

Elul WhatsApp / Telegram Messages

3rd Elul – 3rd September

It's one of my favourite stories, all the better for being true. A young chemist had been working for some time at developing a new bonding agent, a glue. Eventually the work was complete. He tried it out. It didn't stick. What's the use of a glue that doesn't stick? A failure. Time wasted. Effort spent in vain. Back to the laboratory to try again. So ninety-nine out of a hundred people would have concluded. The young chemist was the one in a hundred who thought differently.

Instead of deciding that his work was a failure, he asked, "What if it's a success? What if I've discovered a solution? The only thing left to do is to find the problem." He refused to give up. He kept asking himself, What's the use of a glue that doesn't stick? Eventually he found it. It became a huge commercial success. I use it all the time. It's used for notes you can attach and detach at will. That's how the "Post-It Pad" was born.

I think of that story every time I hear someone write off their own or other people's efforts as a failure. That is not just negative thinking. It's destructive – of confidence, morale, self-respect. More importantly, it's not true, or at least, not the best way of seeing things.

Creation, by its very nature, involves taking risks – the experiment that fails, the attempt that doesn't quite come off. Each is part of the process that leads to discovery. Each is a learning experience. Analysing why something fails is often one of the most instructive exercises we can undertake. Creativity without failure is like being lifted to the top of a mountain without the climb. It's fun. But it isn't an achievement. "According to the effort," said the sages, "is the reward."

Nor are we, here, now, in a position to judge success. I think of Moses Maimonides, the great Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages. Late in life he wrote a book. It was, he tells us in one of his letters, written for a single disciple who had doubts about his faith. It took a long time. Maimonides was in those days a physician as well the leader of his community, and the hours were hard to find. Eventually he completed it and sent it to the young man. From his reply it's clear that it didn't work. Perhaps he didn't understand it. At any rate it didn't answer his questions. A failure in Maimonides' lifetime. The name of the book? *The Guide for the Perplexed*, the greatest work of Jewish philosophy ever written.

I think, too, of the first Moses. What would his obituary have been like, written by a contemporary? The evidence is there throughout the books that bear his name. When he intervened on behalf of his people, they complained. He hadn't made things better; he'd made them worse. In Egypt, their burdens were made heavier. Leaving Egypt, they came up against the Red Sea. Crossing the sea, they found a desert. First there was no water. Then there was no food. Then the people complained there was no meat. Having given the Israelites the Ten Commandments they made a Golden Calf. Sending spies to prepare their entry into the land, they came back and said, it's impossible. Every effort he made to form a free and holy people collapsed. Nor was he privileged to set foot in the land to which he had spent forty years travelling. Can a life of failures be a success? Sometimes it can be the greatest life there is.

As we journey through Elul and look back over our year, we must remind ourselves of an important lesson: you have to make a blessing over failures too.