



Book of Failure? Lunchtime Panel: Who Are You Calling a Failure?

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Dedicated in memory of HaRav Pesach ben Avraham Moshe HaKohen

Dedicated by Nathan Kirsh in loving memory of his dear parents

Yehuda Pesach ben Naftali HaKohen z"l & Rachel bat Mordechai z"l

and his dear brother Ben-Zion ben Yehuda Pesach HaKohen z"l

Dedicated by Neil and Lisette Reines in honour of the teachers of the Beit Midrash

for their contribution to the spreading of Torah in our community.

1. Rabbi Aharon Kotler, as translated from Yiddish in *How to Teach Torah*

Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkanos said that he had learned much Torah from his teachers, yet all of his Torah – compared to what his teachers knew – did not compare to a dog lapping up water from the sea. So great was the gap between Rabbi Eliezer and his teachers, one generation apart. It is impossible then to calculate the distance from our generation to those of the sages of the Mishnah and the sages of the Talmud, all the more so to those of our patriarchs. You must make it clear to your pupils that the people under discussion were not ordinary people motivated by our traits or desires. They were free of any kind of personal aspiration or desire. We cannot comprehend their lofty levels. Just as we have no yardstick for measuring angels so do we lack the means of evaluating our patriarchs.

"*Ma'asey ovos simon labonim*: The patriarchs teach their descendants how to act." Ramban adds that the deeds of the *ovos* molded the future of the Jewish people...

2. Rabbi Yitzchak Adlerstein, *On Football, The Avot and Recent Disputes in Israel*, Jewish Action

If the *avot* were just our national folk heroes, why would we invoke their memory at the beginning of every single *Shemonah Esreh* that we pray? Standing before our Creator and King on Rosh HaShanah, the Books of Life and Death open before Him, would the refrain of our negotiating-song keep on coming back to the actions of Avraham and Yitzchak? Why would the Talmud debate the point at which the merit of the *avot* is exhausted?...

The Torah is first and foremost a book of *guided action*. It is not a book of history, biography, philosophy, or even theology. It does tell us how to act. Any narrative portion of the Torah must be justified as a tool for instructing us how to live our lives.

3. *Imitate the Ramban, not the Professors*, An interview with Shalom Carmy, HaMevasser 38:1

Asher Friedman: Our growing sensitivity to psychological and moral complexities gives us great tools for analyzing narratives in *Tanakh*. Yet often those who attempt such analysis end up turning our *Avot* and *Immahot* into pop-psychology case studies. How should we provide psychological depth to our understanding of *Tanakh* without falling prey to these dangers?

Shalom Carmy: Are we modern people, or modern Orthodox Jews, really more sensitive to psychological and moral complexities? We definitely talk about them a lot. Yet explosion of verbiage, like monetary inflation, does not inevitably make one spiritually richer; it may simply cheapen the currency.

One reason that people shrink the larger than life personalities of *Tanakh* to pop-psychology size is that they are accustomed to treat themselves the same way. What characterizes pop-psychology? Casual deterministic assumptions, clichéd depictions of emotion, a philosophy that cannot grasp the dramatic, absolute, momentous solemnity of the moral-religious life. This is not the way I think of myself; it is not the way I think of you. It is not the way one should think about any human being created uniquely in the image of Gd. Once people see nothing wrong in entertaining secular conceptions of themselves, once they take for moral and psychological insight the tired idiom of the therapeutic, it's no wonder that they are tone-deaf to the grandeur of the *Avot* and *Immahot*.

4. **Rabbi Avishai David, *Perspectives on the Avot and Imahot*, <https://www.lookstein.org/professional-dev/perspectives-avot-imahot/>**

They were human beings who by dint of their extraordinary efforts developed and nurtured their personalities. Ramban in his commentary on the Torah has extensively developed the Talmudic notion (Yevamot 121b) that the Almighty deals with the righteous utilizing a different barometer and standard. Harav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (Bereishit, 12:10-13) in commenting on the Ramban regarding the transgression of Abraham, poignantly notes that the Torah never deifies our great leaders and *tzadikim* but presents them as human beings who struggled violently to achieve profound virtues. By honestly describing their characters we are able to relate to them and view them as our role models. It is in that vein that *Hazal* instruct us "A person is obligated to say, when will my actions reach those of Abraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov." If we view them as transcendent demigods, they will be beyond our intellectual and emotional purview. If we view them as human beings who achieved dizzying spiritual heights through their indefatigable self-discipline, then we can begin to comprehend their attainments. Indeed, it is a subtle distinction but a profoundly important one. It's enormously difficult, if not well nigh impossible, to gain parity with the *Avot* and *Imahot*, but we are instructed to attempt to reach (*matay yageea*) or touch their heavenly bound footsteps (Sefat Emet). The Mishnah in Masekhet Megila (25a) states: "The episode of Tamar is read in the synagogue and translated." It's explained in the Talmud that one might have deemed this improper out of respect for Yehudah, but the conclusion is that the passage only redounds to his credit for it underscores the *middah* of confession exhibited by Yehudah. Harav Solveitchik *shlitah* has, in this vein, contrasted the personalities of Yosef and Yehuda in light of a dual typology employed by the Ramban in his *Shemonah Perakim*. Yosef is the "congenital *tzadik* and *hasid*" who successfully defeats the *yetzer hara* at every juncture. Yehuda is the courageous individual who may have faltered but ultimately rose to the challenge and as a result of those qualities merited kingship.

5. **Rabbi Zvi Grumet, *Another Perspective on the Avot and Imahot*, <https://www.lookstein.org/professional-dev/another-perspective-avot-imahot/>**

What we must always keep in mind, that the Torah *chose* to tell us these particular stories about our *Avot*, even when they are apparently uncomplimentary. Had the Torah wanted to whitewash them and present them as pristine models, it would have done so in a manner that would be undeniably clear to all. This is not the case. The very tales that the Torah chooses to relate are the ones Gd thought would be instructive to us, and it is our job to discover the message(s) in each anecdote. Rather than see the stories of the *Avot* as problems to which answers must be found, we must see those very stories as Gd's plea with us to look even more carefully at the text and discover the message hidden therein. If we find ourselves engaging in apologetics or looking for ways to justify the actions of the *Avot*, then we have clearly missed the point. If, on the other hand, we see anomalies and problems as clues to a greater idea, then we've begun to hear the song of the Torah.