



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, EMERITUS

“The Road to Resilience”

Those of you who have come to know me during my current stage of life will be surprised to learn that I once had athletic ambitions. But I did.

It was especially during my teenage years when I was a student at RJJ, Rabbi Jacob Joseph High School on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. My favorite sport was basketball, and I spent more time perfecting my “jump shot” than doing my homework.

RJJ had a great basketball team, and I was sure that I could make the team. I tried my best for my first two years at the school and failed both times. The coach informed me that I should not even try again. It was a lost cause.

Imagine the sense of frustration and utter failure that I experienced, as a

sixteen-year-old, after that definitive rejection. I had prayed to succeed, but my prayers were in vain. What a letdown!

RJJ was blessed with a wonderful faculty of qualified teachers, many of whom were also empathic counselors. One of them, Mr. Joe Brown, was the advisor for the school newspaper, the RJJ Journal. Sensing my deep disappointment, he encouraged me to assume instead the position of sportswriter for the school newspaper.

“That way,” I remember him saying, “you will get to attend all the games and even sit on the bench. Your ‘downfall’ will lead to ‘achievement’.

Admittedly, it did not take me long to recognize that the entire episode was quite trivial, even petty, compared to all the challenges I’ve faced during the many decades since I was sixteen.

But the lesson I learned then was by no means trivial or petty. Quite the contrary, I eventually learned the principle that failure often becomes a

stepping stone for significant success. My failure in athletic endeavors led me to develop expressive skills, study journalism, and receive training in public speaking and creative writing. Abject adolescent frustration prepared me for a meaningful adult career.

At the very moment that I am writing this column I am also preparing to present a series of lectures. I am entitling it, “Lesser Known Twentieth Century Sages of Israel”.

One of the sages that I hope to discuss is

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Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlap (d. 1952). He was a deeply spiritual and intellectually brilliant scholar, who was the rabbi of the Shaarei Chessed neighborhood in Jerusalem. I have much to say about him, but I'll just share with you one of his insights, an insight that magnifies the significance of the story about my teenage development.

The insight is expounded in Rabbi Charlap's ninth volume, the one on *Sh'mot* (Exodus) of his multi-volume work, "Mei Merom". I hope to include many of his teachings in upcoming editions of this column. For now, permit me to introduce you to one of the concepts central to his approach to the entire Exodus narrative. It is the concept of "yeridah l'tzorech aliyah", "descent as a prerequisite for ascent".

Rabbi Charlap begins by expounding upon a process even more basic to Judaism than the Exodus from Egypt, namely the "descent of the *neshamah*" into the *guf*, the existential "descent" of the "soul" into the "body".

He finds a parallel between that process and the "descent" of Jacob and the tribes of Israel into the *galut*, the Exile into Egypt. He writes: "The soul, despite its intrinsic loftiness and greatness, cannot ascend and expand unless it merges with the body. It is precisely the same with the descent of the nation of Israel into exile... Thus, just as the soul never achieves its perfection without the body, so too was the descent into *galut* a necessary prelude to the growth and greatness of the entire holy nation."

"This", he concludes, "is the meaning of the opening of last week's Torah portion— 'And Jacob **lived** in the land of Egypt'. His entry into Egypt, with his entourage, was not a "descent", but rather the atmosphere of the Holy Land that he left accompanied him and

entered Egypt with him. Thus, he **lived** even in Egypt and did not 'die' there."

This powerful insight of Rabbi Charlap prompted me to recall the resounding words of the Prophet Micha:

"Do not gloat over me, my enemy!

"Though I have fallen, I will rise—

"Though I sit in darkness

"The Lord will be light!" (Micah 7:8)

The second line reads in Hebrew *Ki nafalti kamti*. The midrash translates this a bit differently from the translation above. Rather, in Hebrew. *Ilmalei nafalti, lo kamti!* That is, "Had I not fallen, I would never have risen!"

Failure often, if not always, leads to ultimate success. Indeed, failure is necessary if one is to grow. As the Talmud puts it, "one cannot truly master the Torah unless he has first stumbled in its study—*ela im nichshal ba*!"

There is a lesson here for all of us, especially in these crucial times. *Galut* is a *yeridah*, life in diaspora is a descent. But we must grow from it, and one way is to learn its lessons. What are those lessons? There are many, and one must sincerely examine ourselves, even if we dwell in the State of Israel, and determine whether we have learned these lessons.

Our history should have taught us, and our history persists to this day, that we are surrounded by hostility, but there are ways to cope with it. But coping with it demands much of us.

1. We must be staunchly hopeful, and not despair.
2. We must be certain of our principles and values, especially our commitment to truth, compassion, justice, humility, charity, family, and yes, world peace. We must not yield to doubt those principles

or become skeptical of them or compromise them in any way.

3. And, perhaps above all, we must avoid discord among ourselves, we must attain genuine unity, *achdut*.

Three dangers, three d's: Despair, Doubt, Discord. They all characterized our years of Egyptian Exile, as we will learn from the Book of Exodus, *Sefer Shemot*, which we begin this week.

Yes, the years of slavery were a *yeridah*, a descent. But they offered us an opportunity to learn the lessons of doubt, despair, and discord, to correct them and to grow to become the *am hanivchar*, the Chosen People.

Our history was designed to be a descent to ascend. May we ascend in togetherness, hope, and faithful commitment to our eternal values. ■

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