

**“Successful Failure”**  
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**Kol Nidre 5767/2006**  
**Congregation Beth Torah**

A few months ago I received an envelope in the mail from USAirways. A long time ago when I was flying from New York to my student pulpit in Huntsville, AL, I accrued about 7,000 USAirways miles that I never used or cashed in. This piece of mail offered me the opportunity to exchange miles for magazines. I was faced with either giving up the miles altogether, using them for travel, or selecting any number of publications I would never otherwise subscribe to. While 7,000 miles won't get you anywhere on a plane, let me tell you it was a goldmine in magazines. Sari and I feel like magazine gluttons...Each week we are deluged with periodicals that we can barely keep pace with...Thank God Richardson recycles. In the flurry of Food and Wine, GQ, Time and Newsweek, O Magazine, the daily Wall Street Journal and several others, one cover grabbed my attention in a deeply Jewish way. To prove to you that Torah can be found anywhere, the cover story of the July 10<sup>th</sup> issue of Business Week is what compelled me to read on...In big bold letters it said, “Eureka, We Failed.” How Smart Companies Learned from their Flops. Now that's not something you hear every day! As one consultant in the article claimed, “Most companies put a wall around failure as if it's radioactive.” But this piece suggested a wholly different, fresh, and radical approach. The best companies, they claim, embrace their mistakes and learn from them. And the best ideas, the most remarkable and well known breakthroughs in corporate America are often the result of a prior flop or major mistake.

Consider all of these products (display table):

Light bulb

Post-it Note

Coca Cola Classic

Breakfast Bars

Ford Mustang (catalogue)

Each one of these products, well known to nearly all of us rose out of the ashes of prior experimentation and failure. Take Coca Cola Classic for example...*Those of you who work for PepsiCo will please forgive me tonight.* By a show of hands, how many of you remember its pitiable predecessor, “New Coke”? Back in 1985 Coke thought that the new formula would reenergize a “lethargic brand,” but New Coke was a breathtaking failure. It's amazing that any of you remember this product, because it lasted only 79 days on the market, after a consumer uprising forced Coke to bring back the original, but repackaged and reintroduced like a champion! For the slightly more senior among us, you likely remember the 1957 Edsel; a big, clunky, overpriced Ford that was phased out after only 2,800 models were produced. But the Edsel was the catalyst to something much greater. Ford learned from the Edsel debacle that consumers wanted more “stylish affordability,” hence the “legendary” Ford Mustang which debuted in 1964 and is still going strong.

What's the message here? "Figuring out how to master this process of failing fast and failing cheap and fumbling toward success is probably the most important thing that companies have to get good at," says another consultant. And, it seems to me, that is what we have to get good at as well. This season is overwhelmingly about concentrating on our failures...think of the litany of *Al Chets*, for example. We spend hours in shul meditating on what we might have said, done, or thought that led to a downfall here or a mistake there. But for what? The point of this exercise is not to induce self loathing or to make us feel hopelessly inadequate. The point for us is the same as it is for the corporate world. The point of analyzing our failures is to create even greater successes. Heck, a Chicago new product consultant has even proposed "Failure parties," to help people recognize that failure is part of the creative process. So I'd like to suggest that the High Holidays are the Jewish version of the Failure Party. So let's get it all out there, let's turn over every rock, let's fling open every dark closet and learn, learn, learn. You see it's only really a failure if we fail to learn from these experiences.

The Babylonian Talmud, tractate Bava Batra, page 14b reminds us about that first set of tablets that Moses broke upon coming down the mountain to witness the debauchery of the Israelites swirling and whirling around the Golden Calf. You recall that in a fit of anger and frustration, Moses flung those tablets downward, splitting them into pieces. The rabbis tell us that no archeological excavation on Mt. Sinai will turn up those shards because they were all carefully retrieved and stored, where? Why, inside the Ark right next to the second, intact set of tablets that Moses received subsequently from God. When that ark came to a rest in Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, they were placed in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred inner sanctum in the entire Jewish world. Why save the broken set? Why continue to schlep around these broken parts; the remnants of a fractured covenant, a loss of faith, a national failure? Could it be, suggests our tradition, that retaining those fragments and placing them in that sacred place was to teach us something about our own brokenness? Could it be that sanctifying the shards of an experience gone wrong was meant to urge us to learn from our own incompleteness, our own frustrations, our own wrong turns, misunderstandings and personal failures?

I was reading an article not long ago about DNA. As a recent father for the third time, I've been rather interested in seeing how different traits and characteristics appear in the next generation. Particularly since all three of my kids have blue eyes and neither Sari nor I do...suspicious! "The real marvel of DNA," suggests the author, "is the capacity to blunder slightly." We learn in science class that those blunders are called "mutations," and without them, we wouldn't be sitting here in our pretty *yontiff* outfits, we would be swimming around in a puddle in the form of microscopic bacteria! If we were made to be perfect, then we would still be perfect little swamp specimens. But with each little mistake, each little blunder, each little mutation, we have grown and developed and become sophisticated human beings who write music, paint beautiful pictures, fall in love, build societies, and yes, continue to fail with regularity. Failure is literally part of our genetic make-up, and the Torah testifies to this right from the get go when God surveys creation and says behold this is good, *Vayar Elohim Ki Tov*, but what God does NOT say is 'behold this is perfect.' Could it be, contrary to a whole religious civilization

predicated on original sin, that God actually intended for man to have that little slip up in the Garden so that he could learn and grow and make something meaningful of his life?

Friends, I know that everyone here knows intimately what it means to fail; To fail in a friendship, to fail at a marriage, to fail financially, to fail our children, to fail at our jobs, to fail when our dreams and hopes don't always turn out as we expected. For heaven's sake nobody understands failure better than the Jewish people. We have endured many failed experiments throughout the Diaspora, repeating many centuries of exile and expulsion. We have seen the demise of a monarchy, a priesthood, and two Temples. We have experienced our own internal struggles and self defeat as well. But we also have outlived and outlasted civilization after civilization precisely because Judaism has historically taught us to examine and understand our past. We are the people of the book, people who study old books, ancient books, because we insist that our own history possesses vital keys to our future survival.

Scott Sandage, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, who wrote a book about failure in American culture encourages us to think about our lives as a story. "Failure," he says, "is when the story stops. Failure is not merely a cataclysm that adds to the plot of your life story but is something that stops your life cold because you lose a sense of your future." But failure paralyzes you only if you refuse to learn from it.

I want to say to you today, my friends, that these holy days are truly a gift to all of us. They are a gift because they arrive each year to offer us the opportunity to grow and to learn. They are a gift because they are meant to give us our future back. The greatest aveira, the biggest sin is to feel that our lives are over, that our fate is sealed because we have failed. What we learn about ourselves today and throughout this season will help us to become better human beings, better spouses, better parents, better friends, better Jews because like the big companies, we must use all the dead ends of the year past to build something more meaningful in the year to come. As a wonderful church marke I happened upon recently proclaimed, "Don't put a period where God only put a comma."

You see this light bulb. It took Edison 193 failed inventions before he could get a filament to produce even a glint of light. But look at how radiant, how bright, how glorious this invention has become. Your going to make a lot of promises to yourself over the next 24 hours. I'm telling you now that you will not keep some of them, you will break others, and you will, in the year 5767 fail again and again. The challenge, the hope that should illuminate you, is that every one of those failures---is an opportunity. So my message to you tonight, is not to self-destruct, not to loose hope, not to loose your bearings in life when you hit a brick wall. The message of Yom Kippur is that this holy season and all its prayer and contemplation is your opportunity to turn those failures into even greater successes. Judaism: we bring good things to light!