

GRIT OR QUIT?



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT VAETCHANAN
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Imagine you were pursuing a goal with all your heart and soul for years. There were struggles along the way, but you persevered through them. You are almost there. You can see the finish line. It is within your grasp. But you stumble one more time. This time, you can't seem to figure a way out. You try repeatedly, but you keep getting stuck. Do you persist or do you give up?

Dr. Angela Duckworth, a psychologist from the University of Pennsylvania, studies the construct of grit, which is the ability to persevere and persist towards long-term goals despite challenges and setbacks. Those who demonstrate grit tend to be more successful in academic and professional settings. We have argued in the past, that grit is an essential element of learning Torah and fulfilling mitzvot. Yet, is grit always the proper response? Can't grit also double as an unhealthy stubbornness?

In contrast to Dr. Duckworth, Dr. Carsten Wrosch, a psychologist from Concordia University in Montreal, studies the benefits of quitting. He argues, that there are certain times where giving up is a better response than persisting. People who let go of unattainable goals tend to have fewer depressive symptoms, less negative affect, lower cortisol level, less systemic inflammation, and fewer physical health problems. Moreover, there is an opportunity cost as well. Investing time and energy into one goal prevents us from trying to attempt different, perhaps more attainable or more beneficial goals.

While knowing the line between a healthy grit and an unhealthy stubbornness is not always easily determinable, perhaps we can look to Moshe Rabbeinu for broad guidelines as to how to act when an impassioned goal is blocked. Moshe longed to enter the land of Israel. He desired to finish his original mission of bringing Bnei Yisrael into the land. He yearned to fulfill the various mitzvot that are only pertinent within the physical boundaries of Israel. Minimally, he just wished to experience the feeling of basking in the space of such a holy place. But he stumbled at the finish line. Because of what happened at Mei Merivah, G-d told him he could not enter.

When a strong desire and goal of his was blocked, Moshe did not go down without a fight. He begged and pleaded to G-d to let him enter the land. The midrash expounds on the numerical value of the word Vaetchanan (וַאֲתַחֲנֶן), and informs us that Moshe articulated 515 supplications to G-d. Moshe serves as a paradigm for grit in the face of challenges. When faced with an obstacle, be determined, tenacious, and persevere.

Yet, taken from a different perspective, Moshe also serves as a paradigm for quitting. As soon as G-d told him to stop pleading, he stopped. He put in the effort, but once he realized that the goal was unattainable, he quit. Once he does, he is freed to focus on a new task. He puts his effort in to crafting a farewell message that will influence generations to come in the land of Israel, even though he would not physically be present there.

Within the same narrative, Moshe provides for us a role-model for extreme persistence in goal attainment, as well as an example for quitting when the goal is clearly no longer attainable. When confronted with challenges to our own goals, may G-d grant us the wisdom to discern whether to respond with grit or to quit, the strength to persevere if necessary, and the courage to give up when appropriate.

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