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Filling Our Slates with Failure

A group of artists and filmmakers set up a blackboard outside of a park in Brooklyn instructing people to share their regrets. Over the course of the day, the board filled with confessions from people of all walks of life:

I was afraid, I guess of failing.
I regret all the time I wasted not saying yes to things.
It's something I've always wanted to do since I was little.
Not getting my MBA. Not pursuing acting. Not even applying to college.
Not being a better friend.
Not getting involved.
Never going after my dreams.
I wanted to do so many things, but could never find the time.
Staying in my comfort zone.

What would you add to this blackboard? What are some of your regrets from this past year? What are some of your regrets in life? Are your regrets mistakes you have made? Or, are your regrets missed opportunities?

The chalkboard in that park in Brooklyn filled up with so many different stories. But almost all of the regrets had something in common. The board wasn't filled with stories of failed attempts; it wasn't filled with "I wish I hadn't done that" statements. No, the regrets were about chances not taken, words not spoken, dreams not being pursued.

At the end of the day, the artists used the blackboard full of regrets in a ritual of forgiveness. First they erased every appearance of the word 'not,' and then, they wiped the entire slate clean.

Last week, I was inspired to share our Sages association of Adam and the holiday of Rosh Hashanah. Today, I want to invite us to look to Moses for wisdom, whom our Sages teach is attached to this day, Yom Kippur.

Remember how Moses climbed back up the mountain after smashing the first set of tablets upon seeing the Israelites' idol, the Gold Calf. Our Sages teach us that today, the 10th of Tishrei, more commonly known as Yom Kippur, is the day that God gave Moses a clean slate to write the second set of commandments.¹ On this day as Moses chipped away at the stone, God came down in a cloud and stood with Moses and proclaimed "*Adonai, Adonai El Rachum v'chanun...Adonai, Adonai, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness.*"²

¹ Rashi, Exodus 33:11

² Exodus 34:6

'*Adonai, Adonai El Rachum v'chanun*' we chant these words repeatedly during the High Holy Days when we pray for forgiveness and as we stand before the open ark and prepare to read and find inspiration in Torah. These words appear not once but twice in our Torah scroll. First, God speaks them to Moses as a statement of forgiveness after the Golden Calf. The second time we hear these words, it is Moses who speaks them to God in defense of the Israelites.³

As the Israelites are about to enter the land of their inheritance, God tells Moses to send spies to scout out the territory. The scouts return after forty days. The land is full of great potential. A land flowing with milk & honey. But instead of focusing on all the potential of the land, all the scouts, with the exception of Caleb, are paralyzed by fear. 'We can't go there,' they explain to Moses, "the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large."⁴ The scouts spread their skepticism to the rest of the Israelites, telling them "the people we met there were so large, we looked like grasshoppers!"⁵

Just like after the Golden Calf, Moses pleads on the people's behalf, but this time, God does not present a clean slate for the Israelites. Another chance is not given. God will not allow this generation to enter the Promised Land. But why?

How could God give a second chance after an act of idolatry like the Golden Calf but not to the scouts and the Israelites whose transgression seems to be a struggle with self-confidence? The Israelites are feeling small, like grasshoppers; they do not have faith that they will be successful when conquering the land promised to them by God. They are too afraid to take advantage of this golden opportunity. They don't want to go and well, God concedes. This generation will not be allowed to enter.

Some people seem to have a higher tolerance for risk and failure than others. Reshma Saujani is the founder of the tech organization called *Girls Who Code* and believes that there is a correlation between taking risks, learning to embrace failure and being bold and brave and successful. Saujani founded *Girls who Code* because she believes that teaching coding socializes kids to be brave. Saujani's passion is the advancement of girls and women, but we can all learn from the principles of coding. Coding is an endless process of trial and error of trying to get the right command in the right place with sometimes just a semi colon making the difference between success and failure. It often takes many, many tries until that magical moment of what you are trying to build comes to life. Coding requires perseverance and imperfection in order to be successful.⁶

There is a tech industry joke that "no one takes you seriously in Silicon Valley unless you have had at least two failed start-ups." It is in this San Francisco high tech, high risk culture where Rabbi Noa Kushner works as a rabbi. Kushner shares that her biggest influence and inspiration as a rabbi are here congregants; they have infused her rabbinate with a high tolerance for risk and a desire to be bold and brave when creating sacred Jewish community. Rabbi Kushner founded a Jewish project called the Kitchen which is one part indie-Shabbat community, one part San Francisco experiment, and one part tool kit for DIY Jewish practice. Similar to a synagogue, The Kitchen sponsors Shabbat and holiday services. Similar to Stix Fix or Blue Apron, the Kitchen also sponsors Hello Mazel, a quarterly box of

³ Numbers 14:18

⁴ Numbers 13:28

⁵ Numbers 13:33

⁶ Reshma Saujani, "Teach Girls Bravery, Not Perfection." TED Talk, February 2016.

curated Jewish stuff meant to enhance Jewish lives especially of those skeptical of walking into a synagogue.

The high risk culture of Silicon Valley has also influenced Rabbi Kushner's interpretation of Torah. With regard to the transgression of the Israelites and the scouts, Rabbi Kushner teaches that "It was skeptical fear that caused our ancestors to panic and withdraw from taking possession of their next stage in life: settling the promised Land of Israel; and it is the same skeptical fear that causes us to panic and withdraw from our own next stage of life...we need to trust that our failures will not lead to our demise; quite the contrary, our failures will set us free."⁷

For many of us in here today, it is not our transgressions of failure that keep us from being our best selves, but rather allowing our fear of failure to paralyze us and keep us from reaching our full potential. In order to erase our regrets of chances not taken, words not spoken, dreams not being pursued, we must learn to better embrace failure.

The former U.S. senator from California and a specialist in semantics, S. I. Hayakawa, highlighted an important distinction between two English words that most of us assume are identical: "Notice the difference between what happens when a person says to oneself, 'I have failed' three times and what happens when the person says, 'I am a failure.'" To think of yourself as a failure is to create a perpetual self-image as a loser. But if you learn from your experience, if your failure inspires you to surpass yourself, then you understand that failure is merely a momentary event but doesn't define you.

Let's look again to Moses for inspiration.

Before the Israelites reach the footstep of the Promise Land, as they walk through the wilderness, they become hot and frustrated and tired and there is no water to drink. They blame their leader Moses. Moses and Aaron pray to God and God responds, 'Moses take your rod and gather the people, command that rock to yield water.' 'I've got your back,' says God to Moses as God has done so many times before when Moses lacked the confidence to move forward. But what does Moses do? He proceeds on his own. He hits the rock with his rod, not once, but twice when all God told him to do was talk to the rock. Water gushes from the rock and Moses said to the people 'look what I got for you!' Moses denies God any credit for the miracle. God tells Moses and Aaron, 'because you did not trust me enough to affirm my sanctity in front of all My people, you will not enter the Promised Land.'⁸

This isn't a story about learning from failure; the lesson from this story is learning to live beyond failure. What did Moses do after he learned that he would not enter the Promised Land? He doesn't turn in his rod; he doesn't abandon the Israelites and the dream of the Promised Land. No, Moses got up the very next day and went back to work. Moses went back to leading. This is the teaching. No matter the failure, we have to keep going.

On the one hand, the fate of Moses and the fate of the scouts and the generation of Israelites who went out from Egypt was the same. None were allowed to enter the Promised Land. But we don't remember Moses for being a failure, we remember him as our tradition's greatest Prophet and leader. Moses learned to live past his failure and lead and look forward, offering his leadership to the next generation.

⁷ Rabbi Noa Kushner, "The Room with No Back, Only Forward." *All These Vows*. Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, editor.

⁸ Numbers 20: 2-13

Moses did not allow his failing to turn him into a failure. The Israelites, paralyzed by their fear of failure, are remembered as the generation that wandered.

The holiday of Yom Kippur begins with the powerful recitation of *Kol Nidrei*. We begin Yom Kippur not by looking back at our past year recalling our transgressions, but rather by looking forward to our year to come. We anticipate our future failures and ask God to pardon us. In other words, *Kol Nidrei* is a ritual invitation for us to try, to take risks, and to fail.

The *Kol Nidrei* prayer ends by evoking the story of those skeptical scouts, the *Kol Nidrei* prayer ends with Moses' plea to God on the Israelites' behalf. "Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt."⁹ *Kol nidrei* gives us permission to fail and by recalling the scouts, reminds us that being paralyzed by fear of failure is a transgression for which God's forgiveness cannot be applied.

On Yom Kippur, on the 10th of Tishrei, our tradition teaches that God gave Moses a clean slate. Each year, we inherit this clean slate from Moses. While our tradition offers us this clean slate, in order for us to grow, we must not be afraid to fill this slate with failure. Filling our slate, filling our lives with failure will not lead to our demise, but leaving it empty will surely lead to a life filled with regret.

⁹ Numbers 14:19