

**Sermon/Drasha Beshalach "The Blessings of Failure" , 5774/2014  
Rabbi Ze'ev Smason**

Every baseball fan knows that Ty Cobb was one of baseball's greatest players. His record for stealing bases stood for years. Fourth all-time on the stolen bases list, Cobb stole an astounding 96 bases the year he set the record. Everyone has heard of Ty Cobb. But how many of you have heard of Max Carey? Even in St. Louis -- the best baseball city in America - ask baseball fans if they know Max Carey, and most of them will shake their heads and say, "Harry Carey? Drew Carey? Who was Max Carey?"

Max Carey was a Hall of Fame outfielder who, in a 20 year career, played for the Pittsburgh Pirates at around the same time as Ty Cobb.

Like Cobb, Max Carey had plenty of baseball talent. In fact, one season he attempted 53 stolen bases and succeeded 51 times -- an unbelievable 96%. Ty Cobb stole 96 bases the year he set the record, but he tried 134 times. That's only 71%. Cobb was willing to risk failure, and because of it, he became legendary in the baseball Hall of Fame. Max Carey, who played it safe time after time, isn't remembered today.

What's the lesson?

Like Ty Cobb, in life, you're going to make mistakes. But don't be afraid of taking chances. To succeed you need to take risks. Don't always play it safe.

Most people don't like failure, and understandably so. But failure is not only something that is positive in the bigger picture of life, but absolutely necessary to have any type of success.

Don't believe me? Listen to what the experts have to say.

Thomas J. Watson, the founder and first president of IBM said:

*Failure is a teacher – a harsh one, perhaps, but the best... That's what I have to do when an idea backfires or a sales program fails. You've got to put failure to work for you ... you can be discouraged by failure or you can learn from it. So go ahead and make mistakes. Make all you can. Because that's where you will find success. On the far side of failure.*

Dr. Joyce Brothers believes:

*The person interested in success has to learn to view failure as a healthy, inevitable part of the process of getting to the top.*

If you don't keep your eye on the bigger picture, and don't keep looking up, you'll suffer from "Failure Aversion" -- a lesson we see presented in this week's Parsha.

At the end of *Beshalach* we're told the story of a war against Amalek. Moses said to Joshua, "Choose men for us, and prepare for battle against Amalek" (Ex. 17: 9). Joshua did so and the people waged war. As this was happening, the Torah focuses our attention on one detail. As the

battle began Moses climbed to the top of a hill overlooking the battlefield, with a staff in his hand:

As long as Moses held his hands up, the Israelites prevailed, but when he let his hands down, the Amalekites prevailed. When Moses' hands became weary, they took a stone and placed it under him, so that he would be able to sit on it. Aaron and Chur then held his hands, one on each side, and his hands remained steady until sunset.

What is going on here? Why was the Jewish people's success dependent upon the position of the hands of Moses?

In 1875 an amateur archaeologist, Marcelino de Sautuola, began excavating the ground in a cave in Altamira near the north coast of Spain. At first he found little to interest him, but his curiosity was rekindled by a visit to the Paris exhibition of 1878 where a collection of Ice Age implements and art objects was on display. Determined to see whether he could find equally ancient relics, he returned to the cave in 1879.

One day he took his nine-year-old daughter Maria with him. While he was searching through the rubble, Maria wandered deeper into the cave and to her amazement saw something on the wall above her. "Look, papa, oxen," she said. They were, in fact, bison. She had made one of the great discoveries of prehistoric art of all time. The magnificent Altamira cave paintings, between 25,000 and 35,000 years old, were so unprecedented a finding that it took twenty-two years for their authenticity to be accepted. For four years Sautoula had been within a few feet of a monumental treasure, but he had missed it for one reason. He had neglected to look up.

One of the ongoing themes of Tanakh is the need to look up. King David said "I lift up my eyes to the hills. >From there will my help come." (Psalm 121) Moses knew that his hands needed to be held aloft. The Jewish people had to look upward. "Don't be discouraged", he was telling them. "Keep trying!"

A young man of 32 had been appointed president of the bank. He'd never dreamed he'd be president, much less at such a young age. So he approached the venerable chairman of the board and said, "You know, I've just been appointed president. I was wondering if you could give me some advice."

The old man came back with just two words: "Right decisions!"

The young man had hoped for a bit more than this, so he said, "That's really helpful, and I appreciate it, but can you be more specific?? How do I make right decisions?"

The wise old man simply responded, "Experience."

The young man said, "Well, that's just the point of my being here. I don't have the kind of experience I need. How do I get it?"

Came the terse reply: "Wrong decisions!"

How does failure help? I'd like to share with you three blessings that can come from failure.

