

Overcoming Life's Disappointments

Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim

September 9, 2010

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(With much gratitude to my colleague, Rabbi Harold S. Kushner)

My friends, there are two nearly universal truths we acknowledge at the start of this New Year. The first is our common hope that 5771 will be a year of joy and blessing, good health and good fortune for each of us and all we love. The second is the reality that, for so many of us, 5770 was a very rough year. The failures of the economy have been well documented, and challenged many of us profoundly. We've had personal, familial, and professional disappointments, as well ... and we've had personal, familial, and professional failings. We want to believe things can turn around for us in the new year, but it's hard to see how, it's hard to have faith.

Yet that is what the High Holy Days are all about: finding a way to overcome our failures, and finding a way to overcome the feeling that life has failed us. So much of life is about momentum: the "big Mo." In sports – whether you're watching football or golf, basketball or tennis – you can sense, almost predict, who's going to win, not by looking at the scoreboard, but by noting who has captured the momentum. Weight Watchers has even adopted this language. When they rolled out their latest weight loss materials, they called it their "Momentum Program" – they even trademarked the word. Healthy eating and exercise may be the key to losing weight in any given week, but only by stringing such successful weeks together and building positive momentum can one hope to really take and *keep* weight off.

Momentum is powerful, but not all momentum is positive. As boosting as momentum can be, its negative currents seem to pull that much harder. And for many of us here this morning, 5771 seems certain to continue the disappointments we felt piling up throughout 5770. Before we can feel empowered to overcome our personal failures, we need to find a way to overcome the feeling that life has failed us. We need to shift the momentum.

At a time when I was faced with precisely this daunting challenge myself, I encountered Rabbi Harold Kushner's exceptional book, *Overcoming Life's Disappointments*, and I'd like to share three of his lessons this morning, each drawn from the example of Moses.

What Moses could accomplish in a single day puts us to shame—confronting Pharaoh or splitting the Red Sea to lead the Israelites across. Equally impressive is what he could accomplish if given several weeks—calling down ten plagues on the Egyptians, spending forty days on a mountaintop receiving God's word. But more than anything, what impresses the most, is what Moses could do day after day, week after week, for forty years—serving as the leader of a people who, more often than not, did not want to be led and complained about the life into which he had led them. They hated the conditions of their wandering. They were troubled by the uncertainty of what lay ahead for them and their children. They never quite believed they were capable of conquering and settling the Promised Land. They resented what

they could do and what they could not do – what they had to share with their neighbors, what they had to give back to God. As Rabbi Riemer puts it, Moses had 40 years of personal hell! So how did he do it? How did Moses overcome the day-in, day-out disappointment and set-backs, the frustration of his dreams? And how can we?

REMEMBERING WHY IT IS THAT WE DO WHAT WE DO

First and foremost, Rabbi Kushner tells us, is by remembering why it is that we do what we do.

The story is told of a rabbi who had had such a busy week that he never got around to visiting sick members of his congregation in the hospital. As a result, he had to cancel a planned Sunday afternoon family outing in order to make his hospital visits. After an hour, he left the hospital feeling that he had wasted his time. Two of the people he had come to see had been discharged the previous afternoon (and were probably angry at him for not having come to see them earlier). Two more were sleeping and he hesitated to wake them. Another had a roomful of visitors and saw the rabbi's presence as an intrusion. And the last patient he visited spent twenty minutes complaining about her aches and pains and previous afflictions and cited them as the reasons she could no longer believe in God or the value of prayer. The rabbi could not help thinking of all the ways he would rather have spent that hour. Walking back to the parking lot unhappy with the demands of his job and feeling resentful, he passed an office building with a security guard in front. The guard wished him a good afternoon, which prompted the rabbi to stop and say to him, "It's Sunday. The building is closed and empty. Why are you standing here?" The guard answered. "I've been hired to make sure nobody breaks in to steal or vandalize anything. But what are you doing here in a suit and tie on a Sunday afternoon? Who do you work for?"

The rabbi was about to tell the guard the name of his congregation when he paused, reached into his pocket for a business card, and said, "Here's my name and phone number. I'll pay you five dollars a week to call me every Monday morning and ask me that question: Remind me to ask myself, Who do I work for?"

