a far larger drama and that all the bad things that had happened to him were necessary if the intended outcome was to occur. As he said to his brothers, “It was not you who sent me here, but God.”

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This willingness to let events work themselves out in accordance with providence, this understanding that we are at best no more than co-authors of our lives, allowed Joseph to survive without resentment about the past or despair in the face of the future. Trust in God gave him immense strength, which is what we will need if we are to dare greatly. Whatever malice other people harbour against us – and the more successful you are, the more malice there is – if we can say, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good,” we will survive, our strength intact, our energy undiminished.



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