

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

LIFE-CHANGING IDEAS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

When Weakness Becomes Strength

Shemini 2018 / 5778

“Come near to the altar and offer your sin offering and your burnt offering and make atonement for yourself and the people; sacrifice the offering that is for the people and make atonement for them, as the Lord has commanded.” (Lev. 9:7)

The sages were puzzled by the instruction, “Come near.” This seems to imply that Aaron had until then kept a distance from the altar. Why so? Rashi gives the following explanation:

Aaron was *ashamed and fearful* of approaching the altar. Moses said to him: “Why are you ashamed? It was for this that you were chosen.”

There is a name for this syndrome, coined in 1978 by two clinical psychologists, Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes. They called it the *imposter syndrome*.¹ People who suffer from it feel that they do not deserve the success they have achieved. They attribute it not to their effort and ability but to luck, or timing, or to the fact that they have deceived others into thinking that they are better than they actually are. It turns out to be surprisingly widespread, and particularly so among high achievers. Research has shown that around 40 per cent of successful people do not believe they deserve their success, and that as many as 70 per cent have felt this way at some time or other.

¹ Pauline Clance and Suzanne Ament Imes, “The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention.” *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, vol. 15, no. 3, 1978, pp. 241–247.

However, as one might imagine, Rashi is telling us something deeper. Aaron was not simply someone lacking in self-confidence. There was something specific that he must have had in mind on that day that he was inducted into the role of High Priest. For Aaron had been left in charge of the people while Moses was up the mountain receiving the Torah. That was when the sin of the Golden Calf took place.

Reading that narrative, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it was Aaron's weakness that allowed it to happen. It was he who suggested that the people give him their gold ornaments, he who fashioned them into a calf, and he who built an altar before it (Ex. 32:1-6). When Moses saw the Golden Calf and challenged Aaron –“What did these people do to you, that you brought upon them this great sin?”– he replied, evasively, “They gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”

This was a man profoundly (and rightly) uncomfortable with his role in one of the most disastrous episodes in the Torah, and now he was being called to atone not only for himself but for the entire people. Was this not hypocrisy? Was he not himself a sinner? How could he stand before God and the people and assume the role of the holiest of men? No wonder he felt like an imposter and was ashamed and fearful of approaching the altar.

Moses, however, did not simply say something that would boost his self-confidence. He said something much more radical and life-changing: *“It was for this that you were chosen.”* The task of a High Priest is to atone for people's sins. It was his role, on Yom Kippur, to confess his wrongs and failings, then those of his household, then those of the people as a whole (Lev. 16:11-17). It was his responsibility to plead for forgiveness.

“Moses did not simply say something that would boost his self-confidence. He said something much more radical and life-changing.”

“That,” implied Moses, “is why you were chosen. You know what sin is like. You know what it is to feel guilt. You more than anyone else understand the need for repentance and atonement. You have felt the cry of your soul to be cleansed, purified and wiped free of the stain of transgression. *What you think of as your greatest weakness will become, in this role you are about to assume, your greatest strength.*”

How did Moses know this? *Because he had experienced something similar himself.* When God told him to confront Pharaoh and lead the Israelites to freedom, he repeatedly insisted that he could not do so. Reread his response to God's call to lead the Israelites out of Egypt (Ex. chapters 3-4), and they sound like someone radically convinced of his inadequacies. “Who am I?” “They won't believe in me.” Above all, he kept repeating that he could not speak before a crowd, something absolutely necessary in a leader. He was not an orator. He did not have the voice of command:

Then Moses said to the Lord, “Please, my Lord, *I am not a man of words*, not yesterday, not the day before and not since You have spoken to Your servant. *I am slow of speech and tongue.*” (Ex. 4:10) Moses said to the Lord, “Look, the Israelites do not listen to me. How then will Pharaoh listen to me? Besides, *I have uncircumcised lips.*” (Ex. 6:12).