Something dangerously corrosive happens to the soul when we lose our sense of purpose, or too narrowly define it. A Jewish legend tells that after Moses received the original set of the Ten Commandments from God atop Mount Sinai, he began to climb down the mountain to deliver God's word to the people. Moses was an old man and it was hard for him to negotiate the climb, but he did it because he was inspired by what he was doing. Halfway down the mountain, though, when he saw the Israelites dancing around the Golden Calf, the writing disappeared from the tablets and suddenly they were just two large, heavy stones, too heavy for Moses to handle. At that moment, they fell from his grasp and broke. When he thought he was doing something that made a difference to people, Moses could bear any burden. When he lost that sense of purpose, he became too discouraged to keep on doing the hard things that were asked of him. God had to summon Moses back to the mountaintop, not only to recreate a second set of tablets, but to restore his sense of purpose before he could continue his task.

When we lose sight of the bigger picture of why it is that we do what we do, we lose our drive and sense of self, and risk succumbing to disappointment. But when we remind ourselves of our purpose and remain true to ourselves, our ability to persevere through adversity is

seemingly limitless. A story was once reported about a man who would visit his wife in a nursing home every day. She suffered from Alzheimer's Disease and could not recognize him. People asked him, "Why do you keep on going when she doesn't even know who you are?" And he would answer simply and resolutely, "Because I know who I am."

So the first key to surviving and overcoming disappointment, to seizing control of momentum, is to remember who we are and why it is that we do what we do.

LETTING GO OF THE TYRANNY OF THE DREAM

The second lesson Rabbi Kushner learns from Moses is the importance of letting go of the tyranny of the dream, or as Joseph Campbell puts it: "We must be willing to get rid of the life we planned so as to have the life that is waiting for us."

We all have dreams – this is how my life should be, this is what my future should look like. Sometimes the dream centers on a profession or an expectation of a certain standard of living. We paint a picture of what our family life will be like – a loving, devoted partner; a beautiful, spacious home; a certain number of healthy, perfect children brought into the world without complication.

But when life doesn't match those dreams, what do we do? For Psychologist Daniel Levinson, the only escape from a sense of failure is to free ourselves from the tyranny of those dreams, the conviction that we will have failed at life if our youthful dreams don't come true. It's about facing our past with gratitude and our future with confidence, even as we carry with us the memories of dreams that never came true – for there are other, more attainable dreams waiting for us.

Henrietta Szold, founder of Hadassah, dreamed of having children. The personal tragedy and great disappointment of her life was that she never married, never had a family. While in her forties, she did fall passionately in love with the great Talmud scholar Louis Ginzberg. He was fifteen years her junior, and returned her feelings only platonically. Shortly after their relationship ended, she wrote: "Today it is four weeks since my only real happiness was killed."

Yet Szold would not allow that profound disappointment to thwart her life and deprive her of other great accomplishments. Though she continued to cherish the dream of having children, she did not allow herself to be held hostage by that dream. Instead, she devoted herself to saving the lives of other children and so many others around the world. The "Youth Aliyah" program she created through Hadassah is estimated to have saved some 22,000 Jewish children from Hitler's concentration camps. The highly advanced medical treatment Hadassah Hospital extended to Arabs, as well as Jews, in Palestine played a major role in lowering Arab infant mortality.

To this day Henrietta Szold is regarded as one of the genuine heroic figures of American-Jewish history – a scholarly woman, a passionately committed Jew and a person who saved many thousands of lives.

Up on a mountain, God painted a picture for Moses, a dream of what the Israelite people in covenant with God could achieve, what they could become. When Moses came down from the mountain to find the Israelites prostrate in worship of the golden calf, he not only shattered the two tablets he bore upon the ground – his dream shattered, as well. But the shards of neither were discarded. The Midrash depicts Moses as lovingly picking up the pieces of stone and, when the new tablets would later be carried throughout the Israelites' journey, the old pieces would be carried in the ark along with the new.

Rabbi Kushner imagines Moses saying to himself as he contemplated those fragments touched by the hand of God, “Those broken pieces of stone remind me that I had a dream once, a dream of how I would reshape the world, a dream of how God, working through me, would make everything perfect. It didn't turn out that way. But those stones speak to me not of failure and frustration but of reality, of the limits of what is possible when you are working with human beings. I ended up using them as stepping-stones, building blocks that helped me learn about human nature, about myself and other people, about realistic and unrealistic hopes. Rather than giving up on life, rather than giving up on people because of my disappointment, I built on the experience of my disappointment. The broken tablets pointed me toward wholeness, and the dream that didn't come true helped me discover where truth lies.”