When I was a single yeshiva student, there was an older student, Shmuel, who had been looking for a wife and had dated numerous women for a long period of time. I and his apartment-mates knew he was a veteran of the 'shidduch circuit', which could have been frustrating and discouraging. But Shmuel was a very positive, cheerful, optimistic fellow. When he would return from what was invariably an unsuccessful date, we would gather around the door and say, "Nu, Shmuel, how did it go?"

With a big smile, Shmuel would always respond, "I'm one closer!"

You've heard of the all purpose cleaner 'Formula 409'? It was named by two young scientists in Detroit in 1957 for their 409th attempt to develop a formula that would remove grease and dirt.

Classic film fans will remember *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* in which Edward G. Robinson played German chemist, Dr. Paul Ehrlich. Dr. Ehrlich discovered a drug to treat those afflicted with syphilis. He named it "Formula 606", because the first 605 tests were a failure.

Where would be without WD-40? There was a recent story that reported that police officers used WD-40 to remove a naked burglar trapped in an air conditioning vent! Why is it called WD-40? The folks at Rocket Chemical Company perfected their water-displacement mix on the 40th try.

Setbacks are opportunities to reset. And if we can take lessons learned from our failures, we're one step closer to where we want to go.

Failure has a second benefit.

It's not easy at times to tell the difference between success and failure, or to know where the line between the two is drawn. Paul Tournier, renowned Swiss physician and counselor told a story that I and many of you can easily relate to.

Dr. Tournier had given many lectures, and like all who speak publicly, got great pleasure when the lecture went well. Let's listen to Dr. Tournier's own words as he describes one lecture that was a resounding failure:

*One of my most vivid memories is of a lecture I gave many years ago, one of my worst failures. It was at a university. I felt right from the first word that I was not going to make contact with my audience. I clung to my notes and laboriously recited, with growing nervousness, what I had to say. As the audience left I could see my friends slipping hurriedly away, to spare themselves and me the embarrassment of a meeting. On the way home in my car with my wife, I burst into tears.*

*But the next day a professor of philosophy called me on the telephone. He told me he had listened in his life to a large number of remarkable lectures, but he had never heard one as bad as mine. This intrigued him and made him want to see me. The incident was the beginning of*

*a wonderful friendship between us .... and that was the source of more lasting joy to me than could ever have been procured by success in delivering a lecture.*

A Hebrew expression, *gam zu l'tova* means 'this too is for the best.' When things don't seem to be going your way, say *gam zu l'tova*. At times, hidden blessings turn out to be the sweetest blessings of all.

Not to say that it's easy to have this perspective!

After Winston Churchill's 1945 defeat in the election, he turned to his wife for consolation. She remarked that the defeat could just be a blessing in disguise.

Unconvinced, Churchill responded, "I'm more conscious of the disguise than the blessing."

A setback contains a hidden blessing. Accustom yourself to say *gam zu l'tova*.

Third and finally, failure can reveal one very special, marvelous gift -- the gift of self-discovery.

When J. K. Rowling, author of the phenomenally successful Harry Potter series, had been out of college for seven years, she found herself at a dark juncture in her life. At that time, she says, she had failed in life on an epic scale. "An exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded. I was jobless, a lone parent, and as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain without being homeless."

In short, Rowling says she was the biggest failure she knew. And while she says there is nothing ennobling about being poor, she believes she reaped one great benefit from her failures. Failure, she says, stripped away all the inessential aspects of her life. She stopped pretending to be anything other than herself, and it was then that she began to earnestly pursue the only work that mattered to her. Failure allowed her ...to discover herself

I'd like to conclude with the following story.

A woman's name was accidentally printed in the obituary column of the local paper. Needless to say, she was very upset. Stomping her way into the newspaper office, she demanded to see the editor.

"What kind of paper is this, anyway? Your mistake will ruin my career, not to mention the embarrassment I will have to endure. How could you make such an error?" she asked. The editor responded with diplomatic apologies, but the lady continued in her anger, eventually proving herself unreasonable.

"Look, lady," the editor said with disgust. "Tomorrow I'll put your name in the birth announcements and give you a fresh start."

As long as Moses held his hands up, the Jewish people prevailed, but when he let his hands down, the Amalekites prevailed. In their first battle, Moses taught the Jewish people to look up. Every setback and failure is an opportunity for a fresh start, and to reap valuable benefits.

Failure is a harsh teacher, but one of the best. We can be discouraged from failure ...or we can learn from it. Don't suffer from 'Failure Aversion.'" Strive to be a Ty Cobb, not a Max Carey. Don't be afraid to take risks, because the greatest successes are the result of failures.

-- Every failure brings us one step closer to where we want to go.

-- Every setback has a hidden blessing. Perhaps a life-changing blessing. Become used to saying *gam zu l'tova*.

-- Failure can contain the greatest gift of all; the gift of self-discovery.

Good Shabbos