

“RETHINKING FAILURE”

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Elul 5780 Lecture Series / Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks / Part 2/3 (Transcript)

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Shanah tovah. A good, safe, healthy, and sweet New Year to you, to your family and to *Klal Yisrael*, to the Jewish people throughout the world. *Shanah tovah.*

A few weeks ago, a very special member of our community died. She was aged 97 and her name was Suzanne Perlman of blessed memory. She was an artist of some distinction. She studied, among others, with Oskar Kokoschka, the great painter. And her life story was quite dramatic. She was born in 1922 in Budapest, where her parents had an art gallery. In 1940, she was married in Rotterdam in Holland. And just three days before the Nazis invaded Holland, she and her husband managed to escape to Paris. They had to actually jump on an already moving train to Bordeaux. And from Bordeaux, she was able to take a boat to Curaçao, where she lived for many years.

Now, she and her husband ran their own art and antiques gallery in Curaçao, and most of the customers in the shop were from the cruise ships that stopped there, and some of them were really quite wealthy. And on one occasion, a very, very rich woman came ashore, came into the shop, and asked Suzanne whether she had any shoes for sale from the famous French designer, Monsieur Damagé.

Well, Suzanne didn't just not have any Damagé shoes, she'd never actually heard of Monsieur Damagé. So she said to the woman, "Could I actually see a shoe and maybe I'll find someone in Curaçao who can get some for you?" The woman removed the shoe and Suzanne looked at it and turned it upside down. And there on the sole, she saw something written and she immediately saw what it was. Written on the sole of the shoe was the word, 'Damaged'. In other words, it was a defective shoe with a fault in it that had clearly been sold at a cheap price. And over time, the final 'd' of 'Damaged' had got rubbed out and you could read it as, 'Damagé'. This woman had assumed that that was the name of a French shoe designer. "So don't worry," said Suzanne, "I will find you shoes just like that." And there it is.

I love that story actually, because it's quite nice to think about how, to everyone else, a pair of shoes could be flawed and contain a fault and be damaged goods. But to the person who wore them, they were special, they were exclusive, they were precious, they were Monsieur Damagé.

And I thought, actually, isn't that most of us? Because Rosh Hashanah, and especially on Yom Kippur, and certainly during Selichot, aren't we all aware that we are actually damaged goods? We have faults, we have flaws, we have failings. And then I thought, but what if we were capable of

that paradigm shift? What if we were actually able to see ourselves as specially designed by Monsieur Damagé? Supposing our failings were actually our strengths? Supposing our inability to do X, was actually an ability to do Y?

And then I started thinking about the Biblical characters to whom that might apply. I think for instance of Levi, Ya'akov's third son, who had a fierce and dangerous temperament. Ya'akov, at the very end of his life on his deathbed, cursed him. And yet it was Levi who, one or two generations later, produced the three great leaders of the Jewish people throughout the wilderness years: Aaron, Miriam, and Moshe.

We know that Moshe Rabbeinu had some of that anger of Levi himself, but what that became in Moshe Rabbeinu's life was righteous indignation and a passion for justice. I've often thought that Moshe Rabbeinu, who keeps saying to God, he says it over and over and over again, "I can't speak." And I think to myself, why did God choose him, Moshe Rabbeinu, of all people in the world, to be His spokesman? And then I thought maybe Moshe Rabbeinu, because he couldn't speak, learned to listen. And maybe that's really what we need in our relationship with other people and our relationship with God. What Moshe Rabbeinu thought was his weakness, was actually his strength, his ability to listen.

Rabbi Akiva suffered from a terrible problem, which is, he was, according to the Gemara, 40 before he even began to learn. But when you begin to learn at the age of 40, you have an advantage over everyone else who began to learn at the time everyone else begins to learn, which is that it's harder for you, which means that you labour at it. And the end result is you become Rabbi Akiva, the greatest teacher of his generation, because he understood how hard learning is.

Reish Lakish, whose first career was as a highway man, a man of violence, became a *baal teshuvah*, and the end result was that because he had the most unusual background of really any of the *Amoraim*, he said some of the most beautiful things anyone ever said about the power of *teshuvah* because he had been forced to experience the power of *teshuvah*.

Or if you take a contemporary example, just a few weeks ago, we lost one of the most outstanding teachers and scholars of our generation, of many generations, the late Rav Adin Steinsaltz z"l. Adin didn't come from a conventional background. I'm sure you know the stories. It was the first thing he told people when he met them. That his father was secular and an atheist. It was his father who sent him to Yeshiva because his father said, "I want my son to be an *apikores*, but not an *am ha'aretz*." "I want my son to be a heretic, but not an ignoramus." Now when you got a father like that, and you come from a background like that, you come from a secular world and you want to learn Talmud, that's a huge mountain to climb. But it meant that Adin was able to explain the Talmud to people however secular they were, because he had been forced to make that journey.

Not all, but many of the weaknesses we have are actually strengths that we have not yet discovered how to use. Or less dramatically, by focusing on our weaknesses, sometimes we fail to find and search for our own strengths.

The truth is, there's an unusual blessing, which we make over after we've had a cup of water or a cup of coffee. The *bracha achrona* says, *borei nefashot rabbot v'chesrona*, "You make many different kinds of souls and their deficiencies." Plain reading of the *bracha* says, "Even a deficiency is the gift of God." Even a deficiency has been designed by Monsieur Damagé. So, a negative self-image sometimes prevents us from doing the good we could actually do, which is why I try and struggle against people's negative self-image.

One of the greatest lawyers in Britain in modern times was the late Peter Taylor, the late Lord Taylor, Master of the Rolls and then Lord Chief Justice, Britain's senior judge; Jewish, but not terribly frum, but it was a big *kiddush Hashem*. Everyone knew Peter Taylor had been not only Britain's leading judge, but a very special and outstanding leading judge. And when I first met him, Peter said to me, I was Chief Rabbi at the time, "Chief Rabbi, what will you do with a wicked old sinner like me?" And I said, "Peter, I cannot allow the Lord Chief Justice to be abused like that." And I said, the Sages said, *Kol dayan sh'dan din emet le'amitato na'aseh shootaf lema'asseh bereishit*. "Every judge who delivers a true verdict, becomes a partner with the Holy One, Blessed be He in the work of creation." And Peter blushed and said, that was the nicest thing anyone ever said of him. That was a wonderful man who simply wouldn't allow himself to see himself as a wonderful man.

We are each capable of great good. And we should never say, "I can't do it." "I'm not up to it." "I'm damaged goods." No, the truth is, we are each the rare and special product of Monsieur Damagé. In the coming year, may we do the good that Hashem needs us to do. May we do the good that we must, that we should, and that we can. *Shanah tovah*.