

[Failure and Success: Thoughts on Parashat Vayhi, December 29, 2012](#)

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By

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Jacob had worked a lifetime to raise a family and now was at the point of his impending death. He gathered his family around him to offer his final words. He looked back at successes and failures, at good times and bad, at spiritual achievements and moral deficiencies.

In the midst of imparting his final speech, he paused and poignantly called out: “I wait for Your salvation O Lord” (Bereishith 49:18).

As he reviewed his life and his family, Jacob wondered whether he had ultimately been a success or a failure. Did he accomplish his life’s goals? Would his children and grandchildren live according to his ideals? Did he do enough? Could he have done better? “I wait for Your salvation O Lord.” The Almighty alone knows.

Religious people constantly face Jacob’s dilemma, and not only at the time of impending death. Religious Jews strive to achieve a seemingly unreachable ideal: to win the allegiance of family and friends—and all Jews—to the values, traditions and observances of Torah. Inevitably, we fail and fail often. We ourselves often fall short of our ideals. A religious person is always striving, and knows full well that “success” is often out of reach.

When I had been in the rabbinate for only a few years, I asked myself a painful question: what could I possibly do in order to succeed? I was working with as much energy and self-sacrifice as I could muster, and yet nothing seemed to be changing. Was I prepared to spend a lifetime spinning wheels or treading water?

I discussed my dilemma with Rabbi Meyer Simcha Feldblum, my Talmud teacher at Yeshiva University. Rabbi Feldblum reminded me of a Talmudic lesson. When the priest in the Temple in ancient Jerusalem was grinding the spices for the incense offering, someone was required to stand by him and say: “grind them fine, grind them fine.” The reason is that “the voice is beneficial for spices.” Yet what benefit could a voice have in this process?

Rabbi Feldblum answered: the priest would inevitably reach the point where he thought that his grinding made no difference and that nothing was happening. He would want to stop. So he needed someone to encourage him: you may think that you are not accomplishing anything, but you are perfecting the spices. Keep at it. Ultimately your grinding does make a difference.

This lesson applies to all who wish to transmit the teachings of Torah to their children, grandchildren, students, and members of the larger community. The work will often seem to be in vain, yielding no visible results. But we must continue our task with selfless devotion. Something is happening. We may not see the results now, and we may never live long enough to see the results: but something is happening. The words and teachings of Torah are being planted. They will eventually take root. They will blossom.

Maimonides has taught that the religious person must be a model of human excellence: gentle, honest, friendly, and courteous. People should look at him/her and wish to follow the example, recognizing that Torah has the power to create such ideal individuals.

Those who wish to transmit Judaism must strive to be exemplars of Judaism at its best. Being a religious Jew means living with failure, personal and communal. It means falling short, feeling lonely and misunderstood. But if we ourselves can strive to reach our ideals, and if we can convey our ideals to others with sincere devotion, we can lead lives imbued with genuine meaning. And that is success.

“I wait for Your salvation O Lord.”

[Angel for Shabbat](#)