In order to overcome disappointment, Rabbi Kushner teaches, we do not need to abandon our dreams – but neither can we allow them to define success and failure in our lives.

HUMILITY

The final piece of insight I'll share today for overcoming life's disappointments, for refusing to succumb to inevitable periods of negative momentum, is the importance of humility. Now, when life doesn't seem to be cutting us any breaks, the last thing many of us are feeling is exaggerated sense of self-importance. But the humility of which Rabbi Kushner is speaking is not a function of ego, or self-effacement, or false modesty. Humility, he teaches, is the realization that not everything that happens in life is all about you. Things may work out well, but you may not have been the primary reason for their success. Things may fail, but the failure may not have been your fault. Humility means recognizing that you are not God and it is not your job or responsibility to run the world. That was how Moses was able to remain humble – by recognizing that he was only God's instrument – and how his humility helped him cope with the frustrations of trying to lead an uncooperative nation.

We heard in our liturgy this morning the haunting words: “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die, who shall flourish and who shall perish. These words of *Unetaneh Tokef* are some of the most troubling words to say and understand, and I struggle with them every year. But I've found an interpretation that resonates with me. I now see the opening paragraph of the prayer, the part in which we are told that the book is opened and the entries are in our own handwriting, as a poetic way of saying that some of the things that will happen to us in the year ahead will be the result of things we do and choices we make. We deserve the credit and the blame for perhaps half of the things that happen to us. Then the second half of the prayer, the part about our fate being decided on Yom Kippur by forces beyond our control, is a poetic way of saying that many of the things that will shape our lives in the new year will be out of our hands, the result of biology,

other people's choices, and sheer luck. And in this way, I find the words of *Unetaneh Tokef* not only meaningful, but even comforting. After all, would we really want to be in control of life, anyway? As Mariana Caplan writes: If life obeyed our plans and expectations, then life would only be as wide as our undeveloped intelligence and limited creativity.

Once we understand, in all humility, that not everything that happens is about us or because of us, then personal disappointment need not, and should not, teach us to feel sorry for ourselves. Instead it can, and should, teach us to feel solidarity with others. And when humility leads us to see our pain and misfortune not as something that separates us from a world of lucky people but as something that connects us to a world of suffering people, it hurts less. Sharon Salzberg writes in a book called, *Lovingkindness*: "When we open our hearts to pain and suffering, we begin to heal, not because suffering is redemptive but because opening our heart is."

My friends, this has been a difficult year. Some of us have experienced profound changes in fortune and profession. Some of us have struggled with the hardships of pain, illness and deteriorating health; some of us have had to bear the suffering of our loved ones. Some of us have been stricken with great loss – loved ones whose presence seemed a fixture in our lives, suddenly physically present no longer. Some of us battled personal demons, falling backwards as often as we moved forward. Some of us have seen our dreams, or a piece of them, shatter. This year has been riddled with disappointments, but it doesn't mean that this difficult year has been a failure. And it certainly doesn't mean that we can't overcome the disappointments we have been dealt. By remembering why it is that we do what we do, relinquishing the tyranny of broken dreams, and regaining our sense of humility, we can shift the momentum going into 5771 and seize the blessings that are surely in store.

In *Birkat HaMazon*, the Jewish Grace After Meals, we ask God to bless us "as You blessed our forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with a full and complete blessing." Yet the Bible tells how the lives of the patriarchs were marked by fertility problems, quarrels with neighbors, conflicts between husbands and wives, between parents and children. What sorts of blessings were those? We can only understand the phrase "a full and complete blessing" therefore to mean the experience of life in its fullness, tasting everything that life has to offer – the bitter and the sweet, the honey and the bee stings, love and loss, despair and joy, rejection and hope. The blessing of completeness means a full life, not an easy life, a hard road, not a smooth one, a life that strikes the black keys and the white keys on the keyboard so that every available emotional tone is sounded.

As we say at the end of the ancient Priestly Blessing, *Yisa Adonai panav eilecha, v'yaseim l'cha shalom*. In the coming year, from this very moment forward, may God lift up God's face unto ours, and may we know that most treasured blessing – the gift of *shalom* – of fullness, and wholeness, and above all and throughout all, peace. *Kein y'hi ratzon*.