Moses had a speech defect. To him that was a supreme disqualification from being a mouthpiece for the Divine word. What he did not yet understand is that this was one of the reasons God chose him. *When Moses spoke the words of God, people knew he was not speaking his own words in his own voice.* Someone else was speaking through him. This seems to have been the case for Isaiah and Jeremiah, both of whom were doubtful of their ability to speak and who became among the most eloquent of prophets.²

The people who can sway crowds with their oratory are generally speaking not prophets. Often they are, or become, dictators and tyrants. They use their power of speech to acquire more dangerous forms of power. God does not choose people who speak with their own voice, telling the crowds what they want to hear. He chooses people who are fully aware of their inadequacies, who stammer literally or metaphorically, who speak not because they want to but because they have to, and who tell people what they do not want to hear, but what they must hear if they are to save themselves from catastrophe. What Moses thought was his greatest weakness was, in fact, one of his greatest strengths.

The point here is not a simple “I’m OK, You’re OK” acceptance of weakness. That is not what Judaism is about. The point is the struggle. Moses and Aaron in their different ways had to wrestle with themselves.

Moses was not a natural leader. Aaron was not a natural priest. Moses had to accept that one of his most important qualifications was what nowadays we would call

his low self image, but what, operating from a completely different mindset, the Torah calls his humility. Aaron had to understand that his own experience of sin and failure made him the ideal representative of a people conscious of their

own sin and failure. Feelings of inadequacy – the imposter syndrome – can be bad news or good news depending on what you do with them. Do they lead you to depression and despair? Or do they lead you to work at your weaknesses and turn them into strengths?

“Feelings of inadequacy can be good news if they can lead you to work at your weaknesses and turn them into strengths.”

The key, according to Rashi in this week’s parsha, is the role Moses played at this critical juncture in Aaron’s life. *He had faith in Aaron even when Aaron lacked faith in himself.* That is the role God Himself played, more than once, in Moses’ life. And that is the role God plays in all our lives if we are truly open to Him. I have often said that the mystery at the heart of Judaism is not our faith in God. It is God’s faith in us.

² There is a striking secular example: Winston Churchill had both a lisp and a stutter and though he fought against both, they persisted long into adulthood. Because of this, he had to think carefully in advance about his major speeches. He was fastidious in writing or dictating them beforehand, rewriting key phrases until the last moment. He used short words wherever possible, made dramatic use of pauses and silences, and developed an almost poetic use of rhythm. The result was not only that he became a great speaker. His speeches, especially over the radio during the Second World War, were a major factor in rousing the spirit of the nation. In the words of Edward Murrow he “mobilised the English language and sent it into battle.”

This then is the life-changing idea: *what we think of as our greatest weakness can become, if we wrestle with it, our greatest strength.* Think of those who have suffered tragedy and then devote their lives to alleviating the suffering of others. Think of those who, conscious of their failings, use that consciousness to help others overcome their own sense of failure.

What makes Tanakh so special is its total candour about humanity. Its heroes –Moses, Aaron, Isaiah, Jeremiah – all knew times when they felt like failures, “imposters.” They had their moments of dark despair. But they kept going. They refused to be defeated. They knew that a sense of inadequacy can bring us closer to God, as King David said: “My sacrifice [i.e. what I bring as an offering to You] O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise” (Ps. 51:19).

Better by far to know you are imperfect than to believe you are perfect. God loves us and believes in us despite, and sometimes because of, our imperfections. Our weaknesses make us human; wrestling with them makes us strong.

Shabbat shalom,



LIFE-CHANGING IDEA #25

“What you think of as your greatest weakness can become, if you wrestle with it, your greatest strength.”

LIFE-CHANGING IDEAS IN SEFER VAYIKRA

- **VAYIKRA:** For each of us God has a task. Discerning that task, hearing God’s call, is what gives a life meaning and purpose.
- **TZAV:** The more you celebrate the good, the more good you discover that is worthy of celebration.
- **SHEMINI:** What you think of as your greatest weakness can become, if you wrestle with it, your greatest strength.



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