

The Freedom to Fail

If you find yourself in Plas Madoc in the North of Wales, you may stumble across a playground known as 'The Land'. The Land contains a plethora of construction material and areas set aside for unrestrained creativity. Bricks and lumber can be built into forts. Fires can be started in kindling incinerators. The steep slope down to the muddy creek can be reached by swinging along on the back of a wheelie bin! The only limit is a child's imagination. Play spotters lounge as a background presence, trained not to intervene unless they suspect actual danger. The Land presents as a place of utter madness; ripe for destruction and fatal accidents. But oddly, it proves the opposite. Unrestricted by rules, control or supervision, kids have the ability to experiment with risk. To explore their boundaries and learn from them. To see that when they thrust a leafy branch into the fire, the ensuing billow of smoke causes their co-vandals to throw them out. Kids in The Land uncover their own backpack of innate learning tools. The beauty of trial and error. The responsibility that comes with being part of a cohort. Most of all, they are granted a profound gift; the freedom to fail, and the knowledge that to do so is part of a journey of growth.

To a large degree we have withdrawn permission to fail from ourselves, each other and society. We tend to live fear-based, carefully controlled existences; hinged on achieving perfection. We jump critically on a boss's mistake, a child's spillage, our own shameful blunder. We hold back from taking risks, we fear challenge; because we cannot harm our fragile box of accolades or reputation. And this is an enormous shame, because studies consistently reveal that awarding the freedom to fail is the precursor to success.

Carol Dweck, author of *Mindset*, presented 10-year olds with a challenging puzzle, and she found two distinct groups of children. There were those who grew more determined with each defeat, and kept trying. They displayed a belief that each step in tackling a challenge, mistaken or accurate, is part of an exciting process which increases one's skillset and intelligence. A growth mindset. The second group of children gave up, crumbling after the first attempt. They held a fixed mindset. They couldn't envisage any change to their established strengths, and could not afford to keep trying in case their inadequacies were exposed. Growth mindset was found in a variety of further studies to correlate with resilience, purpose, joy, perseverance and a host of other attributes that create lasting success. As a case in point, the tennis players who become champions, such as teenage world number one Carlos Alcaraz, often have an unforced errors count as high, if not higher, than their winners count. They will go for their shots, and see what happens. To succeed, we need to be unafraid to fail.

In our religion we could be forgiven for thinking that perfection is the ultimate goal. There is a good deal in the Torah about reward and punishment that seemingly requires us to be constantly on our guard, afraid of failing. However, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur come to teach us just the opposite. These annual festivals are dedicated to renewal, starting afresh, and Teshuva (coming back to our true selves and Hashem). Their presence in our calendar relates to the stunning idea found in the Talmud, that Teshuva was one of seven things that preceded the world's creation.¹ If we look deeper into this concept, we see that before our reality emerged, the guarantee for its continuation was devised.

Hashem knew that humans would fail. He *designed* us to fail as part of a growth process. And so, instead of creating a reality that would collapse at the first sin, or sign of imperfection, Hashem first created an insurance policy.² He brought Teshuva into the world before humankind. The

¹ Pesachim 54a

² Concept heard from Rabbi Sacks

radical concept that the slate can be wiped clean. The past can be removed, obliterated; or better yet, celebrated as a catalyst for positive evolution. Reality will not collapse when we do something wrong. We always have a way forward. The process of growth through failure was established. Teshuva gives us the freedom to fail.

This idea is beautifully reflected in the verse in Tehillim, 'A righteous person will flourish like a date palm...'.³ Rav Moshe Isserles questions why this specific tree is used as a metaphor for a person blossoming. The answer, he explains, we find in a corollary verse in Mishlei, 'A righteous person will fall seven times and rise up again.'⁴ If we look at the trunk of a palm tree, it is different to that of any other. Date palms do not form upright trunks, broadening as they grow taller. They start off as a short stump. This grows leaves, which cyclically wither and die. On the remains of the stump, another stump develops, which grows leaves. These in turn wither and die. And so on, until the tree grows tall and proud with its iconic, truncated spine made up of all the stumps it has cultivated along the way. This, says Rav Isserles, is the righteous person's process of growth. Failure, then renewal. Withering, then trying again. On the worn, old, failed stump grows the next block of flourishing tree. Just like the righteous person, who will fall and fall again and use his failures to galvanise growth. The Pri Tzedek summarises this progress with the stunning phrase, 'הנפילה זה עצמו יהי סיבה לקימה' - The falls themselves are the reason for the heights achieved.⁵ In other words, we really can't become anything special without these failures. To quote environmentalist Wangari Maathai, 'Every person who ever achieved anything was knocked down several times. All of them picked themselves up and kept going.'

And Hashem waits for us to take as much time as we need for this process. (RH Machzor: כִּי לֹא תִתְחַפֵּץ בְּמוֹת הַמֵּת. כִּי אִם בְּשׁוּבוֹ מִדְּרָכָו וְחָיָה. וְעַד יוֹם מוֹתוֹ תִּתְחַפֵּץ לוֹ. אִם יָשׁוּב מִיַּד תִּתְקַבֵּל)

There is a comforting Midrash which speaks about an elderly visitor to Avraham's tent who, after receiving warm hospitality, took out his idol to offer thanks. Avraham tried as hard as he could to educate the elder that everything he had eaten came from Hashem, and after numerous hours, the visitor still insisted on thanking his idol. Avraham eventually asked the man to leave. Hashem appeared to Avraham and effectually said 'You lasted a few hours with this man?! I waited 90 years for him to meet you and learn from you to come close to Me!'.⁶ With that, Avraham called the man back and encouraged him to stay. We have the freedom to take our time, to try again, to fail, and build lasting growth in this way.

I will close with an idea illuminated by Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi. He explains that each of the five prayers on Yom Kippur gives us access in sequence to the five levels of the soul. Further, the Vidui of each Tefilla cleanses and unlocks each layer of the soul, opening us upwards towards a final bonding with our Source.

The Nefesh, our sensory nervous system, corresponds to Ma'ariv. The Ruach, our higher level intelligence, is accessed through Shacharis. The Neshama, our spiritual uniqueness, is reached through Musaf. The Chaya, the collective soul, is unlocked through Mincha, and then through Ne'ila we reach the Yechida, the Chelek Elokah Mima'al- the outflow of our soul that converges with Hashem Himself. We tend to think of Ne'ila as an ending. That's it, time's up, gates are closing; Hashem retreats to higher heavenly abodes, and we're locked out. Actually, Ne'ila is a beginning. During Ne'ila we can lock ourselves IN with Hashem.⁷ We've opened and released each aspect of our soul so that we are now enrooted at the highest level with Hashem. In this way we enclose ourselves in with Him for the coming year, and can feel surrounded by His patient and unconditional love, which allows us the freedom to fail along our journey of forward movement.

³ Tehillim 92:13

⁴ Mishlei 24:16

⁵ Nitzavim 1:1, on Makkos 7a

⁶ Cited by Rav Ovadia Yosef on Bereishis 12:5

⁷ Cited in the name of Reb Menachem Mendel of Rimanov

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So let us take these freeing ideas with us into the Yomim Noraim. Let us enjoy Hashem's ultimate kindness, the gift of Teshuva, which as Rambam says, is guaranteed at this time to wipe the slate clean, again and again and again, so that we can indeed flourish like a date palm.⁸

⁸ Hilchos Teshuva